

Overview:

This lesson plan will challenge participants to identify how culture plays into what we deem important and how we sort and categorize the world around us. Participants will be divided into pairs and each pair will receive an envelope with various objects within it. The pairs will take turns silently sorting the objects, and they will attempt to guess the rationale behind their partner's categories.

Background and Information:

Language Envelopes is an activity created by Janet M. Bennett, based on an exercise developed by Jack Condon.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Identify the personal nature of creating categories.
2. Identify some differences in verbal communication and misunderstandings that can occur.
3. Acquire partial understanding of the complexity of elements important to another culture.

Time:

1 hour

Group Size:

Pairs

Materials:

Create one envelope for every two participants. The envelopes should contain about twenty items and each envelope should contain an identical set of objects.

Ideas for objects: Natural objects (leaves, shells, stones, sticks, feathers, etc.) or man-made objects (small toys or miniatures from a craft store; office supplies; household items, like screws, nails, band-aids; hobby items; personal items; food items, like bubble gum, stir sticks, coffee cup lids, etc.).

Optional: Language Envelopes PowerPoint (in [Downloads](#)).

For the virtual option: the [Language Envelopes Jamboard](#)

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Openness:

- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Curiosity:

- To ask complex questions about other cultures.
- To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Links to Activity Resources:

- [Introduction to Language Envelopes by Dr. Kris Acheson-Clair](#)

Activity Instructions (Virtual Option):

1. Begin by preparing the [Language Envelopes Jamboard](#) for your participants. The version available in Links is view only, so the facilitator will first need to make their own editable copy. In the top right corner, there is an icon with three vertical dots. Click that icon and then select "Make a copy." Rename the copied document to whatever is appropriate for the context. Click OK.
2. You will then be directed to the new document. To ensure that anyone with the link to this new Jamboard copy has editing privileges, select "Share" in the top-right corner. Click "Change to anyone with the link." A new window will pop up with a drop-down menu that says "Viewer." Click that menu and select "Editor."
3. For this activity, the facilitator will be dividing participants into small groups and placing them into breakout rooms over Zoom or another similar video conference platform. Before meeting with their participants, the facilitator should determine the number of groups and ensure that each group has their own frame to work with on the Jamboard. To duplicate the current frame, first select the square icon in the top middle of the page. Then, click the icon with the three vertical dots and select "Duplicate." Repeat this step until there are the correct number of frames.

Note: The facilitator may also want to label each frame with "Breakout Room [insert number]" so it's clear which frame each group is assigned to.

4. While everyone is together in the main room, explain the premise of the activity: On their frames, participants should see images of various objects, such as a comb, a rock, etc. In their groups, each person should take turns silently sorting the objects on the frame. As every individual is sorting, the rest of the group should observe and try to guess the categories. Once all group members have attempted to guess, the person doing the sorting should reveal the categories and explain their rationale.



5. Divide participants into small groups and assign each group to a breakout room. Ensure that all groups have the link to the Jamboard and know which frame they're working in.

Note: The facilitator should emphasize that there are many ways to categorize these objects, so they shouldn't worry about getting it "wrong."

6. Once all groups have finished, they should return to the main virtual meeting room and debrief with the following questions:
 - How did you feel while sorting? While watching?
 - What categories did you come up with?
 - What did you learn?
 - What if we were the objects? How would we sort ourselves?
 - What if we could have talked? How might that have changed the activity?

Related Tools:

Tools to use in conjunction with this lesson:

- [Language Coding](#)
- [Language, Culture, and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis](#)