Today’s students are far more diverse—by race, culture, ethnicity, and language—than any other generation the United States has known (Sadker and Zittleman 2007). As a result, many teachers are struggling to better serve students from cultures other than their own (National Education Association 2008).

Failing to understand some of the cultural differences of students can result in a poorer learning environment for them. Conversely, appreciating cultural differences can enable teachers to select appropriate children’s books, plan a culturally responsive curriculum, and provide a classroom environment that is welcoming to all children and their families.

This article will explore one method of creating cultural awareness among teachers—awareness of both our own culture and that of our students.

A personal journey
My personal experience in education has been as an assistant teacher of 3-year-old children, an early childhood director, an education director, and a professor of early childhood education for teacher candidates.

As an education director at an urban not-for-profit educational program, my staff was predominantly Latino, African American, and white. Our preschool through high school students were diverse in race, ethnicity, and family dynamics. I needed not only to understand the cultural differences among my staff but also to prepare the faculty to work with our culturally diverse children and their parents. My goal was—and still is—to equip current and prospective educators to teach diverse populations of students. I believe that appreciating the culture of our students ultimately helps us understand how cultural identity affects their learning.

When I began preparing teacher candidates in an education foundations course at an urban community college, I had a discussion with a colleague, Leslie Craigo, about how she helped prospective teachers to teach culturally diverse classes. Her work (Craigo 2006) prompted me to research the subject and think about strategies for guiding my students. Not only was I impressed by the consciousness this raised in my students, but I was surprised to see my own cultural awareness mature as well.

Understanding culture
The old saying “Know thyself” rings true in understanding culture. The first step is self-awareness, and the second, cultural reciprocity. We first identify our own cultural values and then determine the cultural values of others. While noting the similarities and differences, we accept and respect others. Through discussion, we recognize equally satisfying ways to interact in different settings, which allows for positive interaction among peoples of different cultures.

The final step is cultural appreciation, also known as cultural competency—the ability to maintain appropriate behaviors and roles within our own culture using the natural support system (LaFromboise, et al. 1993). Cultural competency involves respect for others, a willingness to learn about others, and the ability to understand that others may have differing viewpoints.

While teachers cannot be expected to study and
know every culture they may encounter in their classrooms, they can be prepared to learn on the spot. With a healthy cultural competence, teachers will be prepared to identify learning differences or needs in students as well as to interact with their parents.

**Between two worlds**

Teachers and children often learn to negotiate between two worlds: home and school. At times the appropriate way to behave at home or school may conflict, and a teacher or student must choose which norm or custom to follow.

When negotiating between cultures, people become *bicultural*—sometimes tricultural. Bicultural interaction may take the form of assimilation, acculturation, alternation, multiculturalism, and fusion (LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton 1993), as explained in the box on page 5.

When students learn they can choose an interaction style, they feel empowered. I prefer the alternation model, in which we maintain our home culture while successfully fitting in with the main culture in which we live. If a teacher can give bicultural students the knowledge and support to use the alternation model, students may experience greater personal and academic success.

**Using a mosaic for preparing future teachers**

Because cultural self-awareness is essential for cultural reciprocity, I designed an activity to help my teacher candidates (all female but quite diverse) reflect on the values and world views they bring with them to the classroom.

First, I posed the question: What is culture? The illustration below shows the responses that emerged.

During the conversation, I defined *culture* as beliefs, values, perceptions, norms, actions, artifacts, and language shared within a group and passed down to succeeding generations (Nieto 2000). The idea is that culture includes shared values, traditions, relationships, and world views of specific groups that have a strong influence on a person’s cultural identity.

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**CULTURE**

** DEMOGRAPHIC **
- Ethnicity
- Race
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status

** GEOGRAPHIC **
- Country of origin
- Country where you live now
- Terrain
- Weather
- Seasons

** ASSOCIATIVE **
- Religion
- Political view
- Career choice
- Social groups
- Family roles
- Food choices
- Music preferences

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**Culture**

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identity (Nieto 2000). I suggested that a person’s cultural identity can be viewed as a mosaic: a complex picture made from individual characteristics (Chao and Moon 2005).

After an extensive discussion about culture, I asked my students to create a personal cultural mosaic to begin thinking about their own cultural identity. I instructed them to think of their individual characteristics in three broad categories, or tiles: demographic, geographic and associative.

*Demographic* tiles covered a person’s age, ethnicity, gender, and race. *Geographic* tiles featured information about where a person lives or originally lived, such as climate, region, country, and setting (urban/rural, coastal/inland). *Associative* tiles included familial roles, philosophy/religion, career choice, food preferences, music choices, and political affiliation.

While there is a wide range of difference in a group, people within a culture often share many characteristics. It can be helpful to understand the impact of these cultural tiles on students’ developing cultural identities.

In creating their mosaics, students worked in groups of four. They had access to art materials, such as construction paper, markers, glue, and scissors. Construction paper was used as the support and base for the three tile areas. Some students cut their paper into a shape that symbolized some aspect of themselves, such as a heart. Other students chose a paper color to represent the flag of their country of origin.

They worked enthusiastically on the project and talked in their small groups about the procedure being followed and the elements they were choosing. At the end, they reflected on their mosaics, sharing what they had chosen for each tile area and the connections to their own cultural identities.

**Reflections on cultural identity**

*Geographic.* Ten of the 12 education students were born in countries outside the United States. The countries were Trinidad, Panama, Ecuador, Guyana, Bequia, Peru, Haiti, China, and the Dominican Republic. The two students who were born in the United States affirmed that they still embrace their bicultural heritage of Puerto Rico and Trinidad.

Many of the cultural art mosaics included a drawing of the flag of the native country as well as a flag of the United States.

