

## Teaching Locally, Engaging Globally Elements of Culture



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This document was prepared to assist faculty in the food, agriculture, and natural resources, and related sciences in integrating cultural dimensions to the Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs) they create as a part of their participation in the Teaching Locally, Engaging Globally project.

### Learning to Investigate Culture

When investigating culture, one is seeking to understand systems of meaning shared. For example “the alphabet, Euclidian geometry, and the story of creation in the Old Testament” are systems of meaning (p. 13). With that in mind, humans orient themselves in culturally specific ways: (a) in space and time; (b) by means of language and social relations; (c) with the body, food, and clothes; (d) by the structures of everyday life; and (e) in terms of the symbols and frameworks provided by public myths, religion, and ritual. Therefore, when conducting fieldwork and seeking to incorporate culture into the TLEG RLOs one is

collecting clues to help solve the mystery of culture: Why do these people do things the way they do? What are their motivations and goals? How are they constrained by the cultural definitions of their race, gender, age, class, and so on?... Train yourself to look at these things anew, to take nothing for granted, and to prevent your preconceptions (or theory) from dictating what you see and include as evidence. Pick any aspect or item of culture, and begin to ask questions about it. Who uses it? Where does it fit in the system of classifications? What resources are needed to make it, and how are these socially mobilized?... By following the threads where they lead, you are pulling on the fabric of culture. You begin to understand that nothing in culture stands alone; each item is woven into a vast, interconnected web. (p. 21)

### Space

Space is, perhaps, our primary means of orientation in the world – physically, socially, and cosmologically. The need for spatial orientation is universal among humans, but the meanings of space are not. Space is neither empty nor neutral; it is filled with things and with meanings. (p. 37)

To that end, spatial organization has many effects on everyday life. The following are examples of spatial matters that have cultural meaning: (a) personal space; (b) maps and guidebooks; (c) cosmic concepts/worldviews – where we are and what kind of world we live in, (d) concepts of nations and regions; (e) physical divisions such as walls, security fences, and/or mountain ranges; (f) internal divisions – gated communities,

ghettos, and divisions by race, ethnicity, income, gender, age, and occupation; (g) public spaces (e.g., parks, sporting areas, museums, movie theaters, cafes, pubs, restaurants, bathrooms); (h) houses – express who we are, both as individuals and as peoples; (i) invisible spaces – hospitals, nursing homes, mental institutions, prisons, and cemeteries; and (j) cyberspace. Thus, when developing TLEG RLOs one should take into consideration that “space is not neutral but is meaningfully (culturally) coded” (p. 53).

## Time

The industrial revolution shaped the way Europeans and Americans understand the concept of time. “Time became a commodity to be used (well) rather than the medium in which life is lived” (p. 81). For many people, the idea that time can be saved, spent, borrowed, wasted, and budgeted is very natural. However, various cultures have different perceptions of time, and therefore, concepts and experiences of time change as a result of circumstances and context (e.g., agriculturalist may have a seasonal view, fishing societies may have a tidal view, and American children may have a linear view). Even common objects like calendars hold vast cultural meaning. Different calendars of the world illustrate how religion, history, and worldviews shape notions of time. For example, the Western worldview is oriented toward progress and the future because the “past is past, [it is] over and done with” (p. 94).

In addition, “lived time” (p. 96) or our experiences shape one’s concept of time. Therefore, numerous factors such as occupation, gender, age, class, race, lifetime expectancies, birthdays, school time, holidays, work time, leisure time, family time, and community or village time influence one’s experiences. To that end, Americans may say that Turkish villagers waste time, but Turkish villagers may say that Americans waste or over exert themselves.

In summary, when developing TLEG RLOs seek to understand different cultural notions of time in view of people’s circumstances and context.

## Language

When we hear someone speak and have no visual clues...think of all the things you immediately grasp, or at least infer, about that person: gender, nationality or ethnicity, region of origin, age, emotional attitude (anger, fear, sadness, or elation), mental state (confident, anxious, or confused), physical state (just waking up, cold, or drunk), class, education, and often relationship to the hearer. All of this information is perceived almost without thinking, but it predisposes you to respond in a certain way. The way this information is evaluated – the meaning given to it – is, of course, heavily influenced by your culture. (p. 115)

“Language is a symbolic system” (p. 118) that enables one to think or conceive concepts and ideas. That is, words link concepts and sound-images, not things. The meanings of words are not independent of each other and are a function of “an environment of signs...[and] a function of context” (p. 119). For example, “*appetizing, tasty, delicious, juicy, luscious, and succulent*...mutually condition each other and have slight variations in meaning that would be absent if we had only one word” (p. 119).

