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ABSTRACT

Two common tendencies that lead many mainstream students to misinterpret other cultures are the combative response and the exoticizing response. These misinterpretations, however, can be excellent learning moments for helping students understand the constructed nature of culture and the contextual nature of learning. Transformational multicultural education is for everyone because everyone benefits from understanding other ways of constructing the world. Literature studies can help instructors learn about the cultures they are teaching about because creative literature is one of the prime sources of recorded cultural knowledge. Here are some examples of applying theories of cultural perception to available literature in ways that can help students understand the importance of cultural contexts: (1) Isabel Allende's "Walimai," in which it is easy to get students to pick out differences between Walimai's culture and their own, but where they can also see the sense in the things Walimai believes and does; (2) the plot of Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" hinges on the extreme difference between male-female relations in Creole versus mainstream society; (3) Chinua Achebe's "Vengeful Creditor" helps students to see class conflict rather than race conflict, since the oppressors and oppressed are all native Nigerians; and (4) Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Left Hand of Darkness" has often been taught with an eye toward the way it interrogates gender roles. Cites 4 works. (Author/NKA)

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"Asking the Right Questions: Helping Mainstream Students Understand Other Cultures"

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Abstract: Two common tendencies that lead many mainstream students to misinterpret other cultures are the combative response and the exoticizing response; however, these misinterpretations can be excellent learning moments for helping students understand the constructed nature of culture and the contextual nature of meaning.

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"Asking the Right Questions: Helping Mainstream Students Understand Other Cultures"

Helping mainstream students understand and appreciate other cultures requires a transformational approach to the curriculum rather than a celebratory or additive approach. Students must understand other cultures--and the very idea of the cultural construction of knowledge and experience--rather than just tasting some things that are different and confusing or at best vaguely interesting. Transformational multicultural education is for everyone because everyone benefits from understanding other ways of constructing the world (Banks 18, 25). Indeed, nothing is more instructive about the nature of our own reality constructions than the critiques offered by the very different realities of others.

One of the most important things to remember about a multicultural transformation of the curriculum is that there is no substitute for cultural knowledge. Instructors must learn about the cultures they are teaching about. No universal idea about humanity can substitute for cultural knowledge and understanding. Literature studies are at an advantage in this endeavor because creative literature (poetry, drama, fiction, essays, and so on) is one of the prime sources of recorded cultural knowledge. It can be tapped to discover a culture, and no culture can be properly understood without an understanding of its literature, written and oral. But here is where so-called "universal" ideas can play a role. Universal questions are generalized, without the context of culture or specific

situations, submerging all the contextual details. They serve as points of reference, guideposts from which we start to grasp what specific questions a culture asks. And it is in these questions and the assumptions they reveal that we find the semantic tension that defines cultural meanings, rather than in any answers anyone might give to them.

In any field of study the questions are always more important than the answers. The job of the scholar is to discern the right questions to ask, of the teacher to help students learn how to ask the right questions. Students need practice asking questions, especially about culture and meaning. Some of the general questions asked and answered by cultures are:

Cosmology: How does society / the world / the universe work? This covers everything from astrophysics to politics and table manners.

Ontology: What is being? Most importantly for humanistic studies--What does it mean to be a human being? (A man? A woman? A child?)

Epistemology: What do you know? How do you know that you know it? What is knowledge / truth? What rules govern the production of knowledge? the adjudication of truth?

Axiology: What is right and wrong? Ethical? Moral? Divine? Demonic? How is that decided?

The problem, of course, is getting students from these generalities to the specific questions a culture asks. Why is this difficult? Because students' natural tendency is to fill

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in the gaps, interpreting these questions within their own cultural framework and experience. Here is an example.

A mountain is discovered full of copper or gold or other precious mineral and the discovery is hotly debated by the two extremes: the communists say the nation owns the mountain and a cooperative state enterprise should mine it and distribute the wealth equally throughout the society; the capitalists say, no, let the free market decided who will mine and how wealth will be distributed. But are these really two extremes? Only in answering these questions: How should the mountain be mined? How should the wealth be distributed? But the very asking of these questions precludes the asking of others, such as: How does this knowledge alter the Mountain's spiritual value? or maybe, What scientific knowledge can be gained by studying this vein of ore *in sitio*? Our specific questions reveal our assumptions, and that is cultural reality, those unspoken assumptions on which everything rests. Those who cling to static and neutral models of knowledge are merely refusing to examine their underlying assumptions, refusing to admit that they even exist (Douglas, "Grid/Group" 2). So, how do we break students out of their cultural perspective long enough to take a honest and awesome view of other cultures?

