

# LESSON 1:

## THINKING ABOUT CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

### ***Introduction:***

One of the challenges in teaching and learning about culture is the question of teaching about similarities or differences. Should teachers emphasize human commonalities, helping students see how they are connected with others throughout the world? Should we help students recognize and tolerate differences that do exist across cultures? How can we teach both?

This lesson introduces students to a framework for analyzing and understanding the concept of culture, while simultaneously beginning their study of Japanese culture through the photos of the seven Japanese students in the Deai kit. It is designed as the introductory lesson for the *Snapshots from Japan* unit.

The framework that students work with in this lesson is the “Universals of Culture,” a classic social studies model that helps teachers and students work with and appreciate both similarities and differences across cultures. According to the model’s authors, Alice Ann Cleaveland, Jean Craven, and Maryanne Danfelter, the “universals are functions which culture serves and which are found in some form in every culture on earth.” As a teaching framework, the universals provide a way for even the youngest students to think about and organize information about cultures. Moreover, the universals of culture provide a useful vehicle for considering cultural commonalities and differences: the framework establishes broad functional categories common to all cultures, while recognizing that the ways individual cultures realize these categories may look very different from one another.

This lesson has two components. Students first work with photos from the Deai kit to make the universals of culture tangible for a particular culture—Japan. Students then consider strengths and shortcomings of the information provided in the photo essays and begin to think about questions they should ask in examining data.

### ***Organizing Questions:***

What can we learn about society and the individual?  
What can we learn about tradition and change?

***Objectives:*** At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be better able to:

1. Analyze and apply a conceptual framework for defining and understanding the concept of culture.

2. Recognize culture as a fluid concept, with overlapping characteristics and categories.
3. Read, interpret, and categorize non-print data on Japanese culture.
4. Analyze strengths and shortcomings of any given set of data.
5. Recognize and appreciate similarities and differences across cultures.
6. Develop and support arguments for a particular analysis of photo data.
7. Hypothesize about aspects of contemporary Japanese culture.

**Time Required:** 2 class periods

**Materials:**

1. Copies of Handout 1-1, “The Universals of Culture,” for all students
2. Sets of five random photo sheets from the Japanese student photo essays for each group of three students (select photo sheets that include only one image)
3. Nine signs, each with a major category of the universals of culture printed on it
4. 10 self-adhesive notes for each group

**Procedure:**

**Day 1**

1. Begin the lesson by asking students to comment on the following questions: What is a culture? How is culture different from society? Ask students to volunteer their own definitions of culture and post these on the board.
2. Explain to students that they are going to be introduced to a framework for understanding and defining culture. Be sure students understand what a framework is. If students have trouble with this term, ask them to think about the framework of a new house. Students should be able to define *framework* as the structure or skeleton upon which a house is built. An intellectual framework is a structure for organizing ideas and information.

Distribute the outline for “The Universals of Culture” (Handout 1-1). Explain that the universals of culture provide a useful framework for considering cultural commonalities and differences. The universals of culture framework establishes nine very broad categories that are common to all cultures. At the same time, the framework helps us recognize that the ways that individual cultures address these categories may look very different from one another. Give one or two examples to illustrate this point. For example, all cultures have a method of oral communication, although individual cultures often speak a language unrecognizable to people outside that culture. Food is another category that is easy for students to understand. Students are well aware that everyone eats, but are also generally familiar with different kinds of ethnic foods popular in their own towns and so recognize differences in the cuisines of China, Mexico, and Italy, for example.

3. As a class, read through the nine major categories and their subcategories in the universals of culture. Clarify definitions and check for understanding by asking students to give examples from U.S. culture (or from cultural groups with which students are familiar within your own community).

4. Optional Activity: If the class has already studied Japan and time allows, have students form small groups for a short assignment. Allow groups five to ten minutes to apply what they have learned about the categories by filling in data about Japanese culture under the various categories of the universals of culture. Share responses in a brief whole-class discussion.
5. Next, divide the class into working groups of three. Give each group of students a set of any five photos from the Japanese student photo essays and ten self-adhesive notes. Explain that their assignment is to take five to ten minutes to decide within their small groups which category of the universals of culture each photo represents. Tell students that they are to use only the visual information within the photos. They should not turn to the explanations on the backs of the photo sheets for this stage of the activity.

Alert students that there may be more than one logical or possible category for many of the photos; thus, an important part of their small group task is to reach agreement within their work group on where each photo belongs. When the group has made its decision on each photo, it should write the category on a self-adhesive note and attach the note to the photo.

Each group should also record a brief rationale or argument for why they categorized each photo as they did. Explain that there are no “wrong” answers as long as the group can convincingly defend its choice. All students in the group should be prepared to report out on the group’s decisions.

As the small groups do their work, post the signs for the nine major categories of the universals of culture around the classroom.

