CLASSROOM TEACHING

Enhancing equity through cross-cultural instruction and consciousness raising

Schools mirror society and many will be contending with issues related to cultural differences.

JOHN J. IVERS, PROFESSOR OF LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AT BYU-IDAHO
NOV 8, 2021

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Difference makes the world go round.

In our increasingly globalized societies, a huge percentage of our planet's teachers find themselves serving students from diverse cultural backgrounds. We do our best to welcome and serve them in an equitable fashion. However, some of us are unaware that many of these students inhabit different cultural worlds. Some are culturally inclined to crave recognition, while some are humiliated by it. Some are programmed to suppress any emotional response whatsoever while some possess a culturally created filter that is very thin. A situation that might cause embarrassment to a student from one cultural group, may have no impact at all on a student from another.

In countries as diverse for example as Australia and the United States, divergent paradigms are everywhere causing considerable misinterpretation. These paradigms are brought into classrooms every day causing misunderstanding between student and teacher, student and staff, and even student and student. They are like invisible forces, creating all kinds of apparent mischief. We, being ignorant of their existence, may tend to assign culpability incorrectly (and sometimes even blame ourselves when it is not merited).

The urgency of teachers acquiring a more cross-cultural consciousness is exemplified by the fact that in 2020, 29.8 per cent of Australia's population was foreign born (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). That figure approaches one out of every three people! In a classroom of 30 students, might 10 of them be suffering culturally generated misinterpretation by their teachers and/or fellow students? No one can know for sure, however the issue should never be far from our thinking and our teaching.

Presently, we occupy an age of considerable social turmoil in what is considered the "Western" World. Equity is being demanded from many pulpits. Martin Luther King, through his speeches, writings, and peaceful protesting, fought for equity by attempting to raise the collective consciousness to a realization of a culture's sins. Great progress was effected through this paradigm. However, today, especially on college campuses in the United States, it seems like the concept has been largely abandoned. There are many who feel the tactics now are speech suppression and intimidation (FIRE, 2021). Almost half of all U.S. college students surveyed said they would feel uncomfortable expressing controversial political views in class (FIRE, 2021). MLK would, in my opinion, advocate for an approach where the recognition of a culture's "sins" is based on getting the word out, respectful exchange of ideas, love, and working toward mutual understanding.

As a founding sponsor (one of probably hundreds, I am nothing special) of the Martin Luther King National Monument, and as an SPLC Wall of Tolerance honoree (probably one of thousands), I have not given up on consciousness raising. As a teacher, I see education as one of the keys. As a teacher of cross-cultural differences, I see another key; peoples' cultures and subcultures possess diverse interpretations of reality. Educating people about their fellow brothers and sisters on this planet can bring to pass greater mutual understanding, tolerance, and introspection into one's own cultural programming. This is NOT a solution to the

problems we face, but rather it is one little thing that can move us in a better direction.

In this day and age, looking for oppressors seems to be a common theme. Undoubtedly, we all have experienced a bunch of them in our lives. However, according to the famous Brazilian social philosopher Paulo Freire, the biggest oppressor is within (Freire, 1970). We tend to interpret our social worlds, and our own worth and value, on the paradigms that our culture has bequeathed us. Our self-esteem is, in many ways, culturally determined. What would be an "impressive" person in one culture, could be an "unimpressive" one in another. For example, the perfect female "weight" varies significantly. One can be "beautiful" in one culture and not so somewhere else in the world (Africa and the World, 2013; Bright, 2013). How many of us live our lives feeling we are unimpressive, never comprehending we are paying homage to irrational cultural paradigms? How many of our students are doing the same? We also tend to interpret the worth, value, and behavior of others based on our particular paradigms, oblivious to the fact that their behavior could be informed by different cultural codes.

The world is replete with diverse cultural models that cause our brothers and sisters on this planet to continually misinterpret one another. Three highly impactful and divergent paradigms with which all teachers should be familiar are:

- Emotional Expressivity Tolerance
- Monochronic vs. Polychronic Time
- Individualism vs. Collectivism (possibly the most important cultural difference).

There are many other poignant and divergent paradigms of which a teacher should be cognizant, but they may be a topic for another article. However, the three concepts above can often be sources for serious classroom misunderstanding. In this article I will review each and, hopefully, afford the reader a better comprehension of cultural tigers in the grass that can leap on to the scene unexpectedly and ruin the priceless relationship between us and our precious students. No teacher can be faulted for being unfamiliar with these cultural landmines, however much pain can hopefully be avoided through a little bit of cross-cultural instruction.