It helps to take into account the natural bias in the perceiver's culture. This is using the anthropologist Mary Douglas's term "bias", meaning the spin that a given culture tends to put on things. Briefly, social cosmologies (or differing cultural perspectives) can be classified along two

lines of tension, 'Grid' and 'Group'. 'Group' describes how much one depends on group affiliation and how easy it is to change group affiliation. Our society is decidedly Low Group, since the things we need may be had from many sources and group affiliations are easy to change. 'Grid' defines the extent to which social interactions are pre-decided by custom and hierarchy (High Grid), or negotiated on the moment by (at least nominally) equal participants (Low Grid). Our society is also decidedly Low Grid. However, these natural tensions in social cosmology keep it fluid, an ongoing negotiation involving human choice on the personal level. What defines cosmology is not necessarily what occurs in social transactions but how transactions are defined and interpreted by the participants. (Douglas, Cultural 5-8)

In a Low Grid / Low Group society such as ours, the typical stance toward the world and everyone in it is essentially competitive. Since in Low Grid all truth or knowledge is potentially negotiable by argument, the typical stance, the typical cosmological sparing, takes this deep form: "My take on the things is authentic even enlightened, while yours is unsophisticated, dishonest, inaccurate. I'm a sage, and you're a dupe and/or a shyster". This is an extreme way to express it; the communication is usually much more subtle. For example, by common consent the young choose definitions of "cool" and "square" (or whatever words are used today) and laugh at older people. Youth fads and rebellions rarely truly rebel against our Low Grid cosmological order to which the young are merely

responding more directly because more naively. Low Grid demands innovation but no time to think about it (Douglas, Cultural 28). The biggest lack in Low Grid is true humility -- for this is dangerous to show in a highly competitive society. That is why your teenage students already know everything! In Low Grid everyone must seem to know it all; this can make learning and teaching difficult to say the least. Note the combative, deal-making attitude of many students today, now that education is not the isolated hierarchies that it used to be. In Low Grid there is no built-in respect; one must earn it or pay for it every time.

So, what do these tensions do to student responses to culturally foreign texts? Cosmological forces in the fast paced, competitive life of Low Grid drive most people to one interpretive extreme or another, depending on one's perceived success, or lack of it, in the social competition. Those who perceive themselves as unable to compete, not successful, must either internalize a label of inferiority or explain how the playing field is uneven and the rules slanted against them (Douglas, Cultural 35-6). This is fertile ground for many varieties of xenophobia. Outsiders are seen as competition--probably unfair competition--to be stereotyped as inferiors and dismissed, maybe even assaulted. However those who perceive themselves as successful will likely see other groups and things foreign as essentially good, but for superficial and selfish reasons: they are new territory, new markets, new sources of ideas and goods, the question always being how interactions with

others might enhance one's own standing in the social / economic competition (Douglas, Cultural 21). This is fertile ground for a softer but perhaps all the more dangerous stereotyping--the mire of exoticism. Look for the students in love with all things strange and esoteric, especially anything mystical. Again, this counterculture *m. o.* is actually a typical Low Grid response. Secret knowledge from crystals to exotic cults ironically conforms to the standard stance: "my take on reality is more enlightened than thine--so watch out!"

Both of these typical misinterpretations, combative and exoticizing, are naive assumptions based on an epistemology that is too idealized, too static. The one, combative, says that knowledge and perception are transparent (or obvious), which is another way of claiming a privileged status for one's own cultural perspective by refusing to examine underlying assumptions or even admit their existence. Yet the other mistake, exoticizing, also decontextualizes cultural encounters, reducing meanings to the naive responses of the outsider in a way that covertly justifies the perceiver's cultural view. For example: Is the Sun Stone of Tenochtitlan (the Aztec calendar) an exotic, beautiful design, or is it a beautiful, intricate calendar? Though a surface response to its beauty is not difficult to find, the true beauty of it cannot be had superficially. The problem, of course, is that both shallow responses focus on the answers rather than the questions. What best helps students making either mistake to grow to a greater awareness of others and themselves is to demonstrate that

knowledge is a constructed thing, dynamic and contextual, rather than static and neutral *ala* E. D. Hirsch. To quote Banks:

> Hirsch recommends transmitting knowledge in a largely uncritical way. When we help students to attain knowledge, we should help them to recognize that knowledge reflects the social context in which it is created and that it has normative and value assumptions. (Banks 24)

Early 20th century anthropologists and sociologists focused on similarities, the common heritage of "man". The ubiquitous use of the term "man" in the rhetoric of these theories shows up the danger in their reductionist tendencies, for this usage is ethnocentric as well as sexist, a bizarre exclusion by inclusion for so many who are thus thrust beneath its rubric. Late 20th century theorists, such as Douglas and Geertz, focus of differences because what is universal is by definition reductionist, and ultimately hollow, just the vibrations on which we hang our realities. Meaning arises from experience, from contexts. A good example from within our own culture is professional contexts: We allow doctors to do things to us that we would never allow anyone else to do; indeed, some things common to medical practice if put into other contexts would be considered serious crimes and violations of our persons.