6. Ask groups to post their photos around the room under the universals of culture signs for the categories they have chosen. Spend class time sampling some of the photo categorizations, giving each group the chance to explain and defend at least two of its categorizations.
7. Next, have a representative from each group collect that group’s photos from the walls. Be sure students keep the original self-adhesive note on each photo. Once each group has their original photo set, they should exchange it for that of another group. Each group’s task now is to analyze each photo in their new set, creating an argument for putting it in a different category within the universals of culture than the previous group did. The self-adhesive notes will show them how the previous group categorized the photos. Have students place a new note on the photo with the new category they have agreed upon. Allow about five to ten minutes for this group assignment.
8. Ask a representative from each small group to select one or two photos from their second set and explain why each fits under the category they selected. When each group has reported out on one or two photos, have the groups put all the photos back up on the wall under their new categories.
9. When the class is seated, debrief the activity on the universals of culture by holding a short class discussion using such questions as the following:
  - Why could the photos be put in more than one category?

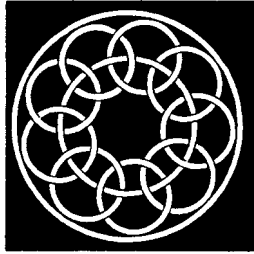
- What does this say about the categories in the universals of culture and what might it say about the concept of culture?
- Are the categories of culture set in stone or can they be seen as flexible or overlapping? Give examples to support your answer.
- How do the categories within the universals of culture relate to each other? For example, how might the category of Material Culture be affected by the category of Economic Organization?

## Day 2

1. The second component of the lesson asks students to consider the strengths and shortcomings of the data provided in the photos. Clarify with students the difference between a hypothesis and a conclusion. A hypothesis is a reasonable guess based on some evidence. Conclusions, on the other hand, are judgments based on significant research. Ask if the students have enough evidence from the photos they have viewed to make conclusions about what Japan is like. (*Students should recognize that their evidence is very limited at this point.*) Do they have enough evidence to make some guesses or hypotheses? (Yes)
2. Have students make hypotheses about Japanese culture based on the photos they have examined. Ask: What may be true of Japanese culture based on the limited evidence in the photos? At the top of a posting sheet or the board, write: “We think the following may be true about Japan.” Record student responses for reference throughout your unit on Japan.
3. Next, ask the class to consider what they would need to know in order to change their hypotheses into conclusions. Create another list of student responses.
4. Tell students that, as they gain more information about Japan, they should reconsider their hypotheses. When students have gathered enough information to change a hypothesis to a conclusion, they should have an opportunity to make an argument to the class in support of the conclusion. Alternatively, if they believe they have gathered enough information to refute a hypothesis, they should have an opportunity to make a case for revising the hypothesis.

### **Extension and Enrichment:**

1. To extend the focus on data analysis, ask students to examine the print information on the back of each photo sheet. Does this information change their understanding of any of the photos? Does it change students’ thinking about how they might categorize the photos within the universals of culture framework? If so, how? Tie this discussion into the previous discussion of hypothesis and conclusion by asking: What is the importance of context in interpreting culture clues? What additional information did the narrative give? How did that information reinforce or change your hypotheses about Japanese culture?
2. The lesson can also be extended by asking students to apply the universals of culture framework to an analysis of photos of student life in the United States. Yearbook and family photos could be used for this activity.



## Handout 1-1

# The Universals of Culture

The universals of culture are conceptual tools for study of cultures. These universals are functions that culture serves. They are found in some form in every culture on earth. The following categories make up our list of the universals of culture:

### **I. Material Culture**

- A. Food
- B. Clothing and Adornment of the Body
- C. Tools and Weapons
- D. Housing and Shelter
- E. Transportation
- F. Personal Possessions
- G. Household Articles

### **II. The Arts, Play, and Recreation**

- A. Forms of the Arts, Play, and Recreation
- B. Folk Arts and Fine Arts
- C. Standards of Beauty and Taste

### **III. Language and Nonverbal Communication**

- A. Nonverbal Communication
- B. Language

### **IV. Social Organization**

- A. Societies
- B. Families
- C. Kinship Systems

### **V. Social Control**

- A. Systems and Governmental Institutions
- B. Rewards and Punishments

### **VI. Conflict and Warfare**

- A. Kinds of Conflict
- B. Kinds of Warfare

### **VII. Economic Organization**

- A. Systems of Trade and Exchange
- B. Producing and Manufacturing
- C. Property
- D. Division of Labor
- E. Standard of Living

### **VIII. Education**

- A. Informal Education
- B. Formal Education

### **IX. World View**

- A. Belief Systems
- B. Religion

---

**Source:** Alice Ann Cleaveland, Jean Craven, and Maryanne Danfelter.