Culture Learning: Simulations & Exercises

Games are a fun and effective way to introduce issues of cultural awareness and intercultural communications to students. The information on this page, compiled by the Intercultural Studies Project, is a good place to start looking for specific cultural simulations and exercises and for ways to incorporate them into the curriculum.

Films and videos also make good introductions to issues related to culture, and can serve as starting points for classroom discussions of such issues.

Contents of this page:
- Simulation Games
- Bibliography of publications
- Contact information for distributors
- Contact information for professional organizations

Simulation Games

Aid to Minorians / Intercultural Sourcebook
Participants are divided into two groups: The Minorians are a poor and underdeveloped society; while the Majorians are wealthy and are trying to plan a project to help the Minorians. Cultural assumptions and the relationship between donor and receiving parties are examined.

Albatross / Beyond Experience
This is a nonverbal role-playing activity that can incorporate a variety of themes, such as male-female relationships and privilege. Participants are asked to watch a brief role-play and then describe what they saw. Most will interpret what they saw and begin to judge the characters in the role while only having seen, but not heard, anything. This exercise provides a good example of how people give meaning to unique events based on their own experiences.

Alternatives: A Game of Understanding / Intercultural Press
This board game examines the relationship between gay, lesbian, and bisexual groups and heterosexual groups in contemporary society. Any number of people can play and it includes aspects of both board games and role-playing exercises.

Bafa' Bafa' / Simulation Training Systems
Participants are divided into two cultures, and are asked to travel back and forth between them. Players try to understand the other culture through these visits while maintaining their own cultural role. This simulation shows how easy it is to misinterpret actions and exchanges when the rules are unfamiliar, and it demonstrates the need for thought-out strategies when learning about a new culture.

Barnga / Intercultural Press
A nonverbal game in which participants are divided into groups to learn a card game based on a number of simple rules. What the participants do not know is that each group's set of rules is slightly different, so when they begin to play the game with others conflict develops. As players are not allowed to talk, they must rely on other means of communication. While sometimes explosive, this game demonstrates how quickly ingroup-outgroup dynamics form.

Brief Encounters / HRD Press
The purpose of this cross-cultural simulation game is to explore how people perceive cultural differences. It explores concepts and skills such as enculturation, ethnocentrism, first impressions, and interacting with culturally different groups.

Chatter / HRD Press
This simulation encourages participants to pay attention to the dynamics of small group interactions. The purpose is to have participants experience variations in conversational styles and to modify their behavior appropriately.

The Cost of Your Shirt / Resource Center of the Americas
This simulation exercise is based on the real-life drama of a Guatemala City maquiladora. Exploring the global issues behind a union dispute, students play the roles of plant managers, workers, government representatives, and concerned US citizens.

Crisis / Simulation Training Systems
Participants form teams and each team is instructed to manage the affairs of a fictional nation. The nations vary in their resources, strengths, and weaknesses, but must work together to solve an international conflict.

Death of a Dissident / Myrin Institute & American Forum
This game looks at economic and social development issues. Set in a Caribbean nation, participants are given roles and asked to negotiate with each other to solve the problems that arise.

Diversophy: Understanding the Human Race / George Simons International
A board game that helps develop the skills necessary to understand and collaborate with people from different cultures. The exercise is based on the concept of the “glueball,” or groups of two that are more likely to interact and solve a problem. This simulation looks at how homogenous groups work as opposed to how
heterogeneous groups work, as well as examining the assumptions that groups make about the decision making process and how to work out a problem.

The Emperor's Pot / Intercultural Sourcebook Vol. 1
This simulation focuses on the different cultural assumptions and values of different groups as one group tries to obtain a valued object from another. Also known as the East-West Game.

Exclude / HRD Press
This game gives participants a chance to experience the frustrations of being left out of a group or being ignored by its members.

Fire in the Forest / American Forum
The learning themes for this simulation include environmental protection, respect for other cultures, and economic development. Set in the Amazon Rain Forest, participants represent conflicting claims to the land and try to negotiate a solution.

Grocery Store / American Forum
In a culturally diverse neighborhood in the inner city, tensions arise between diverse culture groups. A critical incident occurs and is interpreted differently by each party. This game looks at race relations, cultural diversity, and the different cultural meanings that are attached to different behaviors.

Heelotia / Simulation Training Systems
Similar to Bafa Bafa, this game is easier to conduct. In this game, the cultural rules are intentionally vague so as to make the participants decide on their own cultural rules. Thus, this exercise looks at how decisions are made, as well as how one interacts with another culture group.

Hostage Crisis / Moorehead Kennedy Institute
In this game, terrorists threaten to harm U.S. hostages unless their demands are met. As the demands are not feasible, negotiation becomes critical. The main themes in this game are Middle Eastern nationalism, issues of justice, and cross-cultural understanding.

IDE-GO / Intercultural Sourcebook Vol. 1
Participants separate into two groups: one simulates North American culture while the other simulates South American culture. This game is designed to provide insight into the interaction processes and behaviors of these two groups.

Lump-Sum / Weeks, Pederson, & Brislin
Participants are separated into four groups with differing backgrounds and interests. They meet to negotiate the allocation of a specific amount of money. They must decide within an allotted amount of time or the money will be lost. Likewise, the game requires unanimous agreement rather than simply majority rule on the decision, so the only way for any group to win is for all groups to win.

The Malonarian Cultural Expedition Team / Meridian House International
In this simulation, participants play a team of cultural anthropologists from the Republic of Malonaria. The team’s assignment is to study the United States in order to prepare for educational and diplomatic exchanges between the two cultures. A values approach is taken, and members of the team are asked to compare American and Malonarian values as a way to further understanding.

The Martian Anthropology Exercise / Beyond Experience
In this exercise, participants are supposed to pretend that they are studying a new culture, that of the "Martians". The players are divided into groups, and each group is given a task to complete before all reconvene as a large group. Each small group has a different assignment, and assignments can be altered to fit the specific themes that the teacher would like to discuss. Suggested group tasks include going to the public library to study kinship patterns, or going to a cafe to study communication patterns. Each group is to pretend that they have never had contact with this "Martian" culture before, so they must try to make sense of it and then report back to the larger group.

The Owl / Beyond Experience Vols. 1 & 2
A group of reporters are assigned to interview members of another country and, if acting appropriately, can gain access to a mysterious cultural event. If they accomplish the task, the reporters will have their story. Communication problems arise, though, and the reporters are faced with the dilemma of needing information while also needing to find a culturally appropriate way to ask for it.

Same Difference / HRD Press
This game helps participants identify several cultural groups to which they belong, to discover similarities and differences between themselves and others, to identify personal attributes which are immediately recognized and the ones which require time and effort to discover, as well as to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant attributes in a given situation.

Starpower / Simulation Training Systems
Participants form groups with different economic statuses and learn to trade with each other as a way to improve their economic status. The most economically viable group is allowed to alter the rules, though. Alliances quickly form and ingroup-outgroup dynamics become evident as well as assumptions about the uses and abuses of power.

Tisouro: Creating Felt Needs / Beyond Experience (2nd ed.)
In this simple exercise players gather in a circle and pass a pair of scissors to each other. They are only allowed to say how they are passing the scissors, either closed, crossed or open. The facilitator gives the instructions in a way that is ambiguous between participants having the scissors or their legs be closed, crossed, or open when they pass the scissors. This exercise examines nonverbal communication, conflicting signals, and feelings of being left out or not understanding within a group context.

Where Do You Draw the Line / Simulation Training Systems
Designed by Gary Shirts, this ethics game explores what "should be" without excluding consideration of what "is".

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Publications

Beyond Experience Vols. 1 & 2
HRD Press

Intercultural Sourcebook Vol. 1
Simulation Training Systems

American Forum
Weeks, Pederson, & Brislin

Simulation Training Systems
Meridian House International

Beyond Experience (2nd ed.)
Beyond Experience

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Simulation Training Systems

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http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/resources/exercises.html


There are a number of journals that devote much of their effort to experiential learning activities as well, such as:

- Journal of Experiential Education
  http://www.aee.org/publications/journal/aeejourn.html
- Simulation and gaming: An International Journal of Theory, Design, and Research
  http://www.unice.fr/sg/

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**Game Distributors**

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