

# **Cultural Orientation, Cross-Cultural Communication, and Responsive Pedagogy: Considerations for Inclusive Classrooms in Adult Education**

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***Abstract:** In this paper, we explore the relationship between cultural orientation, cross-cultural communication and culturally-responsive pedagogy in university classrooms. Due to the rise of foreign-born learners and citizens of color in higher education institutions, educators should consider the dynamics of individualist and collectivist orientations and how they influence classroom communication. Drawing from the literature and our own practice, we explore ways to make the classroom more welcoming for students of nonwestern social and educational traditions.*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interconnection between cultural orientation, cross-cultural communication and culturally-responsive pedagogy in promoting inclusive classrooms in adult education. Recognizing the increase in the foreign born learners as well as the increase of citizens of color in higher education institutions, there is an increasing need for educators to pay attention to the dynamics of cultural orientation and communication and their influence the classroom climate. Although some practitioners prescribe culturally-relevant pedagogy as an approach (Guy, 1999; Roberson, 2002) to making teaching and learning more relevant to people of color, there is a limited amount of data to inform practices in higher education institutions. Moreover, the models that guide instructions are generally based upon Eurocentric cultural values and ideals despite the fact the adult learners are drawn from both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Drawing from the literature and from our own practice, we explore ways by which we can make the classroom environment more inviting for students whose worldviews, practices, and learning have been informed by nonwestern traditions. We begin with a review of the literature on the characteristics of individualistic and collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1984), explore how communication is influenced by one's cultural orientations (Storti, 1999), and using sociocultural theory as a guiding framework (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978 ), present some strategies for building a more inclusive classroom culture.

## **Individualism and Collectivism – Considerations for Teaching and Learning**

A number of writers have compared western and non-western knowledge systems, citing stark differences in how knowledge is perceived, how it is created, and how the knowledge is utilized (Merriam & Kim, 2008; Nah, 1999). As Merriam and Kim note, “The notion that knowledge itself is fundamentally different in western and non-western systems leads to a difference in how knowledge is constructed, how people “learn,” and the best way to instruct, that is, enable people to learn what they need to know” (p. 73). Western systems have been theorized to demonstrate an individualistic orientation and non-western systems, a collectivist orientation (Hofstede, 1984).

An individualistic culture assumes that individuals are concerned about their own needs, interests, or those of their immediate family members (Greenfield, 1994; Hofstede, 1984). According to Greenfield, individualism promotes independence and holds that an individual should be an independent thinker and that the individual's thoughts should guide actions that benefit the individual and promotes self-recognition. A collectivist culture, on the other hand, assumes individuals belong to “in groups” (family, tribes, organization) and these groups protect

individuals' interests while expecting more loyalty from them (Hofstede, 1984). Collectivism promotes interdependence and places the welfare of the group before that of individual members, suggesting that the cooperation of the group is essential for group survival. From that perspective, "learning is the responsibility of all members of the community because it is through this learning that the community itself develops" (Merriam & Kim, 2008, p. 73). This argument is not to suggest that people from collectivist cultures may not have individualistic tendencies, but the evidence suggests they are more likely to have a collectivistic orientation to learning.

These contrasting orientations have significant implications for behavior and performance in the classroom. Research in the scholarship of teaching and learning has found one's personal orientation to individualism or collectivism may influence various classroom behaviors, such as asking questions (Fassinger, 1995), remaining silent in the classroom (Alfred, 2003; Lee & Sheared, 2002; Wan, 2001), the reluctance to draw attention to oneself (Lee & Sheared, 2002; Wan, 2001), and that students with a collectivist orientation may be less involved and perform poorer in large lecture classes (VonDras, 2005). VonDras conducted a study of the influence of individualism and collectivism on 103 students enrolled in a lifespan development class and reported the following findings:

"Students expressing a collectivist orientation experienced greater problems with learning barriers as a result of learning styles. Further as expected, students with a greater collectivist orientation perceived themselves to be poorer students, having less control and less likely to overcome learning barriers and succeed in attaining the educational goal they had set for the course. In general, these results suggest that students' personal orientation of individualism or collectivism may influence social cognitions and behaviors that support academic achievement". (p. 4)

The findings from that study suggest an understanding of the personal characteristics of students from various cultural orientations is an important pedagogical consideration in the planning and delivering of education programs for adults. Of equal importance is an understanding of the ways in which cultural orientation influence communication and the dynamics of interaction across cultural groups.

### **Current Demography and the Need for Cross-Cultural Communication**

Census 2000 data indicate a growing diversity in the US population. The Non-Hispanic population consisted of 75% Whites, 12.3% Black or African American, 3.6% Asian, 0.9% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, 5.5% some other race (for example, Moroccan, South African, Belizean), and 2.4% claiming two or more races. Moreover, the Hispanic population was at 12.5% with non-Hispanics at 87.5% (Grieco & Cassidy, 2000). In addition, ethnic minorities make up 85% of immigrants to the US. These data paint the portrait of a nation that is very diverse in cultural orientation and ways of knowing and being. Such differences in orientation have implications for communication across cultures, between student and teacher, and student and peers. For example, Park and Kim (2008) suggests that many collectivist learners tend to prefer indirect communication over direct communication. Direct communicators say explicitly what they mean, and value honesty above the relationships (Storti, 1999). They also tend to be individualists (Storti, 1999). Storti notes that in indirect communication, the speakers do not always say exactly what they mean, are more likely to imply what they mean and may even say yes when they mean no. The reasoning behind indirect speech is that the collectivist speaker is constantly aware of the relationship to the person with or about whom he or she is referring and the power position that individual holds. Because the collectivist's identity is wrapped up in the welfare of the group, harmony is valued over truth.

