

Thoughts for the 7th Grade Cultural Geography Block

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Our Human Family

We come in many shades of skin color, speak thousands of languages, and inhabit every continent on earth. We number over 7.3 billion people (and the count is rising fast). If we look at each of the people that make up the Earth's population of 7.3 billion, we will find 7.3 billion uniquely different individuals. But, for millennia these individuals have come together in groups to share the common aspects of their lives. Cultural or Human Geography explores these cultural groupings and how they relate to the place where they originated. Some of the main phenomena studied in Cultural Geography include language, religion, different economic and governmental structures, art, music, etc. Knowledge of these topics, helps us explain how and/or why people function as they do in the areas in which they live.

When introducing this topic to students it is important to share with them the benefit of having a variety of cultures in the world - diversity being the spice of life! I brought in a number of items/foods that we use today, but would not be part of the richness of our lives if not for other cultures. I also talked about our country (U.S.A.), probably more than any on earth being a "melting pot" of the cultures of the world. It is impossible to find a stereotypical "American!"

After recalling our block on biomes, I shared that many aspects of a group's cultural background were direct results of their environment... the kinds of shelters they built, the food they ate, the clothing they wore, etc., all were dictated by the land, flora, and fauna around them, as well as the climate/weather. Where we live can influence the type of shelters/houses we live in, the type of food we eat, and the kind of clothes we wear. For example, if you live in an Inuit village in the tundra of Northern Canada, fresh oranges are not a common part of your daily diet. Whereas in the South American country of Brazil, the world's largest producer of citrus, oranges are abundant. We talked about what would be considered part of a people's culture: language, religion, different economic and governmental structures, role of men and women, art, music, food, clothing, greeting customs, rites of passage/educational methods, etc. (Many of these were

originally created in direct response to the physical environment... have students identify which ones.)

I then talked about how people living in a rural area today, are often more culturally tied to the natural environment around them than those living in a large metropolitan area. (I did this by telling them about life in the small town in Oklahoma, where my Grandparents lived. School didn't start until after the wheat harvest was in; every spring, before the rains came, barn raisings occurred, there were pie socials, as soon as the peach trees began to yield their fruit, etc.)

Next, I had a discussion with the class about the importance of learning about the various people and cultures of the world. (For we all share the same future... the future of our planet and its well-being.) We talked about the difference between acknowledging our differences as just different, rather than bringing an attitude of "ours is better." I shared that in its extreme, the latter attitude can lead towards a climate of intolerance as was found in 1935 Germany, where their leader, Adolf Hitler, proposed the creation of a "Master race" of Teutonic Caucasian, blue-eyed people. This desire to eradicate other cultures resulted in the extermination of 6 million Jewish people and a World War. (As an aside, I told them about the outrage that occurred among Hitler and his followers when U.S. track and field Athlete, Jesse Owens, won 4 gold medals in the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. He defeated Hitler's entire group of "Master Race" Athletes. Why was Hitler so upset? Owens was an African American and by definition an inferior human being!)

I ended by saying that by studying the various cultures of people in the world, we will be able to discover what is important to them...what are their gifts, what are their struggles. Armed with this knowledge, we can help to avoid the atrocities of the past. Rather than eliminate a people because we don't understand and therefore value them, we can learn to acknowledge the commonalities we share, appreciate how we are unique and strive to find ways to work together.

The assignment that came out of this opening lecture: Write an essay on the culture of their 7th Grade class... a description of their class- what they all had in common.

Quite a few of these essays were very insightful... and it helped them think about what it means to be part of a cultural group.

From their essays I created the following picture of their "Class culture," which they agreed with: The class culture was made up of a group of 13 year olds (10 boys/10 girls). They considered themselves to be "country" kids who came from homes with a fair amount of land that supported vegetable gardens and a number of animals/pets: horses, chickens, goats, dogs and cats. Most of them did chores involving animals. They shared home environments that valued education and music. Most of their parents were college-educated. When it came to the students and their classroom "culture" they identified themselves as casual in their dress, jeans being the most commonly worn item of clothing, the girls all tended to wear their hair long and the boys preferred a particular type of shoe (can't remember the brand). They enjoyed playing sports, especially basketball and skiing. Most believed in the existence of God, but were not exactly sure about the "heaven/hell thing." They all believed in the importance of community service and most were involved at some level with local organizations. Pizza was a common favorite food...they also identified their favorite musical groups, video games, etc. but, I don't remember those! And they all agreed that so far Inorganic Chemistry was their favorite block!

When we talked about how the physical environment they lived in impacted their class cultural picture, they realized that living near the mountains made skiing possible, having land made growing some of their own food and having horses and chickens possible. The temperate weather during most of the year allowed them to play a lot of basketball...our court was just outside the classroom. They also realized that living out in the country meant that they had to spend a lot of time in the car commuting to school, friends' homes, and various activities... they were dependent on their parents for this. They also noted that having the school located on a tree filled hillside made any kind of sport requiring a large flat field impossible (i.e. soccer, baseball, etc.). Thus we didn't have the opportunity to play those sports.

However, we are also different from those around us. Physically, we may differ in our skin, hair and eye color; height, weight, body shape. All of these things are

related to our ancestors and the physical characteristics that we inherited from them. Besides physical differences, we can also differ in where and how we live and the beliefs and values that govern our lives and decisions. What are some of these differences?

Although where we live can influence the type of food, homes, and clothing we wear, religion can dictate many of the customs and values that guide our daily choices.

- Religion
- Language
- Where we live
- Shelter type
- How we make our livelihood
- History
- Food
- Clothing style
- Cultural customs
- Educational opportunities

We are also different. By studying and comparing the similarities and differences of our human family we can learn much about humanity as a whole. Anthropology is a field of study concerned with the origin, culture, and development of human kind.

One way to begin our study is to list ways in which people differ: skin, eye, hair color, height, weight, body shape, male, female, age, diet, location, language, religion, clothing, housing, division of labor, music, social structure and customs. Some of these factors are influenced by the places we live, some seem unique to various cultures. Some cultures, such as our own, are made up of such a diverse group of people that they seem to have no specific qualities which identify them.

When we start making distinctions between different race, religions and cultures, we need to be very careful not to make the same mistakes our ancestors have made: forgetting to distinguish "different" from "better than". Many of the most negative aspects of human history can be traced to one group (usually European, Caucasians... also Ancient Chinese) thinking its language, skin color, religion, way of

life or thinking were superior to others. This inevitably led to one group dominating or controlling another.

Our study of cultural geography will bring us to many parts of the planet. We will discover that the different races, religions, cultures of the human family have each brought their own gifts, abilities and capacities. Each culture should be valued and honored, not judged. In developing true interest in ourselves, we must not repeat the mistakes of the past but instead discover who we, as human beings, really are.