



# The Culture Box: A Simple, Highly Effective Activity to Initiate Conversations about Diversity and Inclusion in STEMM

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Keywords: Culture Box, Diversity, Conversation, Dialogue

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## Abstract

The National Research Mentoring Network (NRMN) was initiated in 2014 as part of the NIH Diversity Program Consortium to address the ongoing underrepresentation of several racial and ethnic groups in science. The mission of NRMN was to increase the quality and accessibility of mentoring relationships for all rising scientists, particularly those from underrepresented groups. One group within NRMN set out to create an entirely new approach to teaching the skills needed for culturally aware mentoring (CAM). The CAM workshop was shown to be highly impactful both right after and, for many, even a year or more later. In every delivery of CAM, one activity was universally rated as the most effective and unique – The Culture Box. This workshop will give participants the chance to experience The Culture Box, learn how it has come to be used effectively in many different settings, and explore how to use it initiate conversations about diversity and inclusion in their settings.

The origins of the Culture Box are not clear, but it came to be a part of CAM after one of us (RM) experienced it as part of Change Makers at Northwestern University. Change Makers is a year-long dialogue-based series for groups of 20-25 staff and faculty, based on the Intergroup Dialogue model developed by social scientists at the University of Michigan. Activities similar to the Culture Box have been used for many years in K-12 education from the framework of personal cultural artifacts. They focus on the link between two processes: identity and cultural self-representation. The benefit of such activities is in the process of participants reflecting on and selecting their artifacts and then sharing and explaining themselves and others (1-2).

Briefly, each person is asked to create their Culture Box before coming to a gathering. It is composed of 2-3 physical objects (or pictures when the object is too big or inaccessible) that represent important parts of who they are, their cultures, whatever that means to them; one of the objects should represent their racial or ethnic culture. When participants come together, whether face-to-face or online, they are broken into groups of 4-5. Each person then describes what they brought, why they brought it, and what it means to them. Typically, 3-6 minutes are allowed for each person to speak and others ask them questions. Invariably, conversations become very engaged and allow people to get to know each other very quickly and in meaningful ways. The critical role it plays with CAM has been described (3) but the workshop will go more deeply into the kinds of conversations that occur.



Based on the impact of the Culture Box in CAM, each of us is using it in many different settings with impacts that are more powerful and meaningful than any single activity we have discovered or created. It has become a pivotal activity in many settings, including: a scientific society professional development program for graduate students and postdocs (The ASPECT Mentoring Network – 4); department or program-focused initiatives (HHMI Gilliam Scholar Program, Vanderbilt University’s Mentor Training); individual faculty with their research groups; and, most recently, the initiation of career coaching groups across 2 unique PhD programs in the U.K. supported by the Wellcome Trust.

The workshop will include 5 elements:

1. Additional instructions about the Culture Box will be provided a few days before the workshop so that participants can prepare their Culture Boxes.
2. To start the workshop, everyone will share their Culture Box in groups of 4-5;
3. We will do an extensive debriefing of the sharing of Culture Boxes, exploring how it ‘works’ and how those from different social, racial, gender, and other identity groups may learn from it;
4. More descriptions of how it has been used in other settings; and
5. Group dialogue about ways in which workshop participants could envision using it in the future.

### References

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