Additionally, one's perception of the world is mediated through language. Some suggest that language allows people to create "worlds to live in" (p. 129) or culture. With that in mind, each language has different "ways of interpreting and expressing things" (p. 128). When developing TLEG RLOs it is important to recognize that culture cannot be understood without language and that language conditions "what you think and what you perceive" (p. 142).

## **Relatives and Relations**

"We are social beings; we exist in a web of social relationships that shape who we are" (p. 155), and in and through those relationships, cultural meanings are expressed. With that in mind, terms used to describe relationships, such as marriage, family, friend, and a date, do not have universal meanings. Therefore, cultural underpinnings impact the meaning of terms used to describe one's relationships. If one was to investigate the cultural meaning of a date, one might ask questions like the following:

"Does the word date refer to the person, to the event, or to both? How many people are involved in a date? Is it assumed they are heterosexual, or can they be homosexual? How is it different from other kinds of appointments?... What makes dating possible?... What are the expectations [of the date]? What is a date supposed to accomplish? (p. 157)

Furthermore, in some cultures marriage is a union, whereas in others it is contractual relationship. These examples show how culture influences the meaning of terms used to describe relationships.

Lastly, a final cultural element important in our relationships is manners. To that end, "social relations are made smooth because of conventional, ritualized practices of interaction and behavior" (p. 178). Specifically, manners simplify social life because members of a culture understand what is expected in different social situations.

In summary, when investigating culture for TLEG RLOs one should seek to discover meanings behind terms used to describe social relationships and seek to understand the cultural meanings behind a culture's manners.

## **Our Bodies, Our Selves**

"Our bodies allow us to occupy space, experience the sensual world, and interact with others" (p. 207); however, "are we our bodies or do we have bodies" (p. 206)? Different societies have different conceptualizations of bodies and bodiliness. Cultural meanings lie within the way we view, think, acknowledge, emphasize, and treat our bodies. In addition, our bodies are influenced by culture – by what we eat, how we sleep, how we walk, how we experience our bodies, and by the social control and discipline exerted on them.

When investigating culture one can examine various aspects of bodies. One aspect is body experience. Body experiences shape our self-images and bodies, and these experiences are guided by words, conditioned images of ideal bodies, and nonverbal body behavior. One way to get at bodily experience one must look at a variety of practices and ask about why they do them: For example, why do some people swaddle

babies and other barely cover them or why do some people believe in early toilet training and others assume it happen when the child is ready? A second aspect concerns a culture's notion of the ideal body. These notions will be expressed by relatives, peers, as well as the media and the people who are considered heroes. In some cultures, for example, the ideal physical image of a woman is being thin, whereas for others, the ideal image is round and plump. Additionally, these images can have different cultural meaning such as a thin woman can portray attractiveness, elegance, wealth, and prestige or unattractiveness, poverty, and nothingness. A third aspect is body modifications. Examples of body modification that have cultural meanings are neck elongation, breast implants, tattoos, circumcision, and binding of feet. A fourth aspect is techniques of the body – the way one stands, squats, sits, gives birth, carries a baby, sexual behaviors, and so forth. A fifth aspect is body and nation. Nations control bodies in many ways such as deciding who receives welfare, health care, types of work people do, who enters a nation, who reproduces, and so forth. A final aspect is dead and dying bodies; the way these bodies are treated have cultural meaning. For instance, the answers to the following questions have cultural meaning: (a) were organs removed or are bodies kept whole, (b) are bodies buried or incinerated, (c) are the dead quickly disposed of or not, and (d) are the dying or aged bodies shunned or placed out of sight.

In summary, when investigating culture for TLEG RLOs one should seek to discover meanings is the way people conceptualize, acknowledge, emphasize, utilize, and treat their bodies.

## **Food for Thought**

Food shapes culture and culture shapes food in numerous ways. The following are a few examples of questions or statements one might consider when investigating food and culture.

What constitutes food? What makes a meal? What does it mean to say that 'food is love'? Relation of food to the environment. Fast food, slow food, genetically modified food ('Frankenfood'). Food and sex. Food and civility. Food and religion. Cooking. (p. 245)

As can be seen from the questions or statements above, the cultural meanings of food are "interlarded with issues of classification, religion, identity, civility, pleasure, economics, and the environment" (p. 248). In addition, Delaney suggested that one should consider food in light of "space, time, language, social relations, and body" (p. 248).

