

# HW 1.3: Article - What Teachers Should Understand About Culture

Philosophers, politicians, and scholars do not agree on the definition of culture or the concepts a definition of culture should include. For example, Clifford Gertz articulated 12 meanings for the word based on his reading of Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man*. In some parts of the world the learned behavior and the meaning systems we label as culture in this reading may not be grouped together as a definition for culture. However, examples of the definition we provide can be identified in all human societies. In other words, we can ground our abstract definition of culture with examples of it from all communities in the world. Through these examples we gain both a better understanding of what we mean by culture and a better understanding of meaning systems and learned behaviors of our own culture.

As you read these materials, hopefully you will begin to question whether or not many things you currently consider fundamental, perhaps even genetically determined, characteristics of student behavior, family life, and school participation might be learned rather than biologically determined behavior. When we as teachers recognize culture as learned rather than genetic, we have new hope: first, if a child has learned culture, surely he can learn other things we are teaching; second, if an annoying behavior is a cultural pattern, the teacher can help create new or modified ways for responding; and finally, if a behavioral pattern is learned it can be interpreted differently and become a sign of respect rather than rudeness—more acceptable to the teacher and other classroom members.

## Definition of Culture

The most important point we want to make about **culture** is that people learn it. Things like hunger or tiredness are biological, but how and where we sleep or the specific things we eat, like ham at Easter, are cultural responses. Culture can be thought of as a template for response, which shapes thinking and behavior from generation to generation, and it resides in learned behavior. Three specific **cultural systems** organize culture:

- Systems of meaning—such as language,
- Social organizations—kinship patterns, political structures, social groups, and institutions
- Products and techniques of production within society—the things a society produces; the techniques, tools, materials used in the production; and the processes for production.

## **The Process of Learning Culture**

Part of the **process of learning a culture** is cultural. In other words, the social interactions that result in our learning the ways of our own society include the ways in which culture is taught or reproduced. By this we mean that the strategies and techniques our parents or other adults use to teach us appropriate behavior or process of creating the products of a culture are themselves cultural patterns. There is not, however, a one to one correspondence between the cultural patterns and systems of meaning taught by one generation in a culture and those learned by another. While you, your parents, and grandparents may share many cultural norms, in your interaction with the world you have adjusted and adapted some of those norms. What constitutes appropriate dress for school, or church or formal and informal settings is a good example of this.

## **Culture and the Negotiation of Meaning**

The meaning systems of a culture are negotiated since the members of a society must agree to the relationships among words, behaviors, and other symbols and their meaning. For example, we have agreed to call doors by that name. In order to establish meanings, there are negotiated meaning systems but also processes of negotiation that are learned and agreed upon. As a result of the negotiation of meaning and the processes of negotiation for meaning, different societies agree upon different relationships among meanings, different things to attach meaning to, and different ways of acting out meanings that are shared. For example, mothers and children have strong biological attachments to each other, but the ways in which they represent their relationship—the patterns and practices for interacting with and caring for each other—will have cultural components and often even developmental significance. In the United States children develop strong attachments to their mother at about 7 to 9 months and refuse to “go” to others. In some African countries this behavior actually occurs earlier, because the baby is physically tied to the mother and so develops face recognition more quickly than children in the United States do. Furthermore, as more and more children in the United States are reared in day care, the timing of this attachment may become more delayed.

## **Discovery of Our Cultural Identity**

Our own understanding of who we are as a member of both the **microculture** (the culture of our family background and subcultures we belong to and participate in) and the **macroculture** (the larger culture of the society we live in) contributes to a sense of our own **cultural identity**. We discover our cultural identity as we make explicit the cultural influences in our own life. One way we can begin this process is by observing our everyday behaviors and social interactions and the meanings we attach to them in comparison to those of others who seem to be culturally different from us.

As we become aware of **cultural differences**, we realize that culture resides in the system of meanings and not in the behaviors, objects, or concepts themselves. **Learned culture is like a filter**. How we interpret the data we perceive through our senses is constrained by the values, beliefs, and norms of our culture—our cultural lens. As we observe the world and respond to it, we use the meanings we attach to the physical objects, behaviors, or events to make sense of our environment and act within it. Unless we have experiences that force us to rethink many of our automatic responses to the world, we may not even be aware of the filter our culture provides. Because culture is in part a system of meanings, it actually influences not only how and what we observe but also how we make sense of the world around us. In fact culture as a system of meanings governs the way a group of people understands its learned behaviors, its systems of organization and production, even its physical environment.

