



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

RESEARCHING CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

The textbook for my western humanities survey course covers significant cultural developments in religion, philosophy, literature, music, visual arts, and their historical settings, from approximately 1400 to 1900 A.D., in one-half inch of an 8 1/2 x 11-inch textbook! With such a daunting amount of material to cover and a textbook that can devote only two paragraphs to Rembrandt and four to Mozart, I found myself seeking a context that would connect this vast collection of people, places, things, and events to a framework relevant to my students. The words of an old Simon and Garfunkel tune, "The Dangling Conversation," tormented me:

And you read your Em'ly Dickinson,
and I my Robert Frost,
And we note our place with book markers
that measure what we've lost.

With each exam, I felt certain that we had marked, measured, and lost another century.

A few semesters ago I hit upon an introductory lesson that helps students better understand how the events we cover are linked and related, that they are not arbitrary events plucked from thin air. The lesson is a delightful icebreaker that helps set a collaborative tone for the rest of the semester. Additionally, it gives me a handy frame of reference for future lectures, discussions, and exams.

I give students our definition of culture for the semester: "Culture is the sum of human endeavors, including the basic political, economic, and social institutions, and the values, beliefs, and arts of those who share them." We discuss in some detail the components of the definition. I ask them to think of things we teach our children, such as what and what not to eat, how to behave around strangers, and how to read signs in nature. There is an element of survival skills in cultural traditions.

Thomas Sowell, in discussing cultural diversity and change, observed: "Every culture discards over time the things which no longer do the job or which don't do the job as well as things borrowed from other cultures." We use Arabic numbers instead of Roman numerals, for example, because Arabic numbers work better. That is, we *select*, based on rational principles, what we will teach to succeeding generations.

Then I ask students to compile a list of images they have of the 1940s. When they have finished the 1940s, they are directed to complete a list for each succeeding decade, listing at least five items for each.

Then students gather into small groups, small enough that students can talk freely among themselves. When students have formed their groups and completed introductions, they choose a recorder and a spokesperson, and compile their individual lists into one, with no more than eight items per decade. They always spend quite a bit of time discussing whether the first space flight took place in the 1950s or the 1960s, when the women's movement began, and what music and hair styles were popular in their junior high school days. To keep things moving, I give them a 20-minute time limit, which I usually have to extend.

When time is called, I ask the spokesperson from each group to read its list of 1940s images. I record the items in a column on the board, using different colors of chalk or markers to differentiate the decades. Each group reads its list for the decade under discussion. By the time the last group has its turn, typically all of its items have already been listed. So that group reads first for the 1950s. Eventually, we get to the present. A typical set of lists includes:

	1940s	
WWII		Einstein
baby boom		atom bomb
women-to-work		swing music
Holocaust		
	1950s	
rock-n-roll		TV
Cold War		Korean War



Elvis	drive-ins
traditional families	poodle skirts
1960s	
space race	JFK
Vietnam	MLK
hippies	color TV
drugs/pot	Beatles
Malcolm X	
1970s	
Woodstock	Nixon/Watergate
bell-bottoms	disco
women's movement	sexual revolution
peace protests	
1980s	
computers	AIDS
Reagan	Challenger
Berlin Wall	MTV
alternative music	terrorism
1990s	
Clinton and associates	Princess Di
David Koresh	Internet
Gulf War	school violence
Mother Theresa	environment
cloning	

After all lists are compiled, I ask students if they *personally* remember any of the events in the '40s or '50s, and the answer is usually "no" because few of my students were alive in those decades. So I ask how they learned about these events. Books, television, and parents are the usual answers. I continue: "Out of all the things that were happening in the 1940s, for example, why did someone decide to teach you about these particular things?" We discuss their answers in the context of our definition of culture.

Eventually, we come to the conclusion that what they have learned about the 1940s almost exclusively came from textbooks and are things important to future survival. Textbook authors hope that future generations will not repeat mistakes of the past—a critical survival skill. Most items from the 1950s have been learned from television—e.g., from *Happy Days*. They represent what we enjoy and what we idealize. Ideals and fun events are also important elements in life and are among the things we try to leave for our children.

As a final exercise, I ask students to look at the lists and place asterisks by all items that they would want to *force* their children and grandchildren to learn. Poodle skirts always drop out, but atom bombs never do. With

Elvis, there is usually a debate.

And so, we return to our one-half inch of textbook space and my conclusion. "The editors of your textbook had the task of choosing people, places, events, and artifacts from 500 years of Western culture. They chose things that made a difference, things that we can look back on and say, 'This changed us for better or for worse.' These are the things that they felt were important enough to force you to learn. Your job this semester will be to ask, 'Why is this so important?' and to keep asking until you understand why it is."

It is gratifying to watch the nodding heads as students signal their comprehension. For the moment, at least, they have drawn relationships between history and cultural artifacts. And, they have thought of themselves as transmitters of history and culture to succeeding generations.

Karen Eisenhauer, *Assistant Professor, Humanities and English*

For further information, contact the author at Brevard Community College, 250 Community College Parkway, Palm Bay, FL 32909.

e-mail: Eisenhauerk@brevard.cc.fl.us

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

September 29, 2000, Vol. XXII, No. 21

©The University of Texas at Austin, 1999

Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER institutions for their own personal use.

Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu