

I Am Who I Am

OBJECTIVE

To help students explore their personal and ethnic identities and what these identities mean to them.

TIME REQUIRED

40 minutes

BACKGROUND

These activities allow for exploration of self in various contexts from families to communities to being a U.S. citizen. They are purposely chosen to make students aware that part of being a responsible productive community member, is to possess and practice an appreciation for self in relation to their people and their culture. Furthermore, the activities proceed in an effort to teach that one must understand and, better yet, utilize the cultural knowledge and wisdom and its relationship to the physical environment, as cultural interactions are an integral part of the environment and vice versa. Creating and implementing culturally responsive and/or place-based curricula must be an ongoing collaborative and coordinated process involving cultural specialists, community members, teachers and students.

In Unangam culture, history was passed from generation to generation through stories and songs. Lessons were learned or taught using stories.

MATERIALS

- *There is no such thing as an Aleut*
- “I am who I am” worksheet
- Cultural Venn Diagram

PROCEDURES

- Read *There is no such thing as an Aleut*.
 - ◆ Find out more about the name “Unangan” and what it means. Why is it the name of the people?
 - ◆ Discuss cultural identity.
 - ◆ How many different cultures are represented in the classroom?
 - ◆ How do the students celebrate their culture? Have each student go home and discuss with their family how they celebrate their culture and report back to the class.

- “I am who I am” worksheet.
 - ◆ Ask each student to write down words that describe his/her self.
 - ◆ Share the descriptions. Put descriptions in a chart/columns: Physical, Personality, Ethnic/cultural, Family/social, and Citizen-self/community, state/country, worldly
 - ◆ Discuss the categories and how they played out in the chart, such as which areas were widely used and which were not. Why were some used more than others?
 - ◆ If the descriptions were clumped into one or two categories, encourage the students to expand their descriptions into other areas.
- Cultural Venn Diagram
 - ◆ Use as a tool to visually compare the student’s culture to the Unangan.
 - ◆ Do some cultures have more in common with the Unangan?
 - ◆ Why is that?
- Sharing Knowledge: Create a song, dance, story, poem or picture that relates to the student’s cultural identity.

DISCUSSION

How is the Unangam culture similar or different from other cultures?

After completing the Sharing Knowledge activity discuss how communicating without written words is different from communicating with written words.

This lesson was adapted from: Unangam-Based Environmental Education Primer for St. Paul Island, Alaska. Mierzejek, B., A.D. Lestenkof, and P.A. Zavadil. 2007, and used with permission.

There Is No Such Thing as an Aleut

By: Barbara Švarný Carlson

Qawalangīx originally from Iluulāx, Unalaska

We call ourselves Unangan or Unangas (Atkan dialect). This is our autonym, our name for ourselves, the group identity for the indigenous peoples of the Aleutian Archipelago (including nine distinct subgroups) prior to contact with Europeans.

When Russian explorers came to our land, charting and mapping the area for their Czar, the first island group that they came upon were inhabited by the people who called themselves, Sasignan. For unclear reasons the Russians called them Aleut. They lived in what the Russians named the Near Islands, because of their proximity to Russia at the western end of the Aleutian Islands. As they moved eastward on their journeys, the Russians continued to call the people Aleut, even as they crossed a major dividing line of language and culture, encountering the Sugpiaq (many of whom now call themselves Alutiq) Sugcestun-speaking people of the Alaska Peninsula.

The Russian language became the common acculturation denominator among these diverse groups. What is my point? We “Aleuts” are actually three different maritime peoples who had our own identities and subdivisions prior to our contact with the Russians: The Alutiq speakers, the Central Yupik speakers of Bristol Bay, and the Unangam Tunuu (language of the Unangāx) speakers. Why should we hang onto that foreign name, “Aleut?” To show the pride we have in our cultural heritage and reclaim and maintain our identities as a distinct people we should revive the original words we used to describe ourselves.

Our Unangam identities have become so tenuous that we, as a people, are excavating, sifting, and meticulously labeling the artifacts of various segments of our society with increasing fervor. If we do not, they may disappear forever, or be claimed by another group as their own, muddying our uniqueness and diffusing our very identity. So there is inherent in this work that element of reclamation that is necessarily a part of any revitalization of an indigenous culture.

It is not just material objects that make up our heritage. The endangered Unangam Tunnu, the Unangāx language, with its extant dialects is a virtually untapped resource concerning the clues it can provide to found objects, an understanding the profound relationship with land and sea, rules to live by, history, and perhaps most importantly, a unique view of the world to be shared and appreciated. Unangam folklore is a vital aspect of this contribution to the world bank of knowledge. It is like a gigantic puzzle in which museum artifacts fill another missing gap.

Common among Alaska Natives, people who were either raised away from our home villages, or who had to leave at some point during our lives, and had to remain away for

some length of time, displaced Unangan/Unangas have a deepened sense of the sacred value of our origins. We feel a loss for what we have been missing, be it Native foods, songs, dance, stories, or seeing beauty reflected in artfully made objects. We miss seeing people who physically resemble ourselves and physically feeling the common elements with which our own people relate - elements such as wind, fog, salty air, and horizontal rain. We need to know these things about our cultural heritage and be able to share that common knowledge with family and community. We need to delight in hearing someone shout,

“Aang, Unangāx! “ (Hello, ‘Aleut’). These are what many of those people returning from other places are searching for when they return to the village, or to Alaska. Many of us reside in the densely populated areas such as Anchorage and Fairbanks. Large numbers of Unangan/Unangas with close ties similarly reside on the west coast, particularly in Washington and Oregon. We consider our original villages home even if we have not been able to return there for many years. We share a need to assert, “Where we are from is important to us. What we like to eat is important. Our art is important. Our dance and music are important.”

The Unangam foods are elemental to our culture. To have our Native foods sent to us when we are away is one of the most vitalizing, identity-rich gifts one’s friends or family can bestow. Some of our traditional subsistence foods include aalāx (whale), isūx (hair seal), aanūx (red salmon), and qāx (any kind of fish). From the beaches some favorites are chiknan (limpets), waȳgin (blue mussels), agūgaadan (sea urchins), qasiikun (chitons or gumboots), chuxlan (clams), and kahngadgin (seaweed). Saaqudan (aka Puuchkiis (R)), qaniisan (aka petrushkies (R)), fiddlehead ferns, and other native vegetables seem to make one feel healthier. My favorite is udāx, dried fish with chadūx, seal oil. When we eat these foods we know more strongly who we are.

These valuable links to the Unangam culture are validation of our origins, touchstones to our self- and group-identities. It is an awesome responsibility that pairs us with various types of scholars and researchers as partners as we search for culturally appropriate ways to document traditional knowledge and skills. We are not just an exploitable resource, but an equal partner in this compilation of our world knowledge bank. The more any of us can know about who we are and where we come from, the more sensitive and confident we can be in our interactions among culturally diverse societies. Qāx aasakung.

Thank you, for listening.

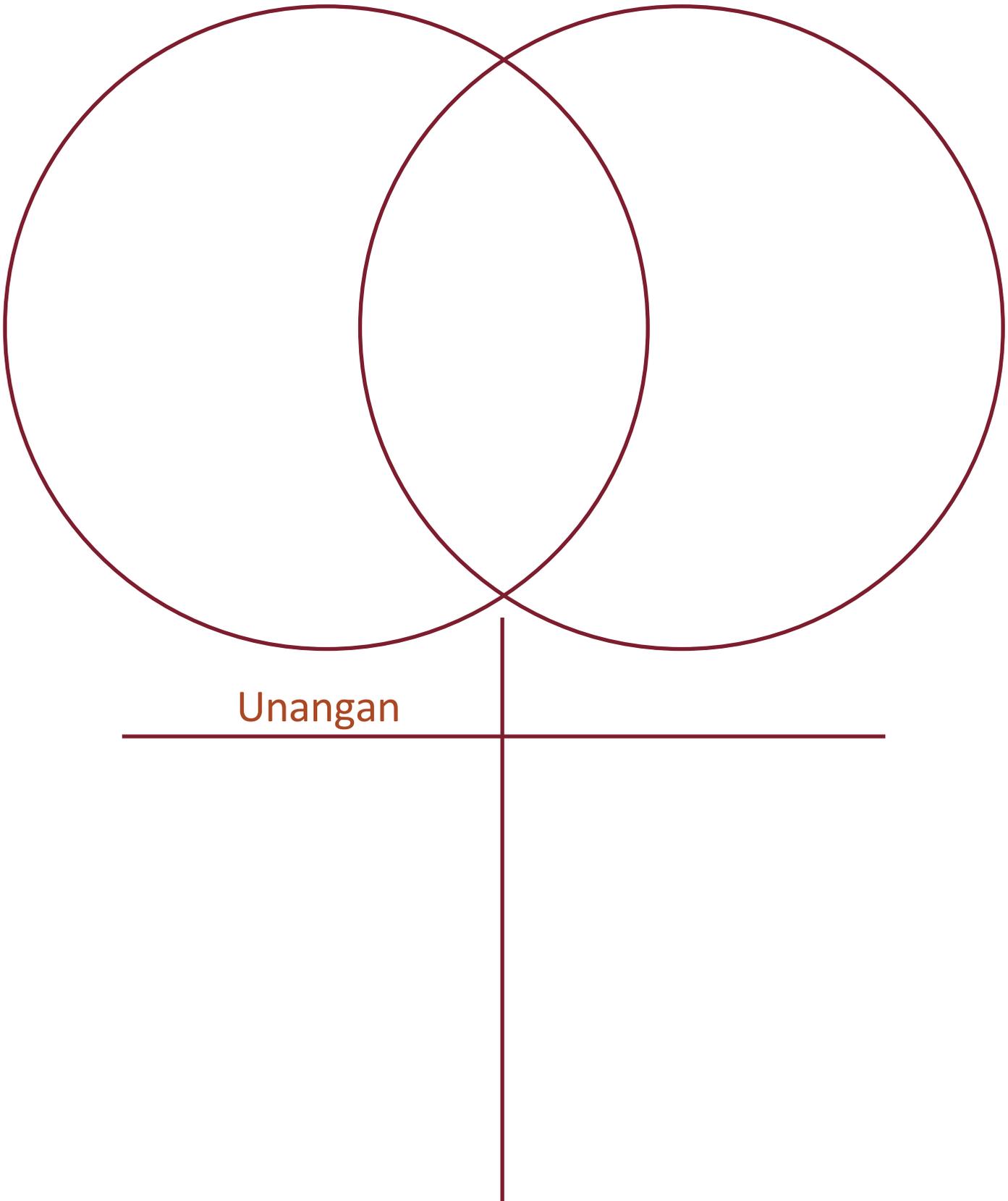
A version of this essay was printed in the Arctic Studies Center's publication of *Crossroads Alaska: Native Cultures of Alaska and Siberia* (1995) and *Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers and Orators: The Expanded Edition*, Alaska Quarterly Review (1999) Ronald Spatz, Executive Editor.

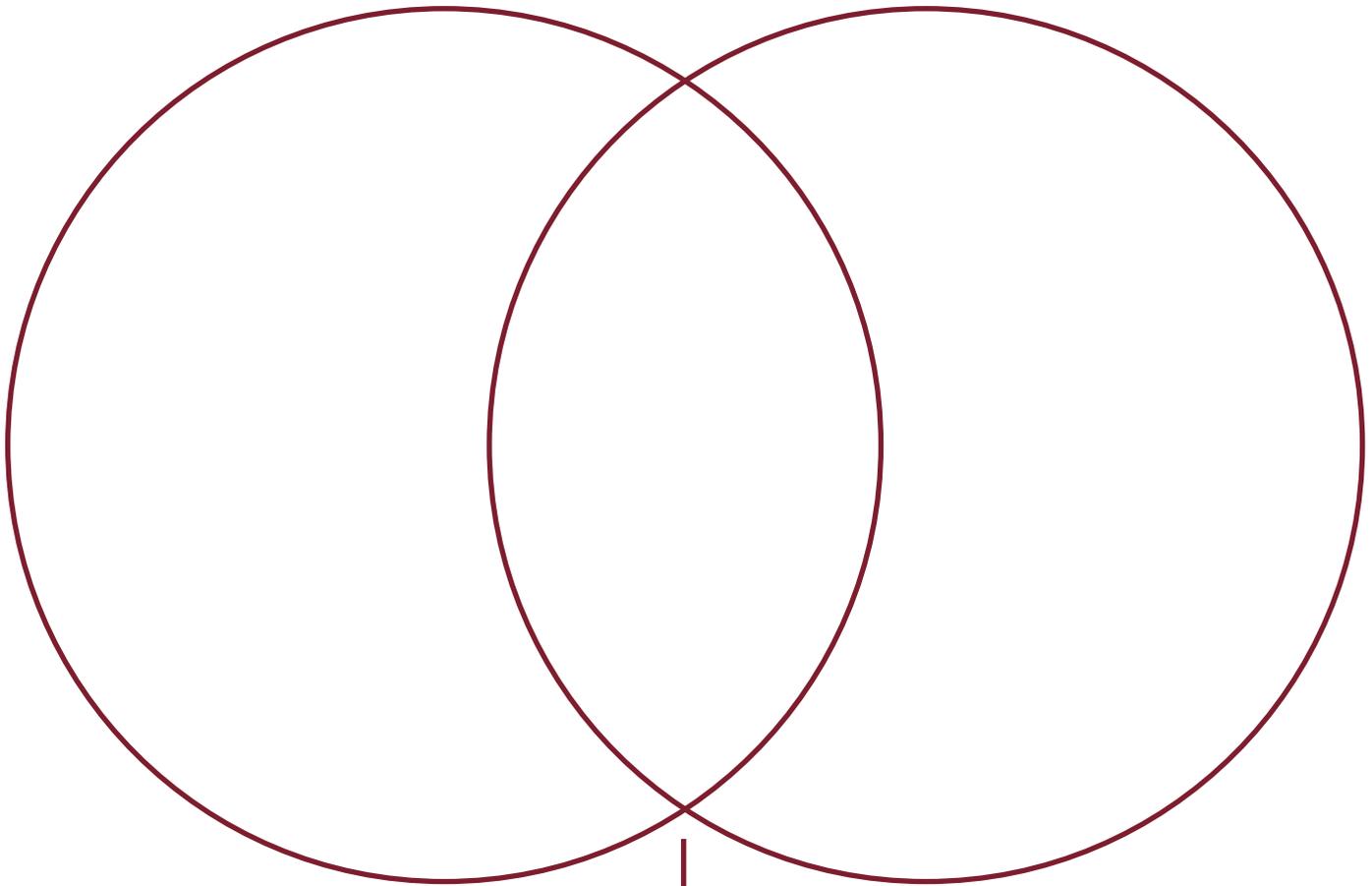
Directions: *Fill in the blanks with your unique answer.*

1. My name is _____.
2. My street address is _____.
3. My town/village name is _____.
4. My birthday is _____ . (day/month/year)
5. I am _____ years old.
6. The color of my eyes are: _____.
7. The color of my hair is _____.
8. I am _____ inches tall.
9. My father's name is _____.
10. My mother's name is _____.
11. I am the _____ (first, middle, last, only) child in my family.
12. I have _____ brothers and _____ sisters.
13. My paternal grandfather's name is _____.
14. My paternal grandmother's name is _____.
15. My maternal grandfather's name is _____.
16. My maternal grandmother's name is _____.
17. My paternal great grandfather's name is _____.
18. My paternal great grandmother's name is _____.
19. My maternal great grandfather's name is _____.
20. My maternal great grandmother's name is _____.
21. I was named after _____.

Cultural Comparisons (Venn Diagram)

Compare Unangan values or ceremonial traditions with the values and ceremonial traditions of others.





Unangan

- strong sense of community
- elaborate hunting ceremonies
- food is a part of the culture
- oral history
- subsistence hunters
- respect for all creatures
- only take what is needed
- share take with elders
- very spiritual

Other Culture

Students can compare to urban cultures, other countries, or other indigenous cultures.

By Aquilina D. Lestenkof, St. Paul Island, Alaska

This activity provides the opportunity for students to hone their communication skills. Tell the students to pretend they don't know how to write words. Then ask them to come up with other ways to communicate, share what they know, or what they have learned without writing words – song, dance, story, poem, picture writing, dramatization.

Divide students into groups. Have them pick one communication method to express what they have learned in this lesson. It's up to you to decide how much writing of words they can use as they develop a chosen reporting method. They may be uncomfortable and therefore “funny”. Try not to dissuade “funny” but tell them that it should not distract from the information they are imparting and ask them to try to employ humor purposefully, in such a way that their audience remembers the information they share. Try different approaches.

One approach you can try is improvisation. For example, one group may have their report in story form with a lot of action words and may be allowed to select another group to act it out as it is being read. You can demonstrate this method with the whole group to loosen them up using one of the Aleut stories in Activity 2.4 or another traditional story from your culture.

Following are some ways to use the various mediums:

Song: A group may compose only the chorus (for example, the core of the information they are trying to impart), a whole song, or music without words. Encourage students to create both words and music, but just one or the other will do.

Bonus: do a song and dance together.

Dance: A group may come up with motions that impart the information they wish to share. Students can decide if the group dances the story or just one person. They may feel the need to have music to go with the dance but should not be too dependent on words. Encourage actions to speak louder than words. This is a good time to encourage the use of humming or a simple chant such as “*la la la la*” or “*ay-ya ay-ya.*”

Bonus: do a song and dance together.

Story or Poem: A group may choose to tell a story because it's more comfortable. Fine, but expand on this by applying more structure. Such as, “Make the story or poem so as 3 and 4 year olds will understand it.” Or “Make the story or poem into a wise tale.”

Picture Writing: Picture writing is someone telling and drawing [no words] a story and the listeners draw what the storyteller is saying, too. The storyteller may even tell the others exactly what to draw. For example, the storyteller may say, “*One day, grandfather was walking by a lake. Okay, you all draw a lake at the bottom of your paper and draw grandfather on the right side of the lake. There were six ducks at the east end of the lake. Draw six ducks, and make one bigger than the others...*” All members of the group may have a chance to be the storyteller. Picture writing can be two-tiered. The group can do this among themselves and then display all their picture writings; or use them to tell “the story” to another audience or the whole class.

Dramatization: All forms of theatrical activity can be used. Employing song, dance, stories, poems, or picture writing in dramatization can be encouraged by providing additional incentives such as extra credit for using multiple techniques to tell a story.