"What counts as food in any particular culture, and what foods are preferred or forbidden is intimately related to a system of classification that, in many cases, has roots in religious prescriptions" (p. 254). For example, kosher food has the blood drained from the meat because of passages in the Bible, more specifically, Genesis 9:3-4. Furthermore, Edmund Leach (as cited in Delaney) stated that in a culture only a small percentage of edible food will be classified as potential food, and he developed the following three major categories of food:

1. Edible substances that are recognized as food and consumed as part of the normal diet.

2. Edible substances that are recognized as possible food, but that are prohibited or else allowed to be eaten only under special (ritual) conditions. These substances are *consciously tabooed*.
3. Edible substances that by culture and language are not recognized as food at all. These substances are *unconsciously tabooed*. (p. 257)

To further explain numbers two and three, pork is recognized as a food by Jews but is not consumed, and dog is not recognized as food by Americans, and therefore, is not consumed.

With that in mind, food is a very important way people reproduce themselves. “Food is a quintessential symbol of *identity* – we are what we eat – both individually and culturally” (p. 249), and according to Schlosser (as cited in Delaney) the food a group of people consume can reveal more about them than art or literature.

In addition when investigating culture and food, one “must consider the kinds of foods that make a meal, the places where a meal can be eaten, and the people with whom a meal is shared” (p. 258). These things differ from culture to culture. For example, in India, caste membership determines with whom one may eat, and in some Turkish villages, tables are not used.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, food can influence culture. In America, fast food changed what, how, and where Americans eat. Additionally, fast food changed America’s farm economy, influenced land and water use, and changed patterns of civility related to dining.

In conclusion, there are numerous ways food and culture influence each other. Thus, when developing TLEG RLOs one should seek to discover culture meanings behind the numerous influences.

## **Clothing Matters**

Clothes serve other purposes than protecting us from elements of weather, they “express cultural meanings and identities and serve as markers of status, age, and gender as well as occupation, activity, degree of formality, and a host of other things” (p. 295). In addition, clothes are nonverbal signs that distinguish individuals and groups and reflect a wider cultural system. For example, clothes can reveal the learned behavior of modesty, which may be linked to religious views in various cultures. Clothes and modesty also reveal what a culture feels about bodies and the exposure of bodies.

Additionally, clothes form a system: “there is sense and reason behind the composition of an ‘outfit’... [and there is] a certain syntax, a lexicon of items and rules of combinations for creating appropriate ensembles for different occasions” (p. 295). Styles, texture, fabric, color, and line all encode cultural meanings. For example, in the US, white is the traditional color for a wedding dress, but in Turkey, red is the traditional color. [Might say: white is symbol of purity, red the symbol of the blood of the patriline] Thus, in this context, the meanings behind the colors of the wedding dresses reveal cultural values. Styles, texture, fabric, color, and line also reveal cultural values

attributed to gender, which can be seen in the fact that men and women wear different kinds of clothes in numerous cultures.

Furthermore, clothes reveal cultural constraints. For example, European women wore corsets to bind their torsos, Chinese women bound their feet to make them smaller, and Japanese women wore kimonos that restricted their movement. Such clothing reveals a culture's notion of gender. Thus, even these items that seem normal to the wearers reveal "a system of values about what life is and how it should be lived" (p. 327).

Finally, clothes can also encode space, time, and life stage. These categories and aforementioned categories are culturally produced and can be investigated to reveal cultural meanings.

In summary, when investigating culture and developing TLEG RLOs one should seek to understand the variety and meaning behind the clothes a group of people choose or are forced to wear.

### **Very Important People, Places, and Performances**

"Certain people, places, events, and cultural practices become iconic; they embody cultural myths or epitomize cultural values" (p. 340). Therefore, within each country or region there are specific places one can visit, performances one can watch, and certain people one can learn about to gain a feel of a culture. With that in mind, the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, and the Statue of Liberty are examples of important places. Fourth of July celebrations, changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, Mardi Gras in Rio de Janeiro, baseball games, weddings, ritual surrounding death, and taking tea in England, Japan, or Turkey are all examples of important events/performances. Examples of cultural icons are Princess Diana, the Beatles, Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, or Mahatma Gandhi.

Interestingly, "cultural icons that appear to represent a particular culture cannot be confined within national boundaries" (p. 346), and thus, many may be global phenomena. This notion helps one to understand that cultures can overlap and are not static contained objects. Rather, culture "is a system of symbols, meanings, and myths that can spread as far and as wide as the people who are its avatars" (p. 346). People, places, and performances "embody, or are able to tap into cultural myths that express qualities, beliefs, and values that, even if not consciously understood, nevertheless touch our emotions and make us feel that we, too, belong" (p. 346).

In summary, when investigating culture for TLEG RLOs one should investigate the people, places, and performances that the local people in a country or region hold up as important.