The idea of common sense is another example of what seems universal but is actually culturally constructed. Is it common sense to come out of the rain? That depends if you live in a swamp or a desert. In a swamp people know that it is common

sense to get out of the rain and stay dry, but in the desert common sense sends the children out to play in the rain and the old people to sit on the porch. Indeed, there is nothing common or matter-of-fact about the thing we call "common sense." Geertz argues that common sense "is as much an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss on them, as are myth, painting, epistemology" and therefore is "historically constructed" and "subjected to historically defined standards of judgment" (76).

> In short, given the given, not everything else follows. Common sense is not what the mind cleared of cant spontaneously apprehends; it is what the mind filled with presuppositions . . . concludes. (Geertz 84)

Physical pain is another example of how much context matters. For example, someone might choose body piercing and suffer through the sting of it in order to get a nose-ring, but it would be a very different reality if that same physical damage (a pierced nose) were caused by a stranger suddenly attacking the person with a needle. It would be yet another reality if the nose-piercing were part of a cultural system where it occurs as a traditional rite of passage. The similarities of these three hypothetical nose-piercings are greatly overshadowed by the incredible differences among the three experiences. We cannot divide experience and perception. Douglas concludes that "[a]nything whatsoever that is perceived

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at all must pass by perceptual controls," a process that is "largely cultural" (Douglas "Grid/Group" 1).

Here are some examples of applying these theories of cultural perception to readily available pieces of literature in ways that can help students understand the importance of cultural contexts:

1) Isabel Allende's "Walimai" (from Stories of Eva Luna) is available in English, widely anthologized, and packed with good cultural twists sure to pique students' curiosity. It is easy to get students to pick out differences between Walimai's culture and their own, but they can also see the sense in the things Walimai believes and does. Near the end of the story Walimai kills a young Amerind woman who is enslaved as a prostitute in a rubber camp and then performs a ritual fast in the depths of the jungle to free her spirit. By our social rules he is a murderer, but it is easy for readers to see his deed as heroic according to the worldview presented in the story.

2) The plot of Kate Chopin's The Awakening hinges on the extreme difference between male - female relations in Creole versus mainstream society. Many students misinterpret Robert's flirtatious nature and Mr. Pontellier's lack of concern about his wife's friendship with him. The combative response usually runs something like this: "Those Creoles are stupid! Why would any man be so dumb to let his wife play footsies with a flirtatious, younger man?" The exoticizing response often follows this direction: "Hey those Creoles are enlightened!

They all seem to have open marriages and believe in free love!" Both responses miss the point. Such flirtatious relationships are entirely permissible in Creole society, but it is understood that these 'romances' are only a game. Madame Ratignolle says to Robert:

> "Nonsense! I'm in earnest; I mean what I say. Let Mrs. Pontellier alone."
>
> "Why?" he asked; himself growing serious at his companion's solicitation.
>
> "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously." (Chopin 19)

Edna does make this blunder, which leads to her enlightenment but also to her self-destruction.

3) Chinua Achebe's "Vengeful Creditor" (from Girls at War and Other Stories but also widely anthologized) helps students to see class conflict rather than race conflict, since the oppressors and oppressed are all native Nigerians. This distinction, then, can be transferred to American texts (and issues) where class issues often get mistakenly described as a race issues. This story also offers a critique of European leftist ideologies by showing how the marked pluralism of Igbo culture refuses and critiques Marxism. The story overtly attacks elitist corruption and materialism run amuck and waves the threat of violent rebellion by the poor, but it also implies a critique of Marxism, which runs counter to the pluralism of Igbo cosmology, the real social threat being not of organized,

communist revolution, but rather the violence of social factionalizing as those cut out of the Low Grid social competition are pushed up Group.

4) Ursula K. Le Guin's social-science fiction novel The Left Hand of Darkness has often been taught with an eye toward the way it interrogates gender roles. It also offers a striking introduction to the difficulty of intercultural communication without understanding cultural contexts. Much of the plot hinges on Genly Ai's failure to understand the implied social contexts and resulting political motivations of the various Gethenians he encounters. Indeed, the plot carefully demonstrates the wisdom that the Handdara monks in the story quietly show forth:

> "Faxe, I don't think I understand."
>
> "Well, we come here to the Fastnesses mostly to learn what questions not to ask."
>
> "But you're the Answerers!"
>
> "You don't see yet, Genry, why we perfected and practice Foretelling?"
>
> "No--"
>
> "To exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question." (Le Guin 70)

The questions are always more important than the answers!

We need to teach multicultural literature to mainstream students, not so that they can taste a little of everything, nor to appeal to some sense of fair play; we need to teach them these other literatures because they are relevant to their lives

and, most importantly, because mainstream students, perhaps more than any others, need help seeing that perception is not matter-of-fact, that knowledge is a constructed and dynamic thing, and that meaning arises from implied contexts. Combative and exoticizing responses to culturally foreign texts are common mistakes, and both come from a failure to understand the cultural contexts involved. However, these very mistakes create the best learning moments for demonstrating to students the constructed nature of culture and the contextual nature of meaning.

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