Avoiding the "It's a Small World" Effect

A Lesson Plan to Explore Diversity

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Introduction

If you have ever visited Disney World in Florida you might have had the opportunity to take a journey on the "It's a Small World" ride in the Fantasyland area of the park. The journey is a slow-moving boat ride through a world that represents over 100 nations featuring hundreds of robotic children dressed in ceremonial costumes, many of whom are also partaking in the stereotypical customs identified with their nations.

The Disney World message proclaims that while we are all different, we are also all the same. The individuals who created the ride in the 1960s hoped to "dissolve boundaries" and did so with the best of intentions as they sought to engender a sense of global harmony, shared experience, and human universality. Most likely the ride was never intended to be a serious tool for learning about other cultures.

Alas, the Disney version of "It's a Small World" stands as an ironic reminder that our understanding of other cultures often lacks authentic detail since "educators who have only superficial knowledge of cultural, racial, and ethnic differences cannot address them sufficiently in instructional programs and policies" (Gay, 2005, p. xvi).

At the same time, elementary school social studies teachers are hampered not only by the daunting task of acquiring sufficient cultural knowledge but also by dwindling instructional time for social studies in the elementary school, even though their students represent an increasingly diverse population with as much as 42% of younger students living in households where someone is fluent in more than one language (Abbot & Brown, 2006).

As a result, classroom instruction about other cultures all too often resembles the Disney version of "It's a Small World" with Fantasyland-like cultural stereotypes, ceremonial activities, and traditional dress that can lead to serious misunderstandings about the depth and complexity of global societies.

The Perfect Venue

Social studies instruction presents the perfect venue for guiding young learners on their own journeys toward cultural competence in learning to understand and accept themselves, other people, and all of society (Gallavan, 2011). Students' abilities to view the world from the perspective of self and others aligns with the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Curriculum Standards for Culture (1.1), which directs teachers to "include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity" (www.socialstuides.org/standards/strands, 2012).

Young learners need to be given opportunities to discover "culturally-based likenesses and differences" and to "explore and ask questions about the nature of various cultures, and the development of cultures across time and place" (www.socialstuides.org/standards/strands, 2012). Providing these experiences at the intermediate elementary school level is developmentally ideal since students in grades three through five are most open to people different from themselves (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2012).

To accomplish these weighty tasks, Banks (2008) advocates for a four-step curriculum transformation model. The first step, known as the Contributions Approach, is similar to the "small world" effect. At this level, content about culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups are simplistic and limited to holidays and heroes. The educator's goal should be to move beyond the Contributions Approach by adding perspectives and concepts to the curriculum (Additive Approach), changing the curriculum so that students can view CLD groups from the target group's perspective (Transformation Approach), and ultimately involve students in making decisions and taking action on important social issues (Social Action Approach).

Such a transformation cannot occur in a single lesson. However, it is our hope that educators who see value in the lesson we present here might consider this learning experience as a jump-start towards the ultimate goals Banks describes.

The lesson that follows helps students move beyond the Contributions Approach through the use of cultural universals, which Brophy and Alleman (2006) define as:

> …domains of human experience that have existed in all cultures, past and present. They include activities related to meeting basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, as well as family structures, government, communication, transportation, money or other forms of economic exchange, religion, occupations, recreation, and perhaps other factors as well. (p. 5)

Cultural universals can be extremely useful in helping students understand the lives of others through a shared sense of human experience because they represent common concerns that most people relate to, regardless of their cultures or places in the world. We all need food, clothing, and shelter, but we satisfy these needs in many different ways that depend upon our cultural values. Through a more authentic sense of similarity we can explore our differences more responsibly.

The Lesson: "A Smaller World of Cultural Universals"

This lesson asks students to consider cultural universals and cultural values as depicted in authentic images of families

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from around the world. Upon completion of the learning experience, the students should understand that while it is possible to make valid cultural contrasts and comparisons through those aspects of culture that are universal, the cultural values that partially guide our lives are far more complex. Anytime we study other societies from a distance, we are limited by "representations" of that culture, whether the representations are authentic or not.