Some of the immigrant students conveyed a strong...
One student wrote, “I love my country and having been away from it has motivated me to appreciate my background more and proudly say that I am DOMINICANA.” This same student also described coming to the United States: “At the age of 14, I moved to New York City. Here, I began a new life. I struggled in school learning English as my second language…. After a lot of effort and dedication I became a successful bilingual student.”

Another student said, “The flags, the American and the Dominican, they represent the conjunction of both cultures in my life.” These students acknowledged both their country of origin and their adopted country, the United States.

One American-born student expressed her biculturalism this way: “I have the American flag to signify that I am an American. I was born here in the United States in the year 1984. My ethnicity is represented with a Puerto Rican flag. Here is a picture of my cousins and me when we participated in the Puerto Rican Day parade.”

An immigrant student in her late 30s said: “My place of birth is Trinidad and Tobago…. I have learned the importance of culture through my nuclear and extended family. They have taught me to embrace my identity and to pass it on to my own children wherever I plant my roots…. I left my family in Trinidad and migrated to the United States of America to start a new life.”

Students understood the connection between their self-reflection and future role as teachers. One student titled her presentation, “My Journey Toward the Teacher I Plan to Become.” In general, the mosaic provided students with a way to express their clear and graphic view of their strengths and identify the origin of these positive features.

Demographic. When thinking about her personal characteristics, gender provoked strong emotions from a usually quiet Latina student:

Being raised in a country where chauvinism is accepted has let me see that it is not fair for women to live their lives under the power of men. When people describe themselves, gender is one of the first things they say. But what is male and what is female? The terms have associations and stereotypes attached to them. People are judged by these terms; perhaps, in different ways in different places but still people are judged. Like all stereotypes, they are
signs of ignorance and generalization. Being aware of that fact, I was encouraged not to let other people decide what I should do as a woman. I have the capacity to learn and do things like any other human being. Women and men have equal rights and responsibilities. They should respect each other. There is no difference when it comes to gender; everyone is the same. I am not a feminist. I just want everyone to be treated equally, and we should encourage this perspective in children from the beginning of their school experience.

This student was not only rejecting the male dominance that was a part of her culture but also connecting to how her view will affect her teaching.

**Associative.** In this tile, students noticed aspects of their lives they had in common. All the students listed their vocation as teacher. Familial roles included being female, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a cousin, and a friend. Some students identified themselves as being a girlfriend, and others, a wife and mother. Some students said their political affiliation was Democrat. Most students said their religion was Catholic; one student said Hindu.

Through discussion, students came to realize they shared the dream of becoming a teacher and the challenge of handling many familial roles. The personal details provided an opportunity for sharing details of their lives and becoming personal and familiar to one another.

**Looking ahead**

These future teachers were excited about developing diverse cultural activities for the children in their classes. One student, who chose a heart shape for her mosaic, explained how understanding culture will affect her teaching:

Culture is truly a big part of what and who we are. I never really noticed that I use my culture in everything that I do until I did this project. Culture is embedded in our souls and inadvertently passed on to our children. I felt that this project has made me recognize how important it is to have family, to have a background and to have a foundation because it carries you throughout your life. As aspiring educators we have to know and accept ourselves before we can accept and understand others. Our culture and ethnic identities help shape our belief and practices. They provide a texture and richness and can bind us
together in groups or separate us from one another. Accepting and understanding ourselves can lead to self-growth and the ability to teach all children effectively. I chose a heart shape for my mosaic because I hold all my beliefs and values close to my heart.

Valuing diversity means respecting and accepting differences. People come from different backgrounds, and their customs, thoughts, ways of communicating, values, and traditions vary accordingly (King, Sims, and Osher 2007).

After the activity, differences that I once noticed among students were replaced with an appreciation for commonalities that students discovered when they shared information. An increased self-awareness brought students closer to developing cultural competence. In reflecting on the experience, students showed an appreciation for valuing diversity and the impact of culture on their own development.

**Adapting the activity for teacher workshops**

The mosaic activity can be adapted for a teacher workshop. The facilitator can make it more open-ended and focus on discussion and self-reflection.
The emphasis in sharing reflections is on relating the project to teacher practices. Through respectful exchanges, teachers can recognize the many qualities they have in common and truly learn to support and appreciate one another.

Questions to ask (NEA 2010):
- How do you think the understanding of your own culture shapes your sense of who you are, as well as your place in home, school, and society?
- How do you think you can teach students who are from cultures that are different from yours?
- How do you think understanding your own cultural identity might help you to plan for learning for the students in your class?
- How do you think your being culturally aware equips you to reach out to the families of your students?

In addition to in-service training, this activity may help with teacher-student and teacher-parent interactions.

Through my journey to help others discover their cultural identity, I have come to appreciate my own individuality. I am the granddaughter of immigrants who came to America through Ellis Island. As a child I tried to blend in with my friends and did not talk about my family customs, such as parties where my grandfathers sang Italian songs or we ate food with names like scripelli and gnocchi.

As an adult I alternate between two worlds. I enjoy my Italian-American traditions at home, while following different social conventions at school.

As I have guided education students in thinking about their own cultural identity, I have become more conscious of the distinct characteristics each student brings to class. I use my understanding of students’ cultural identities to plan a meaningful and engaging culturally responsive curriculum.

To guide the learning of diverse students, we remember that culture is central to student learning and every student brings a unique culture into the classroom (Gay 2000). Understanding the concepts of identity and culture are essential to provide quality classroom experiences.
References

About the author
Helen Mele Robinson, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of education at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York. Her research focuses on literacy—cultural literacy, technological literacy, and emergent computer literacy. In her book Emergent Computer Literacy: A Developmental Perspective she examines how parents guide their children with computers in the home setting.