

# Tips for Using Culture Tree

Culture is something everyone has. It's the norms, beliefs, and behaviors central to a group. In schools, we talk about affirming students' cultural identities. In order to do that we need to understand the different ways to use students' cultural background as an asset. Just saying we affirm one's identity isn't enough. Our brain prioritizes non-verbal actions over verbal platitudes. Here are some ways to do that, from *Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Brain* (2014).

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## Tips to Foster Belonging

Belonging begins with a feeling of psychological safety and authentic inclusion. Here are two tips for using culture to foster belonging by leveraging shallow culture on the culture tree framework.

1. **Connect home norms to classroom agreements.** To affirm students' home culture, help them unpack what norms like respect and cooperation look like in their community. As a class, brainstorm how to actualize them in your classroom community. During the beginning of the school year, make time for students to identify some of these practices as a way for them to buy into the norms and community agreements. Ask the simple question: Would you do that in front of your grandmother?
2. **Redesign the Do Now.** Design the first 5-10 minutes of class to align with the collectivist practice of beginning learning with a few minutes of social connection to build trust and raise oxytocin, our bonding neurochemical. Oxytocin naturally reduces cortisol.  
  
Try a fun activity like a puzzle that's connected to the day's lesson. Other options might be to use protocols like dyads for students to set intentions for the day around behavior or learning. The key is giving them a few minutes of unscripted talking time.

## Tips to Foster Deeper Learning

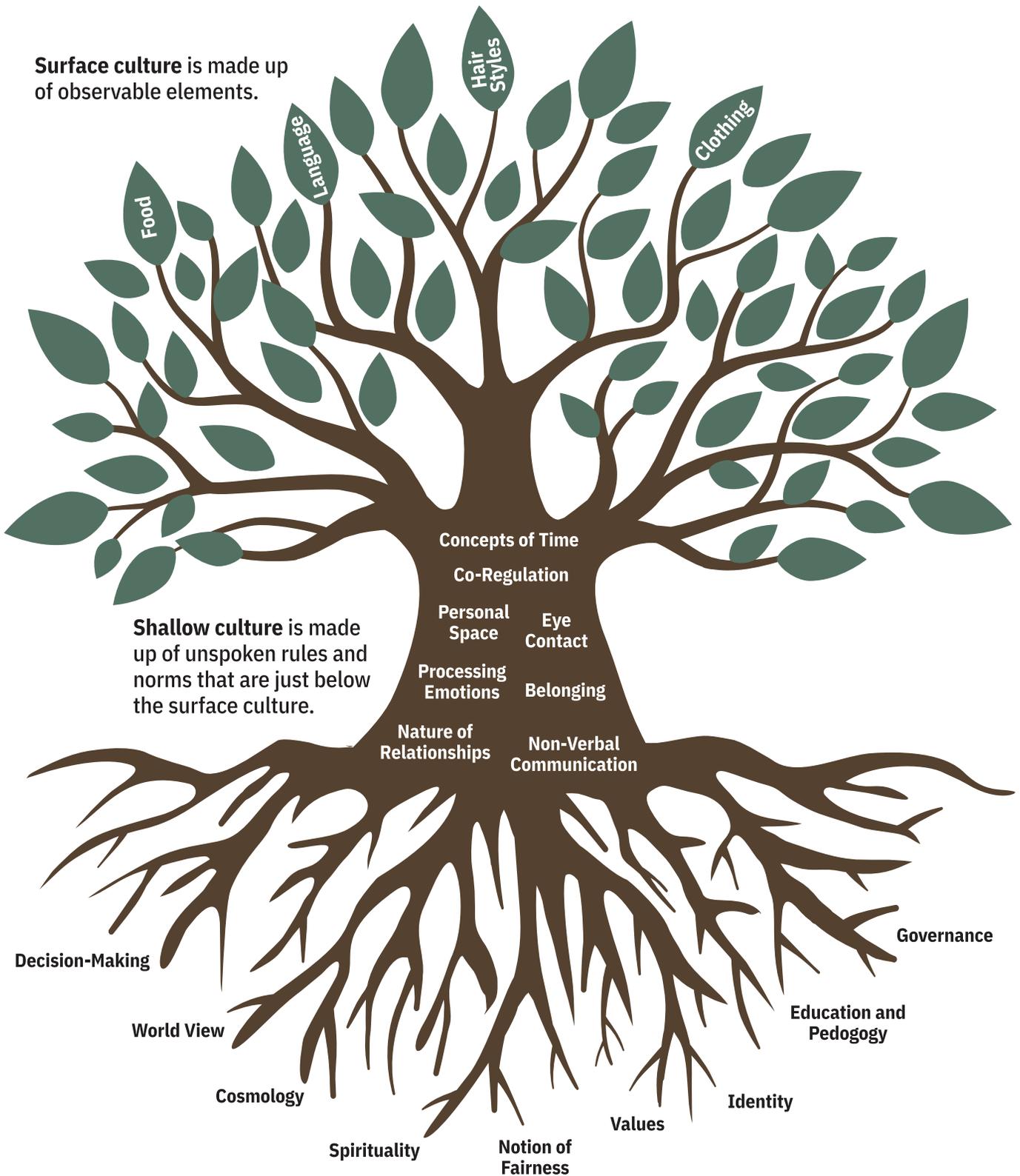
For deeper learning, thinking of culture, also called schema, as the software to the brain's hardware. Using cultural knowledge isn't optional. It is anchored in the brain's number one rule: All new learning must be coupled with students' schema. Here are three tips for using their cultural funds of knowledge as a cognitive hook for learning new content.

1. **Leverage metaphorical thinking.** Metaphors are powerful tools for activating students' background knowledge. Ask students to create a metaphorical representation of the new content as a way to help them get to conceptual understanding.
2. **Tap their funds of knowledge as it relates to the subject.** Before teaching new content, ask students to brainstorm all the different things they already know about the subject. The sources can be from reading, a television show, song lyrics, community stories, or images they've seen. The goal is to simply activate their synapses to be ready to receive new information.
3. **Center talk as a primary mode of processing content.** In collectivist cultures, learning revolves around talking to make sense of new information. Use discussion protocols like helping trios rather than simplistic turn-and-talk structures, which aren't robust enough for deeper thinking.



# Culture Tree

**Surface culture** is made up of observable elements.



**Shallow culture** is made up of unspoken rules and norms that are just below the surface culture.

**Deep culture** reflects the mental models and ancestral knowledge that guide shallow culture and surface culture.