The lesson takes place in a fourth-grade classroom over two or three days and consists of three parts: (a) introducing and defining culture and cultural universals, (b) inquiring about cultural values across cultures, and (c) exploring cultural universals. Specific NCSS Theme 1: Culture performance expectations include:

Knowledge—Learners will understand:

- "Culture" refers to the behaviors, beliefs, values, traditions, institutions, and ways of living together of a group of people
- Concepts such as: similarities, differences, beliefs, values, cohesion, and diversity

Processes—Learners will be able to:

- Explore and describe similarities and differences in the ways various cultural groups meet similar needs and concerns

Products—Learners demonstrate understanding by:

- Selecting a social group, investigating the commonly-held beliefs, values, behaviors, and traditions that characterize the culture of that group, and creating an illustrated description of findings

Part One: Introducing Culture and Cultural Universals

The lesson begins by showing a YouTube video of the Disneyworld ride "It's a Small World" to find out if your students can recognize the ride from their own personal experiences or other background knowledge. Ask the students to describe what they notice in the video so that you can begin construction of a "word wall" of descriptors on the white board or screen for reference throughout the lesson.

Depending on the background of your students, it is quite likely that many if not all of your students, have never experienced the Disney ride. That is fine; the video communicates and gets the point across sufficiently. Tell your students that they are going to have the chance to study other cultures in a more realistic or authentic way than the video portrays.

This learning experience requires everybody to be aligned in their thinking in regard to the concepts of culture and cultural universals. For the purposes of instruction, this lesson adopts the NCSS definition of culture as listed in the performance expectations: "Culture" refers to the behaviors, beliefs, values, traditions, institutions, and ways of living together of a group of people.

Group the students in cooperative learning groups or quads according to your preferred manner of selection. Each group should have a scribe, a reporter, a timekeeper, and a spell-checker. Draw a large two-column T-chart on the board and label one column as "Culture" and the other as "Universal." Give each group a large sheet of poster paper and ask them to replicate the chart on their papers.

Using their charts, have the students brainstorm their impressions when they hear the word "culture" and write their answers in the appropriate columns. Students from previous classes have described culture as "the foods they eat," "the languages they speak," or "the clothes they wear."

These entries are relatively rudimentary answers because it is widely accepted among social scientists that the "values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives are what distinguish one people from another in modernized societies, not artifacts, material objects, and other tangible aspects of human societies" (Banks, 2008, p. 56.) Even though these responses reflect a simplified understanding of culture, they are a good place to start the discussion.

Once the students have finished their lists, each group "reporter" should read the group's list aloud while the teacher writes the responses on the board or screen for all to see. The process is repeated with the concept of "universal" on the other side of the chart. Previous responses have included "everybody knows" and "the world," which should be combined and refined to help the students understand what "universal" means in this context.

By separating or deconstructing the concept into two separate words, the students are more likely to understand what can otherwise be a difficult idea. After finishing the T-Chart, guide the students towards bringing the words "culture" and "universal" together into "cultural universal," the aspects of culture that everybody in the world addresses in one way or another.

Continue by asking the students for examples of cultural universals and writing them on the board. The class may need to be prompted with questions such as:

- What are some things that all people from around the world have in common, no matter where they live?
- What do we need?
- What do we use?
- What do we do?

Help guide the students towards seeing patterns in their responses. Eventually, the list should contain categories such as food, clothing, and shelter, family, government, communication, transportation, religion, jobs, and so forth.

Part Two: Cultural Value Inquiry across Cultural Universals

Now the list of cultural universals is used to begin the second phase of the lesson, which asks the students to discuss, identify, and describe the cultural beliefs and values that are reflected in their lists of cultural universals. There are some cultural values that many members of a particular culture might identify with or share (e.g., "American work ethic"), but it is also important to remember that there are many subcultures and microcultures within that larger culture with very different values.

Part Two is based on a modified version of the initial steps of the value inquiry model (Banks & Banks, 1999), which was designed to assist students in identifying value conflicts, examining them reflectively, making moral choices, and discussing them with others.

Begin Part Two by introducing the concept of "cultural values" as those aspects of life that individuals or groups place a high worth or value on (Banks, 2003). Select one of the cultural universals from the T-chart such as food or recreation. It is a good idea to start this activity with a relatively innocuous cultural universal such as recreation or food because these universals are shared aspects of our cultures and can be used to scaffold discussion about other core values that could be touchier issues to discuss.

