

## TEACHER'S CORNER: BAFBA BAFBA: A GAME OF CULTURE CONTACT

How can students experience the problems that can arise when two cultures misunderstand each other? How can students experience culture shock and ethnocentrism?

For many years, a popular simulation game, Bafa Bafa, has provided one answer. R. Garry Shirts originally developed the simulation for the Department of the Navy to resolve difficulties experienced by American sailors on leave in foreign countries. Since then, high school and college teachers have used it in anthropology, social studies, and English classes. As cultural pluralism and multi-cultural concepts have gained educational prominence, the game has been used to sensitize teachers to the feelings of students from disparate cultural backgrounds. This simulation has also been useful for training in education, public administration, social work, and school desegregation. Yet, ironically, the game has been accused of sexism and ethnocentrism. However, with a few significant changes, Bafa Bafa can still be used effectively.

### How The Game Is Played

Bafa, Bafa takes a minimum of two (but preferably three) class periods to play. Two cultures are created, Alpha and Beta, each with simple behavior rules and a simple game. Half the students join each culture and learn its rules. The Alpha culture is a patriarchy in which women can only initiate contact with an outsider with the approval of a male, preferably the patriarch. Alphas are friendly to each other, greet each other with a hug and inquiries about each other's family, stand close to each other in conversations, and frequently touch. When playing the Alpha game, the goal is to have a good time, laugh, and slowly, not abruptly, say goodbye to each other

before playing the game with another Alpha. In sharp contrast, the Betas have brief greetings, play a competitive trading game, and use a language other than English. There are no cultural differences between the sexes.

Bafa Bafa comes with two tapes that explain the operating rules of each culture, all the necessary objects with which to play the cultures' games, and very specific discussion questions that aid in critical discussion following the simulation.

The basic procedure involves introducing, playing, and discussing the game. During the first class period, the teacher discusses the



concept of culture, divides the class into Alphas and Betas, assigns them different rooms, appoints visiting pairs and observers, and plays for each group separately the tape that explains the values and rules of politeness, and the game for their culture. In this way each culture remains ignorant of the other. The next day each group reminds itself of the rules for social interaction, begins the simulation, and sends first an observer and later visiting pairs to the other culture. During these visits, the remaining Alpha and Beta members carry on their culture's activities. Each group's goal is to determine the other culture's values and the rules of its game. Once the visiting is completed, it is helpful to have students write down how they felt about being a part of their own culture, about visiting the other culture, and about playing the game. On the third day, the crucial discussion occurs with the teacher connecting students' experiences with the broader cultural significance that those experiences illustrate.

#### Weaknesses Of The Simulation

Despite Bafa Bafa's popularity and the stimulation it provides for students, the game has been criticized as sexist and ethnocentric. Carol Mukhopadhyay, an anthropologist at California State University at Chico, argues that Bafa Bafa is ethnocentric in that it perpetuates Euro-American stereotypes about other cultures, especially with regard to male-female relationships. Many may view African cultures and Middle Eastern cultures as patriarchal societies where women have no decision-making power, where men dominate and 'own' women, and where achievement is not valued. Anthropological research has disproven some of these stereotypes. The game may also subtly reinforce sexism. The subordinate position of women in the Alpha society is obvious. But more subtly, the Beta society, where women are "equal," may suggest that when

equality is gained, warmth, nurturing, non-achievement orientations, and support from others are lost. Since this is a fear some women and men have in our society, the game reinforces those fears (Mukhopadhyay and personal communication).

The game can be changed relatively easily to avoid these pitfalls. Dr. Mukhopadhyay suggests that

one way is to ignore gender completely and just create two groups--the X's and Y's or any other label you wish--to replace the males and females in the Alpha society. This allows you to concentrate on value differences and to [focus] on any culture/micro-cultures you may wish to use (e.g. ethnic groups within the U.S., different cultures outside the U.S., genders, class differences, perhaps even teachers and students within the school system). You can select specific groups to represent the X's and Y's ahead of time or not have any specific demarcation.

#### Students Discuss Their Reactions

The discussion on the third day is critical. The Bafa Bafa kit gives some useful discussion questions and suggestions, emphasizing students' personal reactions. For example, a teacher might ask: How did the Betas appear to the Alphas when they visited the Beta cultures? How did you feel when you visited the Alpha culture? Which culture would you prefer to live in and why? Is it possible to talk about another culture without using evaluative terms? Alphas often describe Betas as greedy, aggressive, and unfriendly. Betas find the Alphas to be hostile to outsiders although friendly to each other. Both groups usually find themselves ill at ease when visiting and are often ignored or

expected to understand the other culture. Teachers have found the game a very helpful way to have students experience culture shock (anger, frustration, disorientation, and insecurity), an emotional attachment to their own culture's values to the exclusion of outsiders values, and the development of stereotypes (Webber and Fiske). Mukopadhyay, in her article (p. 103), recommends linking these feelings to an understanding of culture with questions such as:

"1) What do you think were the goals of the game for the Alphas? For the Betas? How did this affect their behavior?

2) What kinds of things did you do to make it less uncomfortable in the new culture? What could you have tried?

3) What cultures exist today that are like the Alphas? like the Betas?

4) Would [you describe] American schools [as] more like Alpha or Beta microcultures? What would schools organized along Beta lines be like? along Alpha lines? How might these different value systems affect student behavior?

5) Which aspects of the simulation are NOT like real life/culture? Are the alternative value systems presented (social vs. achievement) necessarily in opposition? Why is the seeming contentment of the women among the Alphas unrealistic? Do egalitarian societies have to sacrifice achievement and individual striving?

6) Could some new students in school feel the way you did while playing the game? How might children from minority ...families feel? (Most schools are designed to transmit the traditions of the most pervasive culture [in the community].....

7) On the basis of this experience, what guidelines might you formulate to help reduce culture conflict generally?"

Bafa Bafa provides experiential learning to help students discover how easy it is to misunderstand the motivations of people in another culture, to think other people are hostile or rude, to be unable to communicate, and to fail to grasp the proper or polite rules of behavior in another culture.

#### Resources:

Bafa Bafa is published by Simile II, 218 12th St., P.O. Box 910, Del Mar, CA 92014, (714) 755-0272. A simpler version, Rafa Rafa, is designed for elementary school age.

Carol C. Mukhopadhyay. "Teaching Cultural Awareness Through Simulations: Bafa Bafa." In Integrating Multicultural Perspectives Into Teacher Education; A Curriculum Resource Guide by Hilda Hernandez and Carol C. Mukhopadhyay (Chico: California State University, 1985). Available from the Office of Professional Development and Sponsored Projects, California State University, Chico, CA 95929. Cost: \$14.67 (includes mailing). Make check payable to: University Foundation. "Teaching About Cultural Awareness; Bafa Bafa." This 20-minute videotape shows how to use the game without the ethnocentric and sexist biases. Contact: H. Hernandez, Department of Education, California State University, Chico, CA 95929.

Kikanza Nuri Webber and Shirley J. Fiske. "Bafa Bafa: Teaching Multicultural Concepts Through Experiential Methods," In Anthropology and Multicultural Education: Classroom Applications (Publication 83-1, Anthropology Curriculum Project), edited by Yolanda T. Moses and Patricia J. Higgins. The University of Georgia, Department of Social Studies Education, Athens, Georgia 30602. Cost: \$5.00.

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