Background

Key concepts: nation, state, nation building

This role-playing activity divides students into groups that are responsible for different aspects of developing a national identity in a recently decolonized country. It may be useful to establish as a class more context for the scenario (for instance, where is the country located? Who were the colonizers, and what language did they speak?). After groups present to the class, a discussion about the challenges of nation building, its importance in the modern state system, as well as the risks and its relationship to nationalism is possible. The “I am an American” PSA aired after September 11 often helps bring the conversation home to U.S. American students (http://youtu.be/2YRR_bwbgE8).

Scenario set-up

You are leaders of a recently successful independence movement in a former colony. Huzzah! Now you must do the hard work of developing a national identity, even though your state is composed of a variety of ethnicities, religions and language groups. There are two major ethno-linguistic groups with roughly even sized populations, and approximately 30 percent of the population consists of several smaller groups. Additionally, all the ethno-linguistic groups have populations that extend beyond state borders. The population is evenly split between urban and rural. In addition to ethno-linguistic diversity, the country has two distinct climatic regions: an agriculturally productive plain in the south and a relatively arid and mountainous northern region that has rich mineral deposits. There is one city that is significantly larger than the others, and it is located in the south on a seaport.

Your task

Each group is assigned to be a different ministry in the newly formed government. At this time of uncertainty there is fear that many will not accept the new political realities, and developing a new national identity is central to ensuring political stability. There are many strategies for forming a new national identity and your ministries will need to be creative in representing both the past and the hoped-for future of the country to unify a population that lacks the cohesion of a true nation-state.

Read the guidelines for your ministry and then get together and brainstorm the changes you might make or the programs you would create to help build a new, unified national identity. Some ideas may be obvious, others less so, and some may even be radical. Also consider how your ideas would contribute to international as well as national legitimation.

Ministries

- Ministry of Culture
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Governance
- Ministry of Planning and Development
Ministry of Culture

The responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture include flag development, writing a national anthem, and maintaining cultural traditions through such things as museums, public statues and parks, and holiday festival planning. Your task is to develop plans for some of these priorities for your ministry and to be able to express why these priorities are important but also challenging to implement. Keep in mind the variety of ethno-linguistic and religious groups you must represent.

Task: Sketch or outline plans for at least 2 of the following: flag, national anthem, independence festival, museum(s). You will present these to the class and explain the symbolism and significance of your designs.

Example to help you get started:

This is the flag of the United Kingdom as it has existed since 1801. It is a combination of the flags representing the patron saints of England, Ireland, and Scotland (smaller versions below), but the flag of the patron saint of Wales is not represented. In 1801, Wales was already considered part of the Kingdom of England.

Ministry of Education

Your ministry must attempt to instill a sense of national identity in the students of the country. Things that concern you are bridging the urban-rural divide, ensuring educational opportunities for both male and female students, and confronting language barriers:

Task 1: outline the structure of the education system—What language(s) will classes be conducted in? Would you be concerned with standardized testing across the country? Would you prioritize making higher education free or accessible to all? How?

Task 2: outline the content of curricula—What will you teach students about the colonial period and the struggle for independence? How will you teach them about the various cultural groups that make up the country’s population?

Design a capstone project for students graduating from high school that addresses these issues and encourages students to reflect on their country’s national identity. You will present this assignment plan to the class.
Ministry of Governance
Your ministry is responsible for determining the structure of government, deciding where to establish the capital city, and printing currency.

Structure of Government
Task 1: roughly outline the structure of your new government. Consider the executive, legislative, and judicial functions of government. Questions to consider: Will you have a unitary government or a federal system? Will there be a president(s) and parliament/legislature? How will judges be decided? What political parties do you anticipate arising and what requirements might there be for political parties to be recognized?

Example to get you thinking outside of familiar structures:
Bosnia-Herzegovina is ethnically divided between Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks, and it has a unique government structure that recognizes this division. The presidency is shared by 3 representatives of the ethnic groups rather than held by a single person. Each presidential representative is elected for 4 years, and they all serve as Chair of the Presidency for rotating 8-month periods throughout the 4-year term.

Location of Capital
Task 2: Determine the location of the capital city. The colonial power used the largest city on the coast for its capital. Will you do the same or opt for a centrally located capital? What things do you need to consider when making this decision?

Currency
Task 3: Sketch designs for your national currency. Currency is one place where important national events and people are depicted and remembered. What types things would you want to include on your currency to contribute to a sense of national identity?

Ministry of Planning and Development

Regional Planning and Place names:
Place names are an important part of a country’s identity. For example, when Northern Rhodesia (named after English colonialist Cecil Rhodes) gained its independence in 1964, its name was changed to Zambia, after the Zambezi River that flows through the region. All kinds of features have names that might reflect a place’s identity: cities, streets, rivers, mountains, factories, universities, etc. In your newly independent country, should colonial names be changed or not? What about new features as they are built or developed? As cities are designed and built, how can a historical narrative and heritage be incorporated into the landscape?

Task 1: Determine if the country’s name and the name of its capital city will be changed from their colonial names. Develop a process for how new names will be determined (Will the newly elected president decide unilaterally? Will a special committee be formed? Who should be on such a committee and what guidelines would you give them?).

Task 2: Think about how will you introduce your newly renamed country to the international community. If you have time, develop a skit to perform for the class that explains your new identity as if it were a commercial aimed at potential tourists.