The teacher could begin the brainstorm by stating:

People from different cultures might think differently about (cultural universal). Sometimes people from the same culture will think differently about the same aspect of their culture. Therefore, it is important that we identify the different values that people have. When you think about (cultural universal) what do you and your family value?"

After giving students a brief time to reflect, record student responses on the screen or white board.

The concept of "values" can be a difficult one to understand. Older students may be able to grasp the idea that values represent beliefs in what is good or bad, right or wrong, true or false, fair or unjust, and so on. Younger students may need to have the concept simplified into notions of what is or is not important.

For example, if "recreation" is chosen from the list, the students may create a list of items their family places importance on when they have free time. The teacher draws attention to the likelihood that even people from the same culture might belong to another subculture and that our cultural values are reflected in many ways because of our differences within any one culture.

Direct the students to turn their poster papers over and record a second cultural universal. The teacher may choose one or may ask groups to choose their own from the list created earlier. Ask the students to brainstorm their families' values regarding that chosen cultural universal.

When time is called, reporters read their results. If the universal is common to all groups, the teacher records responses for the class. If groups have different universals, the scribes come to the board and record as their group reporter reads the responses. Discussion regarding the results focuses on importance, similarities, and differences among their cultural values.

It is important that students appreciate that their cultural values differ in many ways, and that these values are extremely important to the people who hold them, which means that both the people and their values deserve respect. To this end, the teacher may want to address one of the cultural universals on the list that is aligned with these specific students' core values. This topic should be supported by a discussion of how important it is to respect the rights of others to have unique values, even when we do not understand them or when they come into conflict with our own.

This discussion is important for Part Three of the lesson when students will need to be mindful of their respect for the cultural values of others around the world.

Part Three: Comparing Cultural Universals

In Part Three, students analyze images of various families from around the world to identify many different approaches to cultural universals as well as the values that they may reflect. The images for this part of the lesson appear in a book published by the Sierra Club titled *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* (Menzel, Mann, & Kennedy, 1995). The *Material World* series seeks to capture the "…common humanity of the peoples inhabiting our Earth and the great differences in material goods and circumstances that make rich and poor societies" (p. 7).

To accomplish this, the photographer captured hundreds of images of families from around the world and their possessions or "stuff" by literally removing all of their belongings and placing them in front of their homes. The families pose for the picture with their belongings and the end result is an authentic set of images of "typical" people and many of their cultural universals. While *Material World* is commonly used to illustrate economic differences around the world, the visual staging of a family's material possessions can also provide us with a window into their culture and cultural values as well.

The *Material World* series is available as a book and curricular materials are also available for purchase, including a PowerPoint presentation loaded with images and information. It is possible to teach this part of the lesson using images that are similar to those in the *Material World* series, though the book itself is relatively inexpensive and is useful far beyond the scope of this lesson.

In preparing the presentation for this lesson, it is only feasible (and necessary) to use a small selection of the available images. Seven to ten slides are enough to communicate the objective of the lesson, though the students always want to see more of the pictures. Figues 1 to 4 illustrate some examples of the images available in the *Material World* series.

Introduce the images by telling the students that they will be viewing pictures of families from around the world and that these images will show examples of many of the same cultural universals that they listed in Part One of the lesson. On the screen or board, project or write the following questions for students to consider as they view the images:

- What do you see in this picture?
- How would you describe the people in this picture? What do you think is important to them?
- Can you find examples of cultural universals in this picture? How are they the same or different from your cultural universals?
- What might these cultural universals tell us about the cultural values this family holds? How are these values the same or different from your own?

