

Artifact Adventures: Inventions in Culture

Assignment Title: Artifact Adventures: Inventions in Culture

Estimated Time: Fifty minutes over two class periods with a writing assignment that follows

Class Info/Tags: FYC, Digital Rhetoric, Culture, Invention, Hybrid Course

Context of Use: I use this activity as an invention exercise to heighten awareness of the rhetorical concept of definition and, specifically, their understanding of definition as it pertains to the concept of culture. The exercise is positioned as an invention exercise that can result in multimodality (through the construction of a wiki) and/or a formal paper.

Description and Process:

- Full classroom discussion of culture with a definition for consideration
- Discussion of a specific cultural artifact as a form of modeling
- Students then bring in their own artifacts to discuss in small groups
- Students create a wiki around the artifact they previously discussed in groups

Step One: Preliminary Discussion (fifteen to twenty minutes of class time online or in-person)

Positioned at the front end of the composition process, “Artifact Adventures” relies on an initial classroom discussion and the generation of a collective, crowd-sourced definition of “culture.” The conversation can begin with a formal definition of “culture” the instructor provides merely as a starting point; then, the discussion should quickly depart to more personal insights and explanations of what culture is and specific examples of culture. The instructor at this point might even provide a singular example of a personal and contemporary cultural artifact as a form of modeling. Students may consider culture in a traditional sense that is established through ethnic identity, or they may wish to investigate the concept of culture from the broader perspective of “student culture” or, more generally, “school culture.” After establishing a definition and understanding of the concept of culture, and following a discussion about specific examples of culture, students are asked to think about physical artifacts in culture and to secure one such artifact. Students should have two or three days to secure a physical artifact and to prepare a few notes that explain the significance of the artifact. The instructor might encourage students to think about the artifact through the lens of personal connection, cultural/historical connection, commercial connection, and popular cultural connection. For this first part of preparation, no research is required, though some students might want to conduct an informal form of field research by interviewing friends and family members about the artifact, and some students may be inspired to learn more about the artifact through more formal research processes.

Step Two: Primary Invention Activity for “Artifact Adventures” (thirty-minute discussion and organization in class)

Students are placed in groups of four or five. Then, students produce their own artifact and provide an explanation of the artifact. Each student typically takes five or six minutes to explain the artifact and what it represents. The physical and tactile aspects of this exercise are especially important because holding the artifact creates a sensory experience that makes the activity more vibrant for the students. *The discussion is designed to raise awareness of audience and to encourage students to think about how to organize an explanation of the artifact. The invention strategy is a springboard to the writing assignment that follows.* Oftentimes, students will also learn about what others are and are not interested in, information that can help shape a paper and even direct research. As an additional boon, students sometimes learn about new cultures or even awaken curiosity about other cultures.

Step Three: Flexible Movement from Invention to Writing (writing done outside of class time)

From this central point, and after a short period of reflection, the writing process can advance in any number of directions. Students can work on a group project or their own individual projects, an approach I prefer and recommend. After the primary discussion in class, students can then develop their explanation of the artifact through a multi-modal approach.

What does it look like for students to successfully engage with this (Learning Outcomes):

First and perhaps foremost, this activity titled “Artifact Adventures” is student-centered and designed to help students “experience the collaborative and social aspect of writing processes” (WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, 2). The highly social and personal nature of the activity speaks directly to this outcome because of the demands made on student engagement. An additional benefit is the development and fortification of community in the classroom. Likewise, students through “Artifact Adventures” “learn to give and to act on productive feedback to works in progress” (WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, 2) in that they develop a heightened sense of audience and expectation. The group interaction in class establishes an opportunity for students to consider knowledge stores and limitations of their peers that they might not have thought about prior to the activity. The student-authors can then take into greater consideration the role of audience as the student-authors compose their wikis. Of course, composing wikis and thinking about the organization of pages speaks to yet another of the student learning outcomes in the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition: “Adapt composing processes for

a variety of technologies and modalities” (2). This activity lends itself to the generation of a published wiki (whether grounded in a group project or individual submissions), and the activity can be translated into a pod-cast if instructors want to consider an approach that does not require writing. Either way, the students will be challenged in terms of generating meaning, possibly accessing and using sources for research, and organizing material in a logical manner.

Designed in the spirit of Kevin Roozen’s idea that, “writing can never be anything but a social and rhetorical act, connecting us to other people across time and space in an attempt to respond adequately to the needs of an audience.” (18), “Artifact Adventures” is predicated on the concepts of critical thinking, analysis, and invention. In this sense, this activity approaches writing as “defined by what it *is*: a text, a product; less visible is what it can *do*: generate new thinking” (Estrem, 19). Principally grounded in invention and intersectionality (Russell 1995; Russell 1997) of cultures and people, “Artifact Adventures” serves as an opportunity for students to think more deeply about the cultures they come from, the cultures of others, and the more general concept of culture itself in some of the ways Edward Said conceptualizes culture. The activity, then, is framed around the personal and the analytical. The personal nature of this invention strategy reflects Rodrigo Rodriguez’s understanding of the intimate role of the personal in that “writers and thinkers are connected to their subjects and arguments, which they deem worthy of explanation or description. As such, writers learn about themselves through their writing and the interconnectedness to thought and argument. In fact, writers give authority and credibility to experience through their expertise and in structure and argument.” (133). Because students tend to be invested on a personal level with this activity, the commitment and curiosity the activity generates can potentially create a self-reinforcing system that results in a more substantial connection to every part of the writing process and project. Analytically, the activity challenges students to reflect on the world around them and to name that world as they explain what a culture is and, more specifically, how their own cultures can be defined. Students often seem to have a natural affinity for discussing culture, and that affinity is magnified when the personal becomes a focus. A natural aspect of comparison and contrast between cultures typically emerges from “Artifact Adventures.”

What should people consider in adapting this (Impressions):

Constructing wikis with different pages can be very engaging and creatively rewarding for students, but students could also possibly create a pod-cast or a Prezi. I typically rely on wikis because the approach challenges students to organize their material in a logical and engaging manner while, at the same time, requires students to generate a fair amount of prose. Awareness of audience and how an audience approaches a wiki becomes an integral part of the multi-modal project. An example of a wiki might include

several pages: a general overview/title page, personal connection to the artifact, commercial use of the artifact in society, popular cultural appropriation of the artifact, and cultural/historical research regarding the artifact. For those brave enough, a more advanced wiki page could be designed around the semiotic evolution of the artifact in society, but such an approach would be reserved for a particularly advanced group of students. This exercise provides significant flexibility in that the writing component can be adjusted to be appropriate for almost any level of student or timeframe for instructors. A particularly engaged instructor could even alter the writing requirements and vary them within the members of a single class, using a rubric to define different levels of expectation and quality. Some instructors might feel more comfortable having students avoid research, and this project can work within those parameters as well. Other instructors might want students to write a traditional paper and eschew the multi-modal approach altogether. Likewise, this project affords that kind of flexibility. A group approach can even be applied to generating a wiki and subsequent paper, but group projects, of course, have a host of other complications attached to them, and “Artifact Adventures” might very well not translate particularly well into a collective effort.

This activity can serve as a foundation for a multitude of writing assignments, one of which might involve a greater commitment to research, and because the invention strategy is grounded in the student’s own knowledge, the student is more likely to “handle the chore of deciphering the data deluge” and, simultaneously, avoid “plunging into an abyss of boredom or cultivating their curiosity about a subject.” (Lockett 238). By relying on what students know and how they name what they know, the students are positioned to exert control over the research rather than being controlled by the research. Such an approach aids in self-efficacy and confidence in the writing process.

Works Cited

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