Teaching Locally, Engaging Globally  
Elements of Culture  
RLO Planning Worksheet

Elements of Culture	Key Points/Things to Consider	How might this element relate to the concept of your RLO?
Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filled with things and meanings</li> <li>• People orient themselves physically, socially, and cosmologically</li> <li>• What occupies a space, and what is its significance?</li> <li>• Physical divisions: security fences and mountain ranges</li> <li>• Internal divisions: gated communities, and by race, ethnicity, income, etc.</li> </ul>	
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different cultures have different perceptions of time</li> <li>• Seek to understand in view of people's circumstances and context</li> <li>• Religion, history, worldviews shape the way people experience time</li> </ul>	
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A symbolic system</li> <li>• Perceptions of the world are mediated through language</li> <li>• Different ways of interpreting and expressing things</li> <li>• Conditions what one thinks and what one perceives</li> </ul>	
Relatives and Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships shape who we are and have cultural meanings</li> <li>• Culture influences meaning of terms used to describe relationships</li> <li>• Manners are influenced by culture</li> </ul>	
Our Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different societies have different concepts of bodies and bodiliness</li> <li>• Cultural meanings lie within the way we view, think, acknowledge, emphasize, and treat our bodies</li> <li>• Body experiences; body images; body modifications; techniques of the body; dead and dying bodies</li> <li>• Nations control bodies such as deciding who receives welfare, health care, the types of jobs one does, etc.</li> </ul>	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influences culture and is a symbol of identity – we are what we eat</li> <li>• Cultural meanings of food are intertwined with issues of classification, religion, identity, civility, pleasure, economics, the environment</li> <li>• Consider in light of space, time, language, social relations, and body</li> <li>• What counts as food? What is preferred, and forbidden? What makes a meal? Where can a meal be eaten and whom is the meal shared?</li> </ul>	
Clothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects a wider cultural system and reveals cultural constraints</li> <li>• Styles, texture, fabric, and color all encode cultural meanings</li> <li>• Encode gender, space, time, activity, life stage, status, occupations, etc.</li> <li>• Seek to understand the variety and meanings of clothes worn</li> </ul>	
Important People, Places, and Performances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obvious and can be used to gain a feel of a culture</li> <li>• Express qualities, beliefs, and values</li> <li>• Cultural icons are not confined to national boundaries</li> </ul>	

## **Examples of How Culture Impacts Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resource Sciences**

### **Space**

- Fencing livestock in, out, or not using fences at all
- Is land owned and utilized only by the owner and those with permission or is land a resource for all humans
- Organization of food in open markets and grocery stores

### **Time**

- Fishing societies may have a tidal view of time
- Australian aborigines kept time by the type of flower in bloom
- Time spent on agricultural tasks

### **Language**

- Agricultural practices and knowledge of wildlife and plants being passed down through an oral culture
- Semantics of terms used to describe animals and plants create different classification systems among different cultures
- Potatoes are important to the Aymara of South America, and as a result, the Aymara have numerous terms for discussing potatoes

### **Relatives and Relations**

- Arabs like to establish personal relationships before discussing agribusiness
- A family elder or village elder may have more influence over an agricultural production decision than the actual farmer
- Raj Gonds of central India refuse to take food or drink from people of a lesser caste

### **Our Bodies**

- Among several groups in Africa, being fat is equated with beauty, being provided for, and having plenty to eat
- Nourishment is a type of body experience; with that in mind, Australians typically consume three meals plus two organized snacks a day, thus resulting in higher calorie consumption than most groups of people
- Gender stereotypes/body experiences encode important cultural notions; with that in mind, the custom of the Iban women of Malaysia is to plant and harvest crops and prepare seed for rituals, while the men slash and burn trees for planting, hunt local wildlife, and market Iban-made goods

### **Food**

- Fast food in America has changed what we eat, how we eat, and where we eat
- In patriarchal societies, men often eat first, consume more, and consume higher quality food
- Religious beliefs or other cultural elements influencing what wildlife, domesticated animals, and plants are considered food, and therefore, consumed.

### **Clothing**

- Women's clothes restricting their movements and not being conducive for agricultural tasks
- A culture might dictate which agricultural materials are used in making clothes
- Clothing worn during festivals celebrating planting and harvesting

### **Important People, Places, and Performances**

- In countries where soccer is very important culturally, a significant soccer match could influence agricultural activities on that particular day
- Louis Pasteur and the effects of his research on agriculture
- Mecca – the religious pilgrimage to Mecca or the act of stopping to pray toward Mecca influencing agriculture



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Documentation Worksheet

	Person, Place, or Thing Visited		
	Date: Details:	Date: Details:	Date: Details:
Space			
Time			
Language			
Relatives and Relations			
Our Bodies			
Food			
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