A few little clarifications

In this complex world in which we find ourselves, our human experiences can

generally be found originating in one of three different levels (Peace Corps, 2009). The first one is the Universal Level which incorporates attributes that go beyond culture and seem to be the norm in every culture known to humankind. They are legion, to say the least, however a few examples of them are (1) generosity admired, (2) status differences based on age, (3) fear of snakes, (4) the concept of fairness. (5) resistance to abuse of power, and (6) concern about what others think (Brown, 1991, Pinker, 2002). The second level is the Cultural Level which is what this article examines. The third level, and possibly the most important, is the Individual Level. Even though our cultural paradigms create widely shared beliefs and behaviors within a certain cultural group, we cannot assume that everyone in a particular culture subscribes to them in thought and/or action. Each one of us, genetically speaking and otherwise, is a creature unique in the entire universe. Paradigms constitute common threads running through cultures, but their adherence is not universal within the culture itself.

It also needs to be recognized that the three major paradigms discussed are all so complex, with a vast number of implications, that it is impossible to assume one culture's orientation towards each of them is superior to another. Certainly, when one gets down to specifics, one can see benefits going this way or that, however the problem is that the world contains so many "specifics" we could never satisfactorily quantify to what direction the scales are tipped. I am not claiming, as might be apropos today, that all cultural paradigms are good and should be respected and tolerated. For example, there are some places in the Middle East and South Asia where violence against women borders on cultural or sub-cultural sanction (Roberts, 2008). I think we should be intolerant of such things. However, since all cultures are replete with good and bad, reflected in an infinity of potential circumstances, the overall benevolence and malevolence of entire cultures would not be measurable.

Emotional expressivity tolerance

No matter from what culture one originates, we all seem to possess the same emotions. This is a human universal bequeathed to us by evolution rather than from culture. In fact, all homo sapiens tend to demonstrate similar facial expressions when experiencing similar emotional stimuli (Brown, 1991, Pinker 2009). This fact, however, is not completely immune to some culturally based tweaking in that, for example, in some parts of Asia, people will giggle when they are embarrassed.

However, even though we all seemed to be possessed of the same emotions, how, when, where, and to what level we express them can be subject to seismic shifts in cultural differences. Low expressivity tolerance people will tend to suppress their emotions and opinions and reserve them for certain prescribed circumstances. High expressivity tolerance people tend to feel liberated in expressing their opinions and feelings in almost any venue. And, of course, there are many cultures and individuals that fall somewhere in between.

Students from low emotional expressivity cultures, such as pretty much all of East Asia will likely be more reticent to participate in class discussions, debates, and express opinions that could stir controversy (Althen, 1988, Ivers 2016). Higher expressivity tolerance teachers could therefore misinterpret low expressivity students as being uninterested, unenthusiastic, uncommitted to the material, neurotically shy, and possibly even arrogant (Ivers 2016).

On the other hand, students from high expressivity cultures such as Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Southern Europe, and the urban northeastern U.S. (New York et al) may tend to express their classroom emotions and opinions with much more gusto (Althen, 1988, Condon 1985, Hall, 1976, Ivers 2016). Such a posture could easily cause a lower expressivity teacher to misinterpret such students as being disrespectful, out of control, emotionally disturbed, dumb, and even dangerous. A high expressivity student, expressing disagreement on a matter, will likely self-perceive as being in a state of respectful and artful engagement, whereas a low expressivity teacher (or a low expressivity fellow student for that matter), at the other end of the exchange, may perceive the high expressivity student as completely out of line. Such students are likely to be "overdisciplined" which could wreak havoc with the student's self-esteem and overall attitude toward education (Monroe, 2006). Being overdisciplined is the opposite of equity.

Such differences can be no little thing in generating a whole host of misinterpretations and undue offense. Understanding what cultural orientation a student likely has can be vital in preventing teacher-student miscommunication. On a personal note, as someone from the urban northeastern U.S. (Philadelphia), I have been told that I inadvertently terrify some of my students on the first day of class. It takes them a few more days to realize that I am a really a nice guy. On another occasion, some of my colleagues witnessed a very friendly yet hearty exchange between me and a graduate student from Africa concerning African

politics. Both of us experienced a wonderful conversation, but my colleagues afterwards asked me why the African student was so angry with me.

