Exploring Cultural Diversity with Pre-service Secondary Teachers Using “My Life in a Bag”

As teacher educators we have the responsibility to prepare teachers to become culturally responsive educators who are able to “demonstrate the content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn” (NCATE, 2008). I teach Adolescent Growth and Development, a required course designed to assist undergraduate students to understand the physical, social, and cognitive development of adolescents. I have infused the course with various activities designed to help these pre-service secondary teachers think about their future students as cultural resources, providing them with rich information to design developmentally and culturally relevant instruction that is motivating and engaging to their future adolescent students. One activity that facilitates an increased awareness of cultural diversity and one that the pre-service teachers may actually use in their future classrooms to learn about their own students is “My Life in a Bag,” an activity originally created by Dr. John Caruso at Western Connecticut State University.

In preparation for this activity, I ask the students to think about the term “culture” and brainstorm what culture means to them. After recording and discussing their responses, I then share the following definition:

Culture is a system of norms, standards, and control mechanisms with which members of society assign meanings, values, and significance of things, events, and behaviors; culture includes patterns of knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as material artifacts produced by human society and transmitted from one generation to another (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006, p. 239).

For homework students are instructed to locate and place 5 items in a small bag that reflect their cultural identity. If an item is too large to place in their bag, they may bring a photo or description of it on an index card and place it in the bag. They are to bring the bag and a blank
sheet of paper with their name written on it to the next class. On the day of the activity, students form small groups of 4-6 students and identify a partner in their group with whom they know the least. They switch bags and the paper with their name on it with their partner and without discussing the items, review the artifacts in their partner’s bag and write down how they think each item represents their partner and his/her culture.

After students have written their perceptions of their partners’ artifacts, they then switch the bags and papers and read what their partner wrote. Then, still within their small cooperative learning group, each individual then shares his/her own artifacts with the group and describes how each item represents his/her cultural identity. After allowing time for the group members to share their cultural artifacts, I then facilitate a large group discussion asking students to share comments about the activity, including any misconceptions about their partners’ artifacts and how initial impressions could lead to stereotyping and misunderstanding. We also discuss how they may use this activity to learn about their own students so that they are able to incorporate aspects of their future students’ cultures into the design of their instruction to make learning meaningful and engaging for all of their students within their content area.

For homework and as a test grade, the students are to write a seven-paragraph essay (including an introduction and conclusion) describing their own five items and how each represents their culture. I grade the written essays using a scoring rubric assessing content, organization, style/tone/language, and grammar/punctuation/mechanics. The reflective essays are rich with valuable information about the students as individuals, their writing ability, as well as their disposition for teaching.

Frequently included items in the cultural bags are photos of family, pets, and friends. Other popular items are regional religious artifacts such as crosses and rosaries. Representations
of music are often included such as music CD’s as well as other popular technologies such as iPods, cell phones, computers, and games. Students often place items representative of their passions such as sports memorabilia, hobbies, etc. Most students include some reference to their ethnic heritage. For example, one student included a flag of Lebanon “to represent my Lebanese heritage” and the flag of Ireland “to represent my Irish heritage.” Cultural references to food are often included:

My grandparents on both sides of my family are amazing in the kitchen and the talent trickled down to my parents. I come from a family of immigrants so a lot of our meals still tie in closely to our heritage. My mom emigrated from Cuba when she was four; my paternal grandfather and grandmother came to America from England and Ireland, respectively. It was not an unusual thing to have arroz con pollo one night, corn beef and cabbage the next, and then roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for the following dinner.

Other references are rich in cultural values, such as the following excerpt:

The next item in my bag is a dollar bill that symbolizes hard work. Many Hispanics are not born into wealth but work very hard for every cent they earn. Many of my ancestors and even living family members work in extreme heat and for long, rigorous hours. Although society often looks down on the lower and middle class Hispanic groups, they have the pride of knowing that they are earning their living and gradually increasing in wealth for the future generation of young Hispanics. Hard work is extremely important in the Hispanic culture; without it, poverty would prevail and change would not come as quickly.

Students often comment that this exercise is one of their favorite and most inspiring course activities:

I really appreciated this exercise because it helped me to analyze the things in my life that shape who I am. Before I started “My Life in a Bag” I never realized what a huge contribution my culture had on the way I live my life and the decisions I make. I feel a great sense of pride for the things I included in my “My Life in a Bag,” and I feel empowered by all of them because I know how influential they are to me.

“My Life in a Bag” is an effective activity to increase pre-service secondary teachers’ multicultural awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of the influence of culture on identity. This important insight may assist these aspiring new teachers in using and designing relevant
activities through the utilization of their own students as a rich multicultural resource. In summary, I have found “My Life in a Bag” to be a rich, rewarding, and insight-producing activity for educators and students alike.