Figure 1
***Material World* Image of Mexican Family**

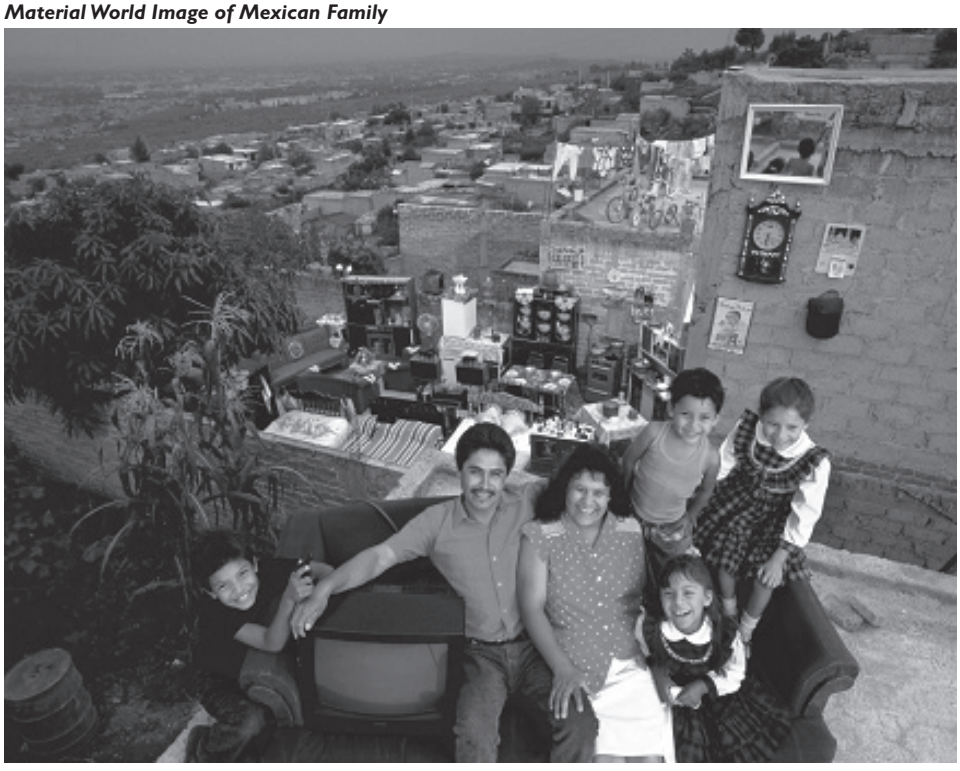

Figure 2
***Material World* Image of Kuwaiti Family**

When this lesson was shared in the fourth-grade classroom, the students were drawn immediately to many of the possessions or items with which they were most familiar in their own lives. For instance, when viewing the picture of the family from Japan (Figure 3), one student mentioned, "They have a lot of shoes!" Since this particular group of students included a large percentage of recent immigrants from Mexico, the slide depicting the Mexican family (Figure 1) created great excitement. Student comments included "I remember those houses" and "I miss that time."

Pets were also noticed quite frequently, which lead to a conversation about who owns pets, what kinds of pets people from different cultures might have, how pets are different from other animals that are owned for work or food, and how the animals people keep can help us understand their cultural values.

The students also were able to identify some of the core cultural values that were represented in the *Material World* images. For example, when viewing the image of the Bhutanese family, one student remarked that most of the family's possessions appeared to be either farming tools or religious items. This observation lead to a discussion about how this family probably spent most of their day (subsistence farming) and which religion this family probably practiced (Buddhism).

When asked how important the students thought Buddhism was to the Bhutanese family, one student responded with, "All of their fancy things are religious, so it is probably what they spend all their money on." This discovery lead to a further discussion about how the choices we make with our money can also reflect our cultural values.

The students often pointed out items in the pictures that were indications of relative wealth or poverty. One example is the four upscale automobiles sitting among expensive rugs and furniture in the foreground of the picture of the family from Kuwait (Figure 2). One student asked, "Are they rich because of oil?" This teachable moment lead to a discussion of the differences between people in the same culture. "Not everybody is rich in Kuwait. Many people are actually quite poor. Do you think that everybody in Kuwait lives like this?"

With prompting, the students were quick to recognize that a picture of one family does not necessarily represent all families from that culture. This outcome was especially applicable when it came to the values that underlie the cultural universal of family structure. In the images of the South African, Cuban, and Samoan families (not shown), some students remarked on the extended family members pictured in the photos, and many of the students were able to relate to living with extended relatives in their own lives.

This revelation was followed by a discussion about how living with extended relatives is often an economic necessity for some families, while for others an extended

Figure 3
***Material World* Image of Japanese Family**

Figure 4
Material World Image of Bhutanese Family

family structure is a cultural norm or tradition.

As the presentation progresses, the students should begin to see that there are many elements of life that connect them to people from other places while there are also many ways in which our cultural universals and values are considerably different. As one student surmised, "It's like picturing what you think they are, but they're not."