Our dress, our speech, our food are learned behaviors and are part of culture. When we brush our teeth, cross our legs, send a birthday card, embrace a friend, listen to music, or go out to play, we practice learned behaviors which are part of our culture.

Some of these learned behaviors include

- actions toward or around people—family, lover, teachers, friends, police, children;
- responses in small social groups;
- actions in large social groups;
- food preparations and consumption;
- work;
- behavior about our homes: building, taking care of, learning; and
- recreation or relaxation.

Culture doesn't just reside in these behaviors. It resides as well in the meanings attached to these behaviors. Through observing behaviors and interpreting them we can come to understand the culture of others. (See Chart 2: Discovering Student Culture)

Major components of the meaning system of a culture are its characteristic values and beliefs. Beliefs and values probably affect every learned behavior. The value and belief systems in a culture overlap with other components. For example, religious belief systems can affect the cultural significance of planting or precipitation, systems of morality can affect recreational pursuits like riding ATV's or recycling, and morality, religious belief, and social organization can all over-lap in government or schooling. Often the values and beliefs we have learned from our culture guide the judgements we make about the advisability of an action, participation with a group, or the appropriateness of a behavior in a particular context.

Family stories, homilies, aphorisms or myths are part of our cultural heritage. They represent the belief and value systems that guide our culture. As a result they give people (those who are members of a culture and those who are outsiders to it) insight into how they should feel, think, and/or act. In a specific cultural context, these systems help us

differentiate right feelings, thoughts and behaviors from wrong feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

### **Relationship of Language and Culture**

An important way of communicating the meaning systems of a culture is through the language we use. The relationship between language and cultural meaning sometimes appears to be so strong that we feel that learning a language—becoming highly proficient in a language or **bilingual** - is sufficient. Almost intuitively we think that if we could just speak Arabic fluently, we would be able to act independently in an Arabic country, like Saudi Arabia, for example. But we soon learn that while it is imperative that individuals learn the language of the community in which they work and interact, if they want to have power, voice, and position in that community and participate completely in it, they must understand the unspoken social rules, the patterns of kinship relations, the production processes and products, and those other norms which constitute the culture of the community. When a person has this deep understanding about a culture other than his or her own and can act culturally appropriately, without thinking about it, that person is considered **bicultural**. Thus, ESL students need teachers' support in becoming not only bilingual but also bicultural. Indeed to accomplish this teachers usually **explicitly teach** students the unwritten rules of a culture, cultural norms, or shared cultural means.

Ironically in fact, people can speak the same language but not act or speak the same culture. In such a community, the cultural group that has the most power is considered the **dominant culture**. In the United States, White middle-class Americans with northern European origins are considered the dominant culture. In addition, students in your classrooms may have the same country of origin or even consider themselves members of the same cultural group with the same cultural heritage but in actuality represent subcultures of the same **macroculture**. In other words, there are **intragroup differences** within a culture. An example of this can be found in people from a Mexican heritage. Whether a student is a recent immigrant or a second or third generation born to immigrant parents can make huge differences in the cultural characteristics of the community that they share.

### **Responsibility of Teachers to Teach Culture**

As teachers, regardless of our cultural heritage and background, whether we are members of a **minority** or the **majority culture**, we have mastered the culture of schooling. We have learned its systems of meaning and its patterns and rules for social organizations and interactions, and we are able to utilize the technologies and produce the products valued within this culture. Sometimes these skills and abilities to use our knowledge and skills for interacting within a culture in order to be successful is called **cultural capital**. Part of our

responsibility as teachers is to help students learn and be able to use these systems of meaning, understand and participate in the social organizations and structures, and utilize and produce the technologies and products that are valued in the dominant culture. By **explicitly teaching culture** to their culturally or linguistically diverse students, teachers help these students develop their own cultural capital.

A young first-year African American schoolteacher began his career as a sixth grade teacher in a predominantly black, low socioeconomic school in a southwestern city. He noticed that the students from his school who belonged to a **minority culture** were not leaders at the local high school. They did not graduate in the same proportion as students from wealthier white schools, nor did they go to college. Yet in his sixth grade they had strong leadership skills, adequate language and math skills, and reasonable creativity and intelligence. As observed the problem of the lack of success, he determined that when his students had moved on to the next level of schooling, they had not understood the **culture** they were entering. He identified not only the unwritten rules of social behavior which were different from those of his students, but he also specifically targeted those elements, that caused negative evaluations to be made about his students. Having once identified the rules of “the school game” his students did not understand and, therefore, were violating, he taught them the rules. He helped them develop **cultural capital** to support their success in the **dominant or majority culture**. For example, he told his students, “We know that time doesn’t make that much difference. As long as you come to school in time to learn the things you need, that will be all right. But in the white culture, they think time means something. They think being on time means you are smart. Therefore, when you go to the high school, no matter how stupid it seems to you, you need to arrive on time every day for the first year. In that way the teachers will think you are smart and that you know the rules.” After a few years, his students were full participants in the high school. They were school leaders. They went on to college, and their actual potential was realized.

