
Education for Cross-Cultural Communication

Through their Comparative Cultures course, teachers in a Vermont high school are helping free their students, and themselves, from the restraints of being "culture-bound."

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A few years ago, I was exploring the fascinating shops along Liulichang Street in Beijing when my ears detected the sound of crickets chirping. Having previously seen crickets in little bamboo cages for sale on the streets of Xining and Xi'an, I decided that a cricket cage would be a great transportable "artifact" to take back to my social studies classroom. I followed the sound of chirps to a small shop, offering a variety of interesting items for sale: rice cups, kites, jade-carved animals, and one loud cricket in a bamboo cage.

While I was attempting to communicate with the shopkeeper, using ridiculous gesturing, another Chinese gentleman in the shop asked, in perfect English, "Do you want to buy something?" As my interpreter communicated my wish, the shopkeeper's smile changed to sadness. He could not sell the cage because he had no other home for the cricket, his treasured pet, which he had bred and reared.

The photograph I took of the man and his cricket now reminds me not to make assumptions about the cross-cultural meanings of words. Dogs and cats are not pets in China; they are food. Crickets are pets, to be cherished as people in my culture do on their dogs and cats.

Miscommunication can breed misunderstanding. For another example, a few years earlier I was in Venice, touring St. Mark's Square. The orchestras were filling the air with beautiful music, and the pigeons were dive-bombing the crowds. I tried to enter the cathedral but was refused admittance because my arms were bare. I had purposefully worn a skirt, assuming that was proper dress for the occasion. What I had failed to grasp was that the underlying value supporting the dress code was modesty. Showing bare skin, whether on the arms or the legs, was immodest and therefore not allowed in a religious building.

Toward Cultural Understanding

The examples are endless, but the educational meaning of these stories is clear. In order for students to become competent, caring global citizens, we need to provide opportunities for them to become less *culture-bound* (Henry 1965). To be culture-bound is to define situations from the perspective of the norms of our own culture, assuming that our ways of interaction are universal.

The simplistic view of cross-cultural communication holds that if people from radically different cultural backgrounds interact, cultural understanding will automatically result. This is not true, unless other knowledge has been introduced before the encounters occur. In-depth studies of divergent cultures, with a focus on *pattern detecting*, is a good place to begin with students.

A Study of Cultures

For the past seven years, two colleagues and I at Champlain Valley Union High School, in Hinesburg, Vermont, have been teaching a Comparative Cultures course. Collaboration and experimentation have been integral parts of developing and teaching the course; this year we expanded our collaborative efforts to full team teaching. We convinced the administration to remove a wall between our classrooms and decorated our new double room with art and artifacts from cultures around the world. We replaced old furniture with small, round tables.

Cognizant of recent research on "dimensions of learning," we focus on keeping students engaged in the highly motivating processes of: inquiry, oral discourse, problem solving, decision making, and writing compositions as they pursue a deeper understanding of diverse cultures. Mindful of research on how the brain works, we know we must provide meaningful tasks for students. We enable students to learn from each other in cooperative groups, as well as in total class discussions.

They discuss and analyze case studies, stories, and other materials. They identify communication patterns, articulate role behavior of individuals and families at work and play, and perceive the connections between these and the culture's world view.

As students learn to use the anthropologists' conceptual tools, they become cultural pattern detectors. Given a wide variety of primary and secondary resources, print and multimedia, students draw inferences about social roles and norms, use of time and space, attitudes toward ethnicity, special linguistic features, and more. Not all activities are intellectually "heavy," however. We experiment with brush painting, mask-making, paper-cutting, and we sample the food and play games from around the world.

Other aspects of team teaching are of equal importance to us as educators. We believe that our human world needs more empathy, compassion, and commitment to collaborative efforts, if we are to survive. Team teaching provides students with models of cooperation and collaboration in action. It shows them that standards for respect extend beyond the one-teacher image, and that it is good for one person to build on another's ideas.

Throughout the course one of our main goals, though, is to teach students to become cultural pattern detectors. While studying China, for example, we ask students to ponder such questions as: What belief systems, ethical traditions, values, and patterns of thinking are embedded in the Chinese culture, forming their unique view of the world? What cultural patterns of expectations, rules, and regulations pervade their daily interactions? What cultural clues give people guidance about how to behave in varied situations?