Understanding the cultural "place" from which a student is coming, which he or she innocently takes to be axiomatic, can be essential in affording our schools a more inviting ambience for everyone and avoiding educational tragedy. This brings to mind the quote of the famous educational psychologist, William W. Purkey, who said, "If we educators lose one child we could have saved, all the angels in Heaven will weep!"

Monochronic vs. Polychronic "Time"

Most people in both the U.S. and Australia see the clock as their boss. They also see the schedule as their boss. Time is like money. It can be wasted, invested, well-spent, badly spent, etc. This is defined as a monochronic view. Most people in Australia, the United States, Canada, Northern Europe, and urban East Asia, have adopted a monochronic view of the world (Hall, 1976). However, monochronic folks occupy a minority position on this planet. Most of the world is what we would call polychronic.

In the polychronic world, people don't feel a pressing culturally created need to perfectly align with the clock. Unless showing up on time is essential, a later arrival might be quite common. "Inconveniencing" others timewise is also not a cardinal sin, and often not even considered an inconvenience! One's schedule is seen as rather flexible, and interruptions are not bothersome as polychronic people are accustomed to doing many things at once. Multi-tasking is the norm in the polychronic world and the concept of focusing on one thing at a time tends to reign in the monochronic realm (Hall, 1976; VP Legacies, 2020).

In the monochronic world, the inflexibility of the schedule and the general impartiality of how things are run afford one a concrete path to obtaining one's daily or long-term goals. In the polychronic world, rules plus human connections provide similar stability (Hall, 1989; Ivers, 2017). Connections and positive human relationships can be the grease through which things get accomplished. The ultimate connection in the polychronic world is the family (Hall, 1989). Family loyalty trumps all else.

Considering the above, misinterpretation can be significant between monochronic teachers and polychronic students (and vice versa). According to Czarnec (2005),

polychronic students, who are not necessarily as tightly tied to the schedule as monochronic students, may benefit from teacher clarification of assignments and expectations during each week. A teacher often reminding his or her students of what needs to be done can be a very important element in keeping a polychronic student in sync with everyone else (Czarnec, 2005). Time set apart for the students themselves to review with each other the principles just taught could also be helpful.

Monochronic students see adroitly navigating the bureaucracy as a way to find resolutions to vexing issues. Polychronic students can also do that however, they have likely been trained to leverage connections and relationships as another effective way to solve problems and get things done. Polychronic students, who see human relationships and human needs as more important than time restraints, may be baffled as their "connections" at a monochronic school, such as favorite teachers, administrators, etc., cannot do too much for them when they (the students) are legitimate victims of unanticipated complications that may collide with certain deadlines. They may misinterpret administrators, teachers, and even school policies as unfeeling, inflexible, cold, and unkind (and sometimes the student may be correct!). On the other hand, monochronic teachers may misinterpret polychronic students as undisciplined or even unethical for requesting for such interventions.

Despite the lip service afforded to it in the monochronic world, family really does come first in the polychronic realm. Therefore, a polychronic student may be unpleasantly surprised that a monochronic teacher will not consider her brother's birthday as a suitable excuse for missing class. If polychronic parents arrive late for a teacher conference, no disrespect is intended. The polychronic parents simply assume the teacher is the boss over his or her schedule and is sufficiently flexible, intelligent, and talented to easily perform any adjustments necessary. As educators, we witness disrespect all the time. Much of it is intentional, but some is not. "Disrespect" exists in all cultures. However, it is important we understand that some forms of disrespect are culturally created phenomena that vary significantly in time and space. Affording people the benefit of the doubt can serve to maintain positive and inviting relationships, enhance equitable treatment, and help us to avoid regrets later on.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

According to the famous cross-cultural psychologist, Harry Triandis, individualism

vs. collectivism is the most powerful and poignant cultural difference in our world (Triandis, 1989). If that is true, any teacher instructing students from different cultural backgrounds should be highly familiar with the implications of both orientations. Australia and the United States are two of the most individualistic countries on the planet (The Hofstede Centre, 2021). Other places where individualism tends to reign would be Canada and most (but not all) of Europe. Most of the rest of the world is dominated by collectivistic paradigms to one degree or another (The Hofstede Centre, 2021, Triandis, 1989, 2001). Therefore, Australians and Americans again find themselves occupying a minority position. Despite the country's general orientation, the U.S. is replete with subcultures that lean collectivistic such as Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Polynesian Americans, Native Americans, and some religious groups (Black, Mrasek, & Ballenger, 2003; Kappeler, 2003; Triandis, 1989: Vandello & Cohen, 1999). I would assume Australia, with its rich and growing cultural diversity would be the same. Australian Aboriginal culture is most definitely collectivistic (Lohoar, Butera, Kennedy, 2014) as would be the country's other significant minority groups hailing from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Culture has a way of creating "needs" that we tend to spend this precious mystery called life uncritically and frantically trying to fulfil. Individualists would feel the culturally created need to do their own thing, make their own decisions, be a mover and shaker, make it to the top of whatever group they represent, be independent, and be unique (Ivers 2016, 2017).

A collectivist, on the other hand, would possess culturally created desires and fears pushing them in sometimes the opposite direction. A collectivist might "need" to get along with others rather than get ahead of them (Triandis, 2001; Hall, 1989). A sense of belonging is culturally inculcated as a basic "must" in collectivism and saving face in front of one's peers is a cultural essential. An African proverb aptly conveys collectivistic wisdom by stating that "a person is a person through persons" (Nwosu, 2009 p. 167). Group goals are more important than personal goals (Triandis, 2001) and some students, especially those from East Asia, may encounter extreme stress and depression trying to meet them. Loyalty to one's group is paramount. In collectivism, "you are more your brother's keeper than your brother's competitor" (Ivers, 2017, p. 81). Being unique is frowned upon and being a team player is important (Hall, 1989). Standing out is concerning because, to one degree or another, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" in all collectivistic cultural orientations and surveillance is high (Triandis, 2001). In some

parts of the collectivistic world, students may understate or sometimes even sabotage their academic performances rather than out-perform their peers and/or superiors (Ivers, 2017; De Atkine, 1999). Parents may understate their children's academic successes even when talking to the child's teachers themselves (Ivers, 2017)!

All of the above can make the cross-cultural classroom fraught with misinterpretation. For example, an individualistic teacher might not understand why a collectivistic student is not volunteering an answer he or she obviously knows. The teacher may not be aware that the collectivistic student does not want the recognition. Public recognition of student successes can be problematic. Individualistic students, for example, continually endure a culturally induced hunger for recognition. This cultural craving is satisfied in diverse ways in each school. However, individualistic teachers, working under individualistic paradigms extant in their school culture, should realize that some forms of well-meaning public recognition could be quite embarrassing to collectivistic students. Being aware of the collectivistic students' propensity for "embarrassability" and lower self-esteem (Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999) should not be too far from a teacher's cross-cultural consciousness. Equal treatment would require the student be embarrassed, whereas equitable treatment would require adjustments based on how students' paradigms are informing them (and their peers). Understanding a student's rather significant "group pressure," boiling just under the surface, might explain a lot of what the individualistic teacher might simply misinterpret as individual oddities specific to the student himself or herself.

Conclusion

To better create effective schools, Young (2021) feels we should focus on supporting the needs of individual students, assist with teacher development, make the school a change agent, and enhance positive teacher-student relationships. Making cross-cultural differences part of a school's consciousness can help with these worthy goals.

It is incumbent upon all of us, as educators, to attempt to grasp the perceptual fields that inform the reality of our students. Most embarrassment and humiliation is culturally created (including our own personal feelings of inadequacy and shame). Things are usually only embarrassing and humiliating when viewed through a particular cultural paradigm that is far from universal, but rather could be limited in time and space. There is no way to completely prevent our students

from such suffering, however, the more emotional pain and self-concept damage we can forestall, the better. Besides the three “at risk” paradigms mentioned above, there are a multitude of others that can foment considerable didactic mischief as well.

The planet’s future is molded in classrooms across the world, by influencers (teachers) who work for minimal pay and prestige yet hope to save humanity one lesson at a time. Understanding “the other,” may be a key part in this salvific process. As a human race, we have long reached the capacity to destroy ourselves and take all of the other intricate and beautiful forms of life with us. We are beings on a small planet revolving around an insignificant star in a galaxy of hundreds of billions of stars in a universe of hundreds of billions of galaxies. Despite our best efforts we have not discovered any form of life elsewhere. Maybe we will someday. However, what if we happen to be the only flicker of life in the vast cosmos? If this unspeakably priceless candle is ever extinguished, cultural ideology will likely be the root cause of it all. Understanding our fellow travelers on this tiny orb has never been more essential than it is now.

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