



AMISTAD AMERICA LESSON COLLECTION

Differences Make the Difference

Grades: 5-8 Time Frame: 2-3 days

Overview

One of the most lasting lessons of the Amistad Incident is how a diverse group of people came together around a single issue, in the name of freedom and justice. African captives, white and black abolitionists, an English and Mende-speaking sailor, young college students, and an elderly former president. Even today, it's difficult to picture them all in a room together.

Most of our lives are spent looking for people with whom we share commonalities - friends, groups and teams we belong to, a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse. If only we spent as much time and energy trying to understand people who are different from us!

For this project you'll look at diversity in an offbeat way. You'll start by understanding the power of group identity. In fact, you'll invent your own new culture or clique. You'll then look at what it takes to understand and actively value cultural differences.

Learning Objectives

- Explore the role group identity and culture play in your life.
- Understand the natural affinities you may have for people "like you" and the natural anxiety you may have about people who are "different."
- Identify ways you can actively seek, value, and promote diversity in friendships, school, work situations, and elsewhere.



Drummer on board Freedom Schooner *Amistad*.

Activities and Student Work

INVENT-A-CULTURE

The feeling of belonging - to a family, group, or culture - is one of the most powerful feelings a person can have. You'd do anything to protect your family, right?!

For this activity, you'll create new cultural groups and live a day as a member of them. See if you can recreate that feeling of identity and belonging! Your teacher will divide the class into teams of 4-5 students.

Once in your team, look up the word "culture" in a dictionary. What are the elements of culture? How does culture manifest itself in a person's life? Make a list of how and where someone might recognize your "culture."

Next, begin inventing your team's new culture. Start by talking about things team members may have in common ("We all like the Simpsons," or "We all like the color purple"). Your mission is to:

- Identify the characteristics or features of your culture. How would someone know you were a part of this group? Do you celebrate certain holidays? Wear certain clothes? Speak a certain language? What are some of your practices?
- Outline some of your group's history.
- Name your culture. ("We're Simpsonites.")

Define as much about your new culture as you can. Your teacher may give you a full class period or ask you to do part of this activity as homework.

CULTURED CLASS OR CULTURE CLASH

Present your new culture to the class. Each team will have five minutes to share who you are and what distinguishes you. Be ready for questions from other 'cultures.'

After presentations, discuss these questions:

- Which cultures can your group relate to most easily? Which do you have the most difficulty relating to? Why?
- What would the activity have been like if you had been asked to invent "races" instead of cultures?
- Was it fun learning about other cultures in the class?

Activities (continued)

CULTURE COUNSELORS

Most schools have some serious cliques and subcultures. On the other hand, students often understand how to value diversity better than people twice their age.

For your final team assignment, imagine a scenario where racial or ethnic diversity is an issue - a local neighborhood, school, sports team, or company situation. For a real challenge, you might pick an actual situation in your school or community or a current world event, such as ethnic strife in a country.

Your team has been asked to advise people involved in the situation. Write a 1-2 page letter of counsel:

- What is the situation?
- What are ten suggestions or pieces of advice you would give to help improve relationships?

Your teacher will ask teams to read or post letters in class.

Resources

WEBSITES

Tolerance.org - Planet Tolerance
www.tolerance.org/pt/index.html

Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding
www.peacecorps.gov/www/bridges/index.html

Taking the Human Rights Temperature of your School - Human Rights Resource Center
<http://hrusa.org/hrmaterials/temperature/interactive.php>

How Race is Lived in America - New York Times
<http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/race/>

Not in Our Town -PBS
<http://www.pbs.org/niot/index.html>

Assessment

- You can define the word "culture" and give examples.
- Each team member participates fully in the creation of your new culture - everyone contributes ideas. Each team member has a role in presenting your culture to the class.
- Your final written assignment is neatly typed and represents suggestions from all members of your team.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do we have an affinity for "affinity groups" (people like us)? Can you imagine feeling as strongly about "diversity groups"? What would it take?
2. What role does *power* play in supporting or aggravating racial or ethnic differences? What role does *individual identity* play? Is one a stronger force than the other?
3. What do you think helps improve understanding between races or cultures? What is the greatest obstacle or threat to understanding?
4. How many "cultures" are you part of? Which are most important to you?



About Amistad America

AMISTAD America, Inc. promotes relationships between races and cultures by acknowledging our common experience and encouraging dialogue based on respect. Freedom Schooner *Amistad* serves as a floating classroom, icon, and monument to the millions of souls broken or lost as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

www.amistadamerica.org