

## Building a Cultural Treasure Trove with the Culture in the Room

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Some say that the shortest distance between two hearts is a story. As Comprehensible Input (CI)/TPR Storytelling®-oriented teachers, one way that we make connections to the hearts of our students is in the telling and co-creating of stories. World language teachers also work diligently to share stories from the target cultures represented by the languages we teach— but how often do we miss golden opportunities to share cultural stories that are right in front of us? We don't have to look to distant lands, books, or films to share cultural stories. There is a vast amount of culture ready for the sharing in each of our classrooms. When we start to use the culture in the room, the person right in front of us becomes the most important, and there is a cultural treasure trove waiting to be discovered.

In our work this summer, we have had the opportunity to do just that with our colleagues: hear the cultural experiences of a diverse group of people as they told their own stories. We worked with dozens of teachers all over the country, and asked each of them, “What is something from your culture that you would want taught?” One thing we learned along the way is that we first need to understand what “culture” is in order to meaningfully answer this question.

There are some great resources out there to help. One place to start is Zaretta Hammond's book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2014). In it, Hammond offers a wonderful graphic representing the different elements of culture in the form of a tree, with leaves representing surface culture, the trunk as shallow culture, and roots as deep culture. What becomes evident quite quickly is that when thinking about culture we must go beyond food, heroes, holidays, and clothing. While all of these can be worthwhile as a way in, culture is much deeper and wider than just these four things.

Another way of looking at culture is that there are *seen* and *unseen elements* of culture. The *seen elements* of a culture are things that are physical, which can be seen and understood by everyone. For example, we can see the physical features of a country and can understand how these have affected/created part of the culture. The *unseen elements* of a culture are things that are based on ideas and communication. For example, we can't see or touch a person's beliefs or religion, but we can learn about these things through communication and thinking. (*See Culture Wheel*)

Once we have established a deeper, more multifaceted understanding of culture, the next step is to examine the impact of personal and group identity on our understanding of and relationship to culture. Use your Comprehensible Input (CI) skills to help students explore their own identities; in so doing, you create the conditions for them to understand their own culture. Help students to notice their own cultural traits. (Often, this noticing happens when students are exposed to difference.) With this as the foundation for making cultural comparisons, we empower our students to gain a deeper and more connected understanding of their own lives, thus giving them one of the tools necessary for cross-cultural exchange. Additionally, it opens up a vast array of options for answering the question "What is something from your culture that you would want taught?"

So, what are the steps to make this happen in the world language classroom?

### **Step one: Elements of culture and identity**

Take one or two class sessions to explore and talk about elements of culture and identity, using the resources above.

### **Step two: Introducing the process of *Cultural Jewels* through students' L1**

The next step is to task your students, as well as yourself, with writing a "*Cultural Jewel*" story in their first language (whatever that language is).

### **The Cultural Jewel Process**

- Make available to students the graphic information on what makes up culture (*i.e. culture wheel, the culture tree, etc.*) that you used in your session exploring elements of culture and identity.

● **Give the following instructions to students:**

- a. Choose something from your culture that you would want taught to someone learning your language and about your culture
- b. Break it down to its essence in 5 – 10 sentences (*give students options to write a longer narrative first and then pare down the writing to its essence; use a graphic organizer to catch thoughts that would then form their story; or dictate their first draft*).  
NOTE: We have found that it's important for the narratives to come from a perspective of "I" or "we".
- c. Share what you created, in groups of 3 – 4.  
When sharing - only share what you have written.  
When listening - just listen deeply and then simply say "thank you".  
(*It is extremely important for the "jewels" to stand on their own without discussion.*)
- d. Stand up when you are done (*or whatever else works for you to have the group signal completion of sharing*).
- e. Each group shares one "cultural essence jewel" with the whole class.

**Step three:**

When students are linguistically ready, have them write a cultural jewel in L2 using this same process. Depending on the level, this could be early or late in the year.

Using this process at the beginning of the year in the students' native language is a powerful way to establish trust and to create community. Students can then more skillfully analyze and engage with culture throughout the rest of the year as well. We have been amazed by the depth of learning, community, and connection that occurs as people participate in this process.

Ideally, you will collect these stories created by students. Perhaps ask your colleagues, family members, students' families, and friends to also write these stories to share within the classroom. As we work within our own classroom community and then expand outward, we can create quite the treasure trove of first-person stories that can be shared.

World language teachers are poised to be leaders in creating multicultural—not just multilingual—classrooms and schools. Our learning how to do this as teachers matters deeply for our students and their futures. When we write and share cultural stories in our work toward multiculturalism, we start creating the space for true cross-cultural dialogue to happen. Dialogue and reciprocal cultural exchange are fundamental to understanding, cooperation, and peace.

Rachelle Adams (<http://www.elevateeducationconsulting.com/>) and Anna Gilcher (<https://annagilcherphd.wordpress.com>) presented at the National TPR Storytelling Conference. Handouts are available here:

[http://scho.schd.ws/hosted\\_files/ntprs2017/c6/Creating%20a%20Cultural%20Treasure%20Trove%20%28NTPRS%202017%29.pdf](http://scho.schd.ws/hosted_files/ntprs2017/c6/Creating%20a%20Cultural%20Treasure%20Trove%20%28NTPRS%202017%29.pdf)

They are available for trainings and inservices throughout the U.S. Adams also provided an on-line webinar for Fluency Fast Faculty in 2017. Rewriting the Story: Upending Bias Through Language Learning with Rachelle Adams.

(<https://newstore.fluencyfast.com/webinarrewriting-the-story-upending-bias-through-language-learning-with-rachelle>)



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