If students provide inappropriate or culturally insensitive responses, they should be reminded of Part Two when they reflected on their own cultural values. It is important for the students to understand that, even though the values of others may seem strange or conflict with our own values, the people and their values are just as meaningful to the people who hold them and deserve the same respect we reserve for our own.

The Final Slide: An Image of an American Family

The final slide of the presentation is an image of an American family from the state of Texas (see Figure 5). This image is reserved for the end of the presentation because it brings the lesson full circle by asking the students examine a representative image of a family from their own culture. However, while this family is undoubtedly American, they are also quite likely to be very different from families of many of the students in your classroom.

Upon reaching this last slide, the students should answer the previous set of questions as they consider their impressions of this particular Texas family as a representation of Americans in general. Write these questions on the board or project on the screen:

- Does this American family look like your family? How are they same or different?
- Are their cultural universals the same as yours? What about the values that their cultural universals represent?
- How do you think an image like this might influence how other people from around the world understand American culture?

Most students in the class indicated that this family was like their own family in some ways but not like their family in other ways. For example, their cultural universals indicate that the family is quite religious, yet they may not practice or value religion in the same way. Students also discussed the cultural values behind recreation by pointing out and discussing the piano and mounted animal heads on the family's garage. Particularly interesting was a discussion about the various cultural approaches to transportation and how we might compare and contrast the large trucks in the American family's driveway with the Kuwaiti family's cars, Thai family's scooter, Cuban family's bicycles, and South African families walking down a road that also served as a footpath.

Such a conversation about how cultural values are often reflected in our choices

Figure 5
Material World Image of American Family

of housing or transportation can lead to a dialogue about why many Americans seem to place a high value on their cars or trucks.

Lesson Conclusion

We want our students to appreciate that our understanding of other cultures and their cultural values is limited when we study only representations of that culture. When students see images of traditional dress, holiday celebrations, religious practices, or even everyday life, they are being exposed to a small slice of a culture that not everybody in that society will value in the same way.

As they found out with the discussion of cultural values in their own classroom in Part One, the family next door may be extremely different than the family in the picture. With that in mind, the lesson concludes with a writing assignment that asks students to reflect upon their understanding of cultural universals, their discoveries about cultural values, and the best way to study other cultures. Provide students with these questions to help them guide their writing:

- How can cultural universals help us learn about cultures and people from around the world?
- How do cultural universals help us understand the cultural values of others?
- How could assuming that everybody has the same cultural values lead to misunderstandings or conflict?
- Now that you have completed this activity, what do you think is the best way to learn about other cultures?
- What will you remember most from this activity?

When this class of fourth-graders was asked what they would remember most about the lesson, the students' responses included "Never mistake people for what you think they are" and "I will remember that everyone is different in their own way." Perhaps the only way to authentically understand a culture is through complete immersion, and student responses indicating that "traveling everywhere in the world" would be the best way to learn about other cultures are not uncommon. Unfortunately, while the majority of our students will not have had that opportunity, they can use their newfound appreciation for cultural universals and values to guide further investigation.

Extension and Further Investigation

One way to enhance this initial lesson and reinforce students' understanding of other cultures and cultural values is to have the students examine other cultures in more depth. The *Material World* materials are a helpful place to start this investigation as they provide many more images than can be presented in a single lesson.

Through our discussions we also learned that many of the students thought that using the Internet, books, or videos would be useful in finding out more about other cultures. These resources were available to them previously, but after this lesson, the students were in a stronger position to put such resources to work in a more purposeful way.

To extend the lesson, students should be encouraged to find examples of cultural universals from other societies and hypothesize about the cultural values that underlie them. Using the resources available to them, students should investigate, test out their hypotheses, and record their findings. Encourage them to consider how different people within the same culture or subculture may employ different cultural universals or hold different cultural values.

Ultimately, the students could create an illustrated description of their findings and present their work to the rest of the class. Ideally, these presentations would allow the students to talk about their original impressions of other cultures, the hypotheses they created about their cultural universals, and the information they found about the cultural values that are reflected in the everyday lives of people from around the world. The end result of such an endeavor would be a far deeper and more authentic appreciation for how small our cultural worlds can be.

Lesson Plan Resources

PowerPoint Presentation with images of cultural universals (see http://www.menzel-photo.com/books/mw.php. for more information on the *Material World* Series)

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