Explore your Cultural Baggage

http://guide.culturecrossing.net/explore.php

The one thing we all do when heading out on an international trip is pack a bag. We may pack different things depending on the climate, availability of products, and other personal needs. But a suitcase full of socks and toothpaste isn’t the only bag we lug around with us. Whether or not we know it, most of us also tote around at least a few pieces of cultural baggage. Like any good suitcase, our cultural baggage contains loads of compartments and hidden pockets—but they are stuffed with things that are less tangible and more likely to get you into trouble when crossing borders.

What is Culture?

Before you start sorting through your cultural baggage, it’s helpful to understand what we mean by “culture”. Culture can mean many things—it’s a vast concept that can be defined in a wide variety of ways. One of the simplest and most comprehensive ways to think about culture is as the complete way of life of a group of people. For the purposes of the Culture Crossing guide, we focus on aspects of culture that relate to etiquette, communication, social and business interactions, and other elements critical to fostering sensitivity, awareness and understanding in our ever-expanding global community.

What’s In Your Cultural Baggage?

Our values, assumptions, biases, and communication styles are some of the things that turn up in our cultural baggage. Neatly folded into one corner of the bag might be your views of time. In the other corner, your expectations about gender roles. Check that zippered side pouch and you may find your sense of personal space and comfort level with confrontation. And then there are the countless gestures and mannerisms that inevitably tumble out of your overstuffed bag when you least expect it.

Are You Culturally Aware of Yourself?

When you are immersed in a foreign culture, lack of awareness of your own cultural traits can make you feel vulnerable, frustrated and fearful. Interactions with people from other cultures might leave you thinking, “That’s so backward”, “They’re so lazy! How uptight!” Although some of these reactions—or judgments—are based on individual personality, many of them are based on a set of expectations and perceptions instilled in us by our respective cultures. Becoming aware of the nuances that comprise our own cultures can result in some serious self-discovery. Here are a few things to chew on as you begin to take stock of your own culture:
• How close do you usually stand from a friend while talking? How about a business colleague? A stranger? How close is too close?

• How much eye contact is too much? Too little? Why?

• How comfortable are you when a friend touches your shoulder or pats your arm while talking with you? A colleague? An acquaintance? When does it become too much?

• When do you show up for a party: on time? 10 minute late? 2 hours late? 5 minutes early? How about a business meeting?

• Do you usually get directly to the point? Beat around the bush? Somewhere in between? Why?

• What's more important, the group or the individual? Are you more concerned with maintaining harmony with those around you or achieving the best results for yourself? [Yes, both are nice...but when it comes down to it, which would you sacrifice? Which one wins?]

• When showing someone where something is, do you point? Gesture with one finger? The whole hand? How do you beckon someone? Fingers inward? Outward? What’s the sign for money? What gestures are taboo?

The way you answer these questions may be based on culture as much as (or more than) individual personality. Culture influences our behavior in countless ways—subconsciously guiding our actions, reactions and interactions. One way of becoming more self-aware and discovering some of the origins of your behavior is by examining some of the key aspects of culture including: views of self, perceptions of time, and verbal and non-verbal communication styles. Note: not all individuals from a given culture will fit neatly into these groupings and definitions, but there is usually some truth in these generalizations.
ASSIGNMENT: EXCHANGE STUDENT TOP 10 SURVIVAL GUIDE

After you’ve explored your cultural baggage with your small group, it’s time to think a little more about our own culture, and then explore some other cultures’ norms. You will start by visiting this website (the source of the article you just read, link is on the class site)
http://guide.culturecrossing.net/explore.php

1. Scroll down past the questions you’ve just answered, and assess where YOU fall on the four aspects of culture: views of self (“me or we”); perceptions of time (“linear or cyclical”); verbal communication styles (“direct or indirect”); and non-verbal communication styles.

2. Click on “HOME” and explore for a few minutes. See the back of this page for explanations on the categories on this website.

3. You (and a partner, if you wish) will create a guide for a pair of exchange students: a SBHS student going to a country that you select, and a student from that country who is coming to Stone Bridge to study. Choose what you think are the Top 10 most important cultural tips for these students to know.

4. Start with the culturecrossing.net site to get the idea, then move on to the links below (also on the class website). I would also like you to find at least two other sites to use, specific to the country you choose.

5. Format is up to you and your partner. Make it fun and post-able on the wall! Include both text and graphics. You will have time today to work on it.

LINKS:

http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/countryinsights-apercuspays-eng.asp

http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/cultural_etiquette.htm

http://www.foodbeast.com/2014/03/20/this-infographic-explains-how-to-politely-dine-out-around-the-world/

http://www.worldbusinessculture.com/index.html

http://www.swissotel.com/promo/etiquette-map/

EXAMPLES: THE BASICS

GREETINGS
The most common forms of greetings in the country for men meeting men, women meeting women, and meetings between men and women.

COMMUNICATION STYLE
Whether to be direct or indirect when communicating (verbally or non-verbally) in a variety of circumstances.

PERSONAL SPACE & TOUCHING
The appropriate amount of space to give when speaking or interacting with others. Also, the amount and frequency of acceptable touching during conversations.

EYE CONTACT
An overview of the appropriate amount and type of eye contact acceptable/common during conversations.

VIEWS OF TIME
An overview of how people in this country view time (expectations about being on time, whether people covet their time or give it freely, etc.).

GESTURES
Common gestures used by country nationals, along with their meanings.

GENDER ISSUES
Roles, perceptions and expectations of women and men in each culture.

LAW & ORDER
Tips related to how strictly various laws are followed and/or enforced (drinking and smoking ages, traffic violations, interactions with law enforcement agencies, etc.).

TABOOS
Specific behavior and gestures that are considered rude and/or obscene.

MISCELLANEOUS
Relevant information that does not fit into any of the categories listed above.

STUDENT BASICS

CLASS RULES
Information about appropriate dress for students on campus/in the classroom, grading systems, etc.

SOCIALIZING
Etiquette tips for dating and partying in each country. Additional information and caveats for women in social situations.

MISCELLANEOUS
Relevant information that does not fit into any of the categories listed above.