These are some of the *big* questions

that can provide a framework for guiding investigations of smaller sets of actions. A belief system embedded in the Chinese culture can be seen in the following example. In China, it is considered an insult to tip shopkeepers. The deeply rooted Confucian ethical principles of accepting and carrying out one's duties (based on one's status) prescribe avoidance of special treatment as an individual. Being singled out as a shopkeeper and receiving a reward for doing one's duty is a source of public shame. Chinese culture gives special meaning to the word *shame*, which is a primary method of social control. Being publicly shamed causes one to "lose face," to be exposed as unethical. It is to be avoided at all costs.

In teaching our students about diverse cultures, such as, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East, we stress that cultural relativism, in the sense of accepting as "good" any and

all cultural patterns, is to be avoided. Female infanticide is not "good." Neither is any form of slavery. Students need to grapple with ethical questions concerning humaneness as they expand their understanding of what it means to be human. Sources that can guide the thinking process include the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights (Downing and Kusher 1988) and publications by such organizations as Cultural Survival, American Ethnological Society, and Minority Rights Group.¹

To keep pace with our students, who over the years, have grown more sophisticated as cultural pattern detectors, we've had to make substantial changes in our materials and methods. We are using Edward T. Hall's conceptions of cultural patterns as common culturally determined ways of behaving in a given society. One critical learning activity focuses on Hall's notions regarding cultural context (see box).

Clues to Culture

One way of comparing cultures around the world is to analyze them in terms of how many clues the culture provides about how people should relate to one another and live their lives. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall discovered that almost all cultures fell into one of two categories: high context (providing lots of cultural clues) or low context (providing few cultural clues).

For example, think about how people greet one another. The method of greeting will vary from one culture to another; whether one gives a handshake, bows, or kisses the other person on both cheeks is

culturally determined.

Surrounding the simple act of greeting, however, are many other behaviors, including cultural beliefs and values, language usage, and social norms. The depth of a bow as a greeting in Japan will vary according to the difference in prestige of the two people engaged in the greeting. Japanese has six forms of the word *you*. Only one form is used between equals; the other forms are each reserved for communicating higher or lower status as well as recognizing sex differences. Before strangers can greet in Japan, each must discover the other's position related to himself or herself in order

As a final project for their in-depth studies, our current students select a culture of their choice not studied in the course and apply their pattern-detecting skills to investigate it. Sorting through information, they search for significant patterns of world view, communication, social roles and norms, work and leisure, and ethnicity. In the process, they find evidence of continuity amidst change and current problems and conflicts. After organizing their findings, they present them to the class. They then share their learning with the whole school in a one-day International Festival.

Freedom from Boundaries

Cultural understanding does not automatically result when people from different environments interact. To communicate effectively and build bridges of appreciation and mutual respect, individuals must bring to the encounters cultural pattern-detecting

to know how to bow and what to say.

Contrast this with a greeting in the United States. *You is you* in American English. The right hand is extended, followed by "Hello, how are you?" There are subcultural variations, of course, but most of the time American greetings are not surrounded by many other rules and clues. American greetings thus place the U.S. culture on the side of being a "low context" culture, whereas the Japanese greeting patterns are high context ones.

As Hall examined his high and low context cultures, separated on the basis of extensive or sparse "clues," he discovered that cultures that fell into each category share some other patterns as well. High context cultures, with lots of formal rules,

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skills. Teachers can do much to help their students break the bonds of their culture-boundness, enabling them to become multicultural people. Perhaps they, or the students who come after them, can even shed their ethnocentric biases entirely and appreciate and

tend to be more past-oriented and slower to change than those that fall in the low context category. In the high context cultures, people are more highly involved with one another on a personal basis, relying more on extra-linguistic forms of communication than on language. They tend to stand close when conversing, and to have a relaxed sense of time. Low context people, by contrast, are more impersonal and language-oriented in their interactions; they focus on being punctual, not wasting time, clock-watching, and other time-conscious behaviors. (In the very low context Swiss culture, signs at railroad stations tell train passengers how many minutes to the next station instead of miles or kilometers.)

value honored, culturally distinct differences. □

¹For multicultural resources, write to: Cultural Survival, 11 Divinity Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138; American Ethnological Society, 1703 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009; Minority Rights Group, 29 Craven St., London WC2N 5N5, England.

References

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Since cultural patterns (like other forms of human behavior) are complex and dynamic, Hall's analysis does not provide a clear-cut separation of all the world's cultures into a high or low context box. Many cultures will show some features of both types.

Using ideas connected with cultural context provides one insightful way for understanding cultural differences. As with most comparative data it must be remembered that no value judgment is attached to features of Hall's classification system. Hall's concept of context is nothing more than an anthropological tool for increasing understanding of cultural differences.

—Martha Ozturk

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