

# Cultural Diversity in Education: Deciphering the Code or “Where’s the Beef?”

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I trust the title of this paper has spurred your interest and curiosity. The role of “teacher” is to stimulate thinking and question the status quo. In this article, I’d like to explore a topic that has received widespread attention and caused me great thought.

Recognizing and responding to each student as an individual is critical to the teaching/learning process. Unfortunately, education is quick to grasp and apply terms and educational jargon without carefully understanding their meaning and significance. Specifically, I am concerned with the use of the term “cultural:” cultural diversity and multi-cultural education as examples. We must be careful of our meaning to assure that we are not camouflaging emotionally charged terms such as “race” with the more politically correct use of “culture.” Let me explain.

Brislin sees culture as consisting of “ideals, values and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behaviors.”<sup>i</sup> Aldridge adds greater dimension. “We learn cultural codes for social life, role expectations, common definitions of situations, and social norms in order to provide predictability and survival of the human species.”<sup>ii</sup> Further, according to Hofstede “culture is to human collectivity what personality is to the individual.”<sup>iii</sup>

Does culture stem from nature or nurture? Pilar Ossorio, a legal scholar and microbiologist states:

“We can’t find any genetic markers that are in everybody of a particular race and in nobody of some other race. We can’t define any genetic markers that define race.”

That is not to say that genes are not important in determining who we are. But these genes are not “racial.” Further, Ossorio continues:

“What make us different are both genetic differences that we have between us and also the interaction of the genome with the environment, and the environment is a very, very complicated thing...everything from the environment in the womb to the environment in your school.”<sup>iv</sup>

And that environment also includes family, neighborhood, community/church/region, state and country. In addition, the latest DNA studies suggest the importance of DNA determinants and the very, very small

difference in DNA between racial groups. And does that less than 0.1% difference account for cultural characteristics; a point interesting to ponder?

At February's meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Martha Farah, Director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Pennsylvania reported: "the new results from neuroscience indicate that experience...has a strong effect on the way the brain works. It's not a case of bad genes."<sup>v</sup>

So what is "our environment," as found in the nurture side of the equation? Since we are reared in different families, communities and regions, is there a common thread that joins us; what might be called our "American culture?" And if so, what is our "American Culture" - no easy task to define. J. North Conway in *American Literacy: Fifty Books that Define Our Culture and Ourselves*, identifies 50 published works that help to define the American culture.<sup>vi</sup>

Steve Aloia, Professor of Education at Cal State, helps us as he outlines five basic standards that define our American culture as extensions of our heritage:

- A culture of freedom and liberty
- A culture defined by the principles of universal suffrage
- A participatory democracy
- A culture defined by rights, and lastly
- "*We are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*"<sup>vii</sup>

Under this overview of American culture, one must look to the more specific components which makeup and define our "popular culture." That is, our specific ways of acting, our roles, and our social norms; another difficult task.

Carlson and Vichcales, in attempting to look deeper into popular culture, find that "suggesting that someone define 'popular culture' is like asking a fish to explain water."<sup>viii</sup> Michael Lind feels that "the common (American) culture is not merely a combination of different racial and ethnic cultures, but a 'smearing' of them into one masterpiece, in which their original states can no longer be recognized."<sup>ix</sup> While culture consists of many components "language is (its) symbolic glue..."<sup>x</sup>

While we will agree that English is still a common language which bonds us, though Spanish is pushing hard, we also must admit that a “common” English may be hard to find. Observe a Maine down easterner speaking with a southern Texan....a true Bronx native talking with a Louisiana Creole.

Noted anthropologist and expert in kinesics and nonverbal communication Ray L. Birdswhistell<sup>xi</sup> found that verbal language (as opposed to non-verbal communication) makes up 35 % of our communication. Yet language meaning varies greatly by country and region. Don't confuse bonnet and boot as clothing items in England; they refer to parts of the car.<sup>xii</sup> Nor should a North American confuse a British counterpart with a description of work "on the job," as it conveys a sexual rather than a workplace connotation. And that does not take into account regional American differences. Maine's "italian sandwich" becomes a "grinder" further south; a "poor boy" ("po'boy") yet still further south, and a "cuban" in Florida; not to mention the "subs", "torpedoes," "hoagies" and "heroes" in other regions.<sup>xiii</sup>

If we realize that we are still only focusing on 35% of our communication, the differences become even more apparent. Watch the hands of an Italian New Yorker and the facial expressions of a Native American in the Southwest; or the stance of a Montana rancher and a Southern Belle; or a Louisianan doctor and a lumberjack of the "north country."

At any point in time, each of us is a bearer of a variety of changing cultures; each of us is different. Perhaps Aloia has a point when he finds 'multicultural' as the "politically correct lexicon of the day."<sup>xiv</sup> Let us refocus to a classroom of **learning diversity** and **multi-learning environments**.

When I shared a draft of this paper with my Department Chair, she reminded me of an important point. As teachers, we must both create and model a classroom climate of respect, respect and respect. Not always easy, but essential. The base of any classroom is our respect, one for the other. We must both respect and honor our differences. And we are all different – just look around. No two faces are the same nor are our learning styles.

In the classroom, that takes on an additional focus. While, as educators, we must address each student as an individual, I prefer to see individual students from a Constructivism perspective (both Piaget's cognitive and Vygotsky's social) with differing learning styles. In a classroom of 30 individuals, there are 30 different (though perhaps similar) styles of learning. It's time to make a major substitution of vocabulary and direction, as we examine **learning diversity** and **multi-learning environments**.

While there are a variety of concepts defining learning (and teaching) styles, I find many to be overly complex and confusing. For many years, I have relied on the collective research and mega study of doctors Rita and Kenneth Dunn<sup>xv</sup> as they define learning styles in a variety of areas:

- Environmental
- Emotional
- Sociological
- Physical
- Psychological

They focus on 21 “elements,” each with a wide range of difference. They look at the very important areas of perception (some students are visual learners, while others are auditory) and individual vs. group or cooperative learning; and to less important areas such as persistence and hemisphericity.

They look at easy areas to address such as structure (desk and room arrangement) and intake (some students learn better when chewing) and to more challenging areas such as sound and motivation. They consider areas where the teacher has control such as impulsive v. reflexive learners, global vs. analytical learners and lighting preferences to areas with little control such as time of day, mobility, classroom temperature and outside noise.

What we have learned from this is that no two students have an identical learning style, just as no two students have the same appearance. While there are many commonalities, areas at which the teacher must direct his/her efforts, there are also areas of significant difference, requiring individual adaptation. Some areas are critical and can not be ignored, while others are less important and can be given a lower priority. Add to that Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences and the challenge becomes even greater.

Compounding this is the fact that, as human being (yes, teachers are human too) we also have a specific learning style which we translate into a classroom teaching style. I am an auditory learner – I tend to talk a lot in class. In fact, I have to make a special effort to assure that I have visual materials for the student who is a visual learner.

Consequently, in addition to understanding and responding to learning styles, we must understand our own individual styles and how they translate into teaching practices. The important point

we can take from all of this is that, regardless of race, social class, ethnicity, gender, or color of hair – every student has an individual learning style that requires an appropriate teaching focus.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Aldridge, M. Gene, (1997) *Lectures on Intercultural Communication*, Troy State University, Troy, AL..
- <sup>iii</sup> Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences n work-related values*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications. P. 21.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Race – The Power of an Illusion*. Retrieved January 25, 2008 from <http://www.newsreel.org/transcripts/race1.htm>
- <sup>v</sup> Monastersky, R., (2008). Researchers Gain Understanding of How Poverty Alters the Brain. *The Chronicle of Higher Education: Today's News*, February 18.
- <sup>vi</sup> Conway, J. North. (1993). *American Literacy: Fifty Books that Define Our Culture and Ourselves*. New York: William Morrow & Company.
- <sup>vii</sup> Steve Aloia, Professor of Education at Cal State Fullerton, in *North County Times*, November 14, 2006.
- <sup>viii</sup> Lewis H. Carlson and Kevin B. Vichcales, eds. (1996). *American Popular Culture at Home and Abroad*. Kalamazoo: New Issues Press.
- <sup>ix</sup> *The American Culture*. Retrieved February 19, 2008 from <http://www.msu.edu/course/mc/202/Lind/cultures.html>
- <sup>x</sup> Aldridge, M. Gene, (1997) *Lectures on Intercultural Communication*, Troy State University, Troy, AL.
- <sup>xi</sup> Knapp, M. (1972). *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. Reinhart and Winston, Inc., New York.
- <sup>xii</sup> [http://english2american.com/dictionary/cat\\_theroad.html](http://english2american.com/dictionary/cat_theroad.html)
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Dictionary of American Regional English*, Harvard University Press.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Op. cit.
- <sup>xv</sup> See <http://www.geocities.com/~educationplace/ls.html>
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