The degree to which one values the importance of saving face will usually determine the learner's degree of directness of speech. Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) defines face as a "claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him. It is a vulnerable identity-based resource because it can be enhanced or threatened in any uncertain social situation" (p. 187). Because individualists are usually direct speakers, they do not give great importance to preserving their face or that of others and believe that getting or receiving information efficiently is the primary goal of communication (Storti, 1999). For collectivists, preserving harmony and saving face are of upmost importance even at the cost of truth. Moreover, it is not appropriate to have conflicting views or even disagree because it would go against maintaining the harmony of the relationship, which is the goal of communication (Storti, 1999).

How do all of these cultural values play out in the classroom? Since individualist teachers promote independence and self-expression, the methods that they may use to engage their students in learning will be influenced by these values. For example, a professor's individualist interpretation of self-directed learning can be problematic for collectivist students who favor group work and collaborative learning. Given the range of differences in cultural orientation among racioethnic groups, educators are left with the challenge of creating learning environments that would give space and voice to the worldviews and experiences of group members. As a start, educators need to move beyond the cognitive models of teaching and learning to a more integrative or sociocultural approach that would allow for the diversity of cultures, orientations, and experiences in the learning environment.

### **Sociocultural Theory and Culturally Responsive Education**

According to John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), "Sociocultural approaches are based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbolic systems, and can be understood when investigated in their historical development" (p. 191). This suggests that one's approach to learning is culturally and historically based and must be understood within these contexts. Since immigrant adults bring their histories, cultures, and early socialization experiences to the learning environment, the sociocultural approach provides a lens through which we can understand behaviors and plan for more meaningful pedagogy.

Vygotsky's (1978) conceptualization of sociocultural theory stresses the interaction of the (a) social, (b) cultural-historical, and (c) individual factors as key to learning and human development. From the interpersonal or social perspective, Vygotsky emphasized the view that interactions with persons in the environment stimulate the developmental process and foster learning. Sociocultural theory extends Piaget's notion of cognitive learning to a more integrated perspective that involves learning in community with other learners (Schunk, 2004). Therefore, when planning programs for learners from nonwestern traditions, an important consideration is to provide opportunities for them to interact with other community members, within a supportive environment, where each student can capitalize on the learning histories and cultural capital of one another.

Like Vygotsky, Rogoff (1995) sees the sociocultural context of adult learning as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environmental contexts within which the learning takes place. Moreover, she argues that a complete account of learning and development must consider the interactions among the personal, interpersonal, and community dimensions of the lifeworld. The *personal* dimension involves individual cognition, emotion, behavior, and beliefs. At this level, the unit of analysis is the individual's psychological and cognitive characteristics, as well as self-efficacy beliefs. The *interpersonal* or social dimension includes communication, role performances, dialogue, cooperation, conflict, relationships, for example.

The interpersonal plane reveals the individual's ability to successfully interact with others in various social and cultural environments. The *community* or institutional plane involves shared histories, languages, rules, values, beliefs, and identities. An individual may belong to several communities, each with its own rules, histories, and cultural practices (Rogoff, 1995). The three dimensions that Rogoff proposes—individual, interpersonal, and community—similar to Vygotsky's individual, social, cultural-historical factors, are not separate, sequential, or hierarchical, but, rather, interactive and somewhat fluid. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the interdependence of these three dimensions.

However, we must be mindful that a learning community in which the majority are members of a dominant group will take on the values and mores of that group and regard them as the ideal for which all should aspire. As a result, values and practices that do not mirror those of the majority are often viewed as deviant or insignificant. The fact that Eurocentric values and ways of knowing are perceived as superior to that of non-western cultures is due to the power of the white dominant culture and not to the superiority of the values themselves (Alfred, 2003), and educators must manifest this knowledge in their teaching. The question, then, becomes how should educators design instruction to allow for diversity of values and experiences inherent in today's multicultural classroom?

### **Instructional Design for Inclusive Learning Communities**

Those who design and deliver instructions for adult learners must be mindful of the words of Guy (1999) who posits that discussions among learners are always in relation to a particular community that holds significance and relevance for the learner. Whether that community is bounded by language, culture, geography, or history, the learner sees himself or herself as a member of a community that shares important attributes. Guy further emphasized, "Educators should find ways to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their learners and to discover learners' webs of significance. Cultural self-awareness, cultural knowledge about learners, and instructional skills that are inclusive and empowering constitute the kind of knowledge and skills required for service to marginalized learners" (1999, p.16). To that end, program planners and educators must resist the notion of planning for a generic adult learner with universal characteristics, experiences, and ways of knowing. As Sparks (2002) cautions, planning programs that treat all learners the same may end up perpetuating the inequality that already exists. Therefore, using the tenets of sociocultural theory to guide instruction—individual characteristics, cultural orientation and history, and learning in community—can minimize alienation among ethnic minority groups.

Similar, using culturally relevant approaches demands that adult educators scrutinize their educational environment for communication styles, teaching methods, classroom standards and expectations, assessment criteria, and curriculum that could be unsuited with the learners' culture (Guy, 1999). In the past, educators were trained to view the adult learners as a homogenous group, and as a result, educators who instruct adults of diverse backgrounds are often unprepared to serve them. They either transform into culturally responsive educators or they enforce their biased values and dominant ideologies onto the learner (Amstutz, 1994).

One of the ways in which professors can promote cross cultural understanding is to learn their students and to help them learn about their own cultural identity. Researchers have documented that one of the first steps in being culturally responsive begins with examining how cultural belief systems influence the experiences of learners and teachers' beliