



# **“I Am From” Activity Guide:**

## *A Tool to Foster Student Interaction in the Classroom*

Developed by the University of Minnesota’s Global Programs and Strategy Alliance and the Center for Educational Innovation. Compiled by Mary Lynn Montgomery and Mary Jetter.

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## Where I'm From

*I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.*

*(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.)*

*I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.*

*I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.*

*I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!*

*I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.*

— George Ella Lyon

Retrieved from author's website:  
<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>



# “I Am From” Activity Guide

## What is “I Am From..?”

This guide describes a set of activities based on the poem “Where I’m From,” written by George Ella Lyon in 1993. These activities have been developed for the Internationalizing Teaching and Learning program as part of the Internationalizing the Curriculum and Campus initiative at the University of Minnesota. The poem and associated activities have been used with students of all ages as a way to help them explore their cultural backgrounds and values and have proven to be an effective tool to foster interaction between international and domestic students.

## How “I Am From” Benefits Students

As the number of international students and those from diverse backgrounds increases, it is becoming more important than ever to facilitate communication among students and to help students learn from one another and understand each other’s backgrounds. This will foster a sense of community in the classroom and increase the sense of comfort that students have with one another. Research<sup>1</sup> shows that:

- International and domestic students do not typically interact in classes unless specific activities are included that encourage them to do so.
- Students benefit from activities that encourage them to move beyond their comfort zone while being supported by the instructor.
- Intentionally structured and facilitated activities help students appreciate diversity and allow for cross-national interactions to take place in the classroom.

Intentionally structured and facilitated activities such as the “I Am From...” activity provide an opportunity for students to interact with one another, perhaps outside of their comfort zones, in ways that enhance student learning in the classroom. Furthermore, the “I Am From...” activity addresses all aspects of the Interaction for Learning Framework model (Arkoudis, S., Yu, X., Baik, C., Borland, H., Chang, S., Lang, I., Lang, J., Pearce, A., & Watty, K., 2010), a model that has been shown to be effective for encouraging student learning from cross-national interactions: plan interaction, create environments for interaction, support interactions, engage with subject knowledge, develop reflexive processes, and foster communities of learning.

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<sup>1</sup> “Study of the Educational Impact of International Students in Campus Internationalization at the University of Minnesota” available at: [http://global.umn.edu/icc/resources/ed\\_impact.html](http://global.umn.edu/icc/resources/ed_impact.html)

## Objectives of the Activities

The objectives are to facilitate students' exploration of the identities present in the classroom including:

- **appreciation** of the diversity of experiences among students.
- **respect** for the diverse experiences, feelings, and aspirations of the class members.
- **recognition** and acceptance of the many cultures of the individuals in the classroom.
- **facilitation** of interaction among students through understandings of cultural similarities and differences.

## “I Am From” Activities

### Pre-writing activities:

- Frame the activity for your students and articulate the purpose for doing this particular activity. For example, you could talk about the importance of having students recognizing their own cultural background as well as that of their peers. Explain to students that this activity is designed to help them think about their own background and the experiences that have made them who they are today.
- Have students think about their background: what are some of the things that have been formative in developing who they are today? Students could reflect on their childhood or any other formative experience or time in their lives, such as a trip, an organization they belonged to, or a study abroad experience. This part of the activity can be conducted as individual reflection or could be facilitated as a small group discussion.
- Share George Ella Lyon's poem with students. The instructor can read it or play the audio [ <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/audio/where.mp3> ] or show this video [ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdnHl\\_yW1dQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdnHl_yW1dQ) ].
- Model your poem for students by reading the first few stanzas. Demonstrating how to read the phrases as a poem will help students understand the purpose of the activity and will prevent them from simply writing a series of statements that they share with their peers.

***“Whether an institution desires a new lever for campus internationalization, wishes to prepare students for global participation, or simply wants to engage students in more meaningful content learning, supporting cross-national interactions in classrooms appears to be an important strategy.”***  
(Yefanova & Johnstone, 2015, p. 10)

### Writing activities:

- Give students the brainstorming worksheet (available at the end of this guide) and about 5 minutes to brainstorm, then give them another 5-10 minutes to write their poems.
- The topics below are found on the brainstorming worksheet, with an added example of how this activity could be adapted for discipline-specific reflection. The sentence frames are intended only as a guide and can be adapted for your course and your students. Adapting this section works especially well if students are writing about a formative experience or time in their lives rather than about their childhood as a whole.
  - Familiar foods, especially those associated with family gatherings
  - Sights, sounds, and smells from your neighborhood
  - Familiar sayings heard repeatedly growing up
  - Familiar people, family members, friends, or ancestors
  - Discipline-specific topics (influential authors, experiences such as internships, motivation for selecting major, etc.)

### Post-writing activities (should be voluntary for the students):

- Ask students to share their poems if they are comfortable doing so. There are a few options, depending on how you would like to facilitate the activity:
  - Students can read their poems to the entire class. Note: if students share their poems with the whole class, choose the first student to present strategically. You want to make sure a student who will be comfortable sharing with the group and will read their work as a poem instead of a list of statements.
  - Students can share in small groups
  - Students can hang their poems and do a gallery walk
  - A few other ways to have students share are: inner/outer circles, exchanging poems so students aren't reading their own, four corners<sup>1</sup>, or sharing in an online Moodle forum.
- Facilitate student reflection on this activity.
  - experience of writing the poem
  - what they learned about themselves
  - what they learned about their classmates
  - why is it important to do this activity in relation to [course content being addressed with this activity]

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<sup>1</sup> Instructions at: [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/tools/tool016.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/tools/tool016.shtml)

- Questions to guide reflections:
  - Describe the experience of writing this poem. Was it easy or difficult?
  - Describe the experience of reading the poem aloud. How did you feel?
  - What did you notice in the poems read aloud by others?
  - What similarities and differences did you notice between your poem and that of the other students?
  - What did you learn about yourself in this activity?
  - Was there anything that surprised you, either in writing your poem or sharing it with the class?
  - What was valuable or interesting about this activity?
  - How might completing this activity help you as a (biologist, mathematician, historian, etc.)?

## Considerations

- **Keep in mind that** for some students, thinking about their background may evoke painful memories that they prefer not to revisit. Students should not be forced to share their poems if they are not comfortable doing so. Be sure to give students the option to reflect on another formative time in their life (i.e. college, study abroad, an extracurricular activity, etc.). For more information on how to support students' mental health, see <http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/index.html>.
- **Type of class.** Is the course part of a cohort, a stand-alone course, etc? If students are part of a cohort, they may already have a level of comfort with one other, making it easier for them to disclose more personal information earlier in the course. If it is a stand-alone class, a level of comfort should be established before asking students to share about their personal experiences. While it may be tempting to use I Am From... as a get-to-know you/icebreaker activity at the beginning of the semester, students are likely to gain more from the exercise if it is done later in the course.
- **Articulation.** Where in your program does it make sense to complete this activity? For example, it is not as effective if students end up completing the activity multiple times. It is also more effective if students can clearly understand how it connects to the curriculum and learning objectives of the course.
- **Relevance and applicability.** Explain the purpose and rationale for doing this activity. What student learning and development objectives does it accomplish? What do you hope students will gain from this activity? If

students do not see the relevance and applicability to the rest of the course content, they will not gain as much from participating in this activity. As part of the activity, you might consider asking students to consider how self-exploration enables them to be better actors within their disciplines.

***“Our challenge, as a field, is to capitalize on these interactions [cross-national interactions] to maximise content and culture learning for all students.”***

*(Yefanova & Johnstone, 2015, p. 10)*

- **Implementation.** Students benefit the most from activities that are intentionally designed and facilitated by the instructor. Think about how you will frame this activity with your students and what you hope to achieve by implementing it in your classroom. Decide which pre-writing questions you would like the students to address and how you would like the students to share their poems (e.g., to the whole class, in small groups, or in a gallery walk.) If students are sharing with the whole class, talk to the first student who will present and make sure they are comfortable doing so. If students are sharing in small groups, we recommend intentionally forming these groups so international and domestic students will be working together. Remember that students should not be required to share if they are not comfortable doing so. Rather than grading this activity, we recommend using it to encourage self-reflection and build awareness, which will ultimately promote student development.

## Other Uses of “I Am From”

The “I Am From” activity can be used in a variety of settings as a way to encourage students to reflect on the perspectives of others. For example:

- **History class:** Have students complete poem from the perspective of someone living in the era being studied.
- **Literature class:** Have students complete poem from the perspective of a character in a work being studied.
- **Geography class:** Have students complete the poem from the perspective of someone living in the area being studied.
- **Study abroad:** Have students complete the poem from the perspective of someone living in the country they will be visiting. Or you might consider having students revisit and reflect on their poem after having spent time in the host country and make changes based on their experiences.

## References

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## Why do the “I Am From..” activity with your students?



*“As a teacher I want my students to get to know one another in a different yet more intimate way than they normally do in a class. I also use this so I know a bit more about my students background so I can tailor some of my material to them and to tap them for ideas and examples of intercultural interactions.”*

— Thorunn Bjarnadottir, Director of Intercultural Education,  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

*“The ‘I am From’ activity has added a unique dimension to my public speaking classes because we do this activity as part of our Audience Analysis unit. In addition to my attempts to get the students to feel comfortable with each other and identify as a classroom community, having students share some of their key experiences from home by describing the smells and sounds of home helps the entire class realize that we are more alike than we may have first imagined.”*

— Jill Trites, Senior Teaching Specialist, Department of Family Social Science, College of  
Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

*“The instructor gets to see another side of the students. Regardless of if you’ve ever had the student before, you see them in a different manner, in a different light, and I think there are real positive ramifications in developing student/faculty or student/instructor rapport through that. From the perspective of the student, I feel they are more engaged, that they feel more a part of the community, that you as an instructor are building... when I use this activity, what I notice is that they are more willing to speak out and more willing to speak out, and felt seemingly more comfortable to express their ideas in front of the rest of the class.”*

— Brian Dingmann, Associate Professor of Biology,  
University of Minnesota, Crookston:

*“I became much more aware of the individuality each person has. I never really took the time to think about the values or cultural qualities my own family has. I suppose I took them for granted and never took the time to appreciate or identify them.”*

*“I like to think that my realization of how wonderfully diverse my background is can help me to recognize that clients and colleagues also have equally diverse histories and that it will keep me from making assumptions about them.”*

*“After the “I am ...” activity, I gained insight to the kind of veterinarian I would like to be.”*

— Veterinary Medicine students who participated in “I Am From” activities



### **I Am From...**

*Familiar foods, especially those associated with family gatherings*



### **I Am From...**

*Sights, sounds, and smells from your neighborhood*



### **I Am From...**

*Familiar sayings heard repeatedly growing up*



### **I Am From...**

*Familiar people, family members, friends, and ancestors*