My first year of teaching included five “world cultures” classes at Riverdale Junior High School in Jonesboro, Georgia. To motivate my students and get beyond the deadly boring “exports and imports” of my textbook, I taught surface culture. Looking back now, I see it was much like a tourist perspective of other cultures. I decorated my room with travel posters and created bulletin boards that focused on surface differences. I motivated my students as though they were experiencing a travelogue: “Let’s go visit India and see the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort. We will eat samosas, drink tea, listen to Ravi Shankar (who was playing with the Beatles back then), try on saris, and see a video of Hindu temples.” The comments of a guest speaker from Nigeria woke me up to the inadequacies of this approach. He told me how disappointed he was that my students not only knew nothing significant about Nigerian people but did not want to listen to what he thought or cared about. “They just want to learn a game or eat some food – what does that teach them that is important?” were the words I shall never forget.

I had been training them to think that surface culture was all they needed to know. And I had done nothing to help them learn from or interact with people from other cultures. Merry Merryfield

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