As teachers work with language minority students, they need to be especially aware of not only their level of linguistic skill—their **bilingualism**, but also their level of cultural skills—**biculturalism**. The need to think of ways to help students who do not understand or possess the cultural skills necessary for school success in the dominant culture to develop them.

### **The Individual and Stages of Cultural Contact**

When an individual from one culture moves into or comes in contact with a second, there are stages of cultural contact. These can be called **euphoria, culture shock, and adaptation**—aka called honeymoon, horror, humor, and home. **Euphoria** recognizes the pleasure of experiencing new customs, foods, and sights. **Culture shock** follows as the newcomer becomes increasingly aware of the differences between cultures, is disoriented when cultural cues are misinterpreted, and the misinterpretations result in frustration. Depression, anger or withdrawal may result. The depth of the shock may depend on

perceived or real cultural congruence, individual personality, and availability of emotional support. **Adaptation** occurs when the newcomer can interact in the new culture with confidence and success. In this case, the new-comer recognizes the strengths in and differences between the new culture and his or her own culture and can use information from both cultures to act successfully in either. This may be a long process. In some cases, in this process newcomers may actively reject certain aspects of the culture. They may feel lonely or frustrated and lose self-confidence.

For school aged children, teachers play an important role in helping students learn aspects of the new culture, maintain respect for their own culture, and provide support when students are caught in or discouraged by the differences. During this process, teachers should use **culturally sensitive pedagogy**. They can do this by showing respect for cultural differences that exist in their classrooms, providing education to all of their students about the elements of culture generally (and the cultures represented in the classroom specifically) and applying multiple perspectives in their own interpretations of classroom behaviors to support students in learning the new culture and the frustration from the process.

Prejudice, racism, stereotypes as well as **institutional racism** can be the result of cultural interaction and contact. Most adults are familiar with impact that prejudice, racism, and stereotyping can have in the life of members of minority or non-dominant groups; however, we may be less informed about or aware of the impact of **institutional racism**. Prejudice can inhibit cultural adaptation. Prejudice is a dislike toward something or someone usually based on a faulty and inflexible generalization about that person or thing. People who are prejudiced often express it through **ethnocentrism**, which is a feeling that the things of one's own culture are superior to those of all other cultures. People from both the **minority and majority culture** can have and express feelings of prejudice and ethnocentrism. Racism is a form of prejudice. It refers to the belief that one race (your own) is superior to other races and that a person's race determines intellectual, personality and other traits. Racism becomes cultural when a person believes that the values, traditions, beliefs, products, music and art of other cultures are inferior. Stereotypes often emerge from racist beliefs. A stereotype is a preconceived oversimplification and generalization about people from religious, ethnic, and cultural groups different from your own. Because prejudice, racism, and stereotypes can have detrimental effects on the ability of individuals and groups to reach their potential, teachers have a special responsibility to not only employ **culturally sensitive pedagogy**, but also to educate their students against bias.

**Institutional racism** is a problem that is particularly difficult for a teacher to address. No matter how hard a teacher may work to reduce bias in her teaching and classroom, her effort may be futile if the school as an institution promotes racism through its policies, traditions, and practices. This happens when a school's policies and practices support and produce racial inequalities in the school. For example, classification processes for identifying students for talented and gifted programs often result in an underrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

This may be particularly true for language minority students when a single speeded standardized test is the initial screening tool.

## **Metaphors of Cultural Interaction**

When cultures come in contact with each other, the people associated with them respond in different ways from rejection, domination, total assimilation, conflict, or **accommodation**. Earlier in the history of the United States we used a metaphor to account for the results of the process of cultural contact within the United States. That metaphor was the **melting pot**. This cultural metaphor holds that people immigrated to the United States and created a new homogeneous culture in which all minorities held equal power—both **immigrant** (people who moved to this country from another one) and **indigenous people** (native peoples who hold minority status within culture such as Native Americans, Hawaiians, Eskimos). Consider such a metaphor. When things are melted together and stirred up, a new mixture emerges. In cooking, all elements melted into the mixture give flavor, texture, and color to the final product. In fact within this metaphor is the idea that all cultural heritages have an equal opportunity to influence the culture that emerges and also that what emerges is indeed a new product. Such an image implies Americans from all ethnic and racial backgrounds and heritage have equal access to and equal chances to succeed and thrive. Such a metaphor of cultural contact is an image of **accommodation**. In the 60's we came to recognize that the **melting pot** metaphor was probably an inaccurate account of acculturation and **assimilation** into the culture of the United States.

We realized that in the earlier history of the U.S., **immigrants** were almost forced to assimilate into the society whose cultural norms were mostly determined by the more dominant white middle-class Americans with northern European origins. The process, largely inconspicuous, whereby one culture establishes and maintains dominance over another in a larger society from generation to generation is called **hegemony**. As a result of cultural hegemony and in some cases **cultural tyranny**, immigrants to the United States were forced to assimilate to the new culture. When a person assimilates to a new culture, he or she gives up their past culture—this includes meaning systems (like language), social organization (extended kinship relationships) and production processes and products. The process of **assimilation** is considered subtractive in that it takes away and invalidates a person's cultural and linguistic heritage.

A newer metaphor, proposed as a description for the way in which cultures coexist in the larger U.S. society, is the metaphor of the **salad bowl**. In this metaphor, while ingredients from various cultures are mixed together, in the final product each ingredient maintains its unique and individual flavor, texture, and color. Even within this metaphor however is the assumption of uniformity of culture across the United States and a sense that all Americans can participate in the **salad bowl** equally without becoming something completely different from what they were originally. This metaphor is a metaphor of **acculturation**. By **acculturation**, we refer to immigration patterns in the United States whereby, new

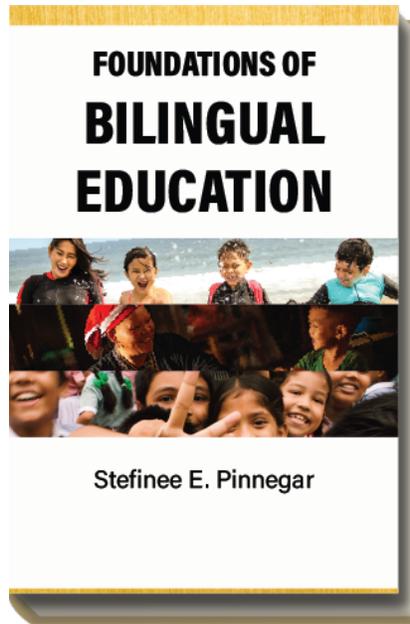
immigrants came to understand and respond to the society in culturally appropriate ways which included not just speaking the language but using it in culturally determined and appropriate ways both for social interaction and for expressing meaning.

With the increasing changes in demographics within the United States, this metaphor of the **salad bowl**, while providing insight into how diversity might operate in a culture, is not robust enough to account for how the U.S. as a society might need to respond to the **culturalpluralism** increasingly apparent in our society. **Culturalpluralism** is a term for cultural diversity which recognizes that within the United States there are numerous cultures which both shared and diverse ways of responding to the problems of life. One path to peaceful coexistence is the acceptance of the validity of the right of different cultural groups to respond according to their own meaning system.

From the perspective of the **salad bowl** metaphor students would co-exist in society, but would become incorporated into the culture through the process of **acculturation**. **Acculturation** refers to effective adaptation to the **mainstream culture**. This is an additive process where students learn how to respond in culturally appropriate ways in a culture other than their own, but also maintain their own cultural heritage. When the home culture of a student is relatively similar to the culture of the community they enter, there is high cultural congruence. When cultural congruence is high then the **acculturation** to a new culture usually becomes easier.

A final metaphor for accounting for the culture of the United States is the **Kaleidoscope**. In using a **Kaleidoscope**, each time the tube is moved the pieces fall together in new ways creating new and variant interactions and patterns which are aesthetically beautiful and satisfying. This metaphor asserts that the United States gets its character from its cultural diversity from the freedom to celebrate, honor, and reproduce different cultural traditions. Such a metaphor for culture could be said to represent an image of **cultural relativism**, where all cultures have equal value and it is inappropriate to judge the validity of cultural act from outside the cultural system that produced it. It could also be said to be an image of cultural **accommodation**, whereby members of the mainstream culture as well as the minority culture accept some change.

Whatever metaphor is used teachers have an obligation to support language minority students in learning not only how to speak the language but how to use the language in culturally appropriate ways. Supporting students' **acculturation** requires cultural sensitivity on the part of the teacher who must determine the aspects of student behavior and misinterpretation, which emerge from cultural rather than individual and personal differences and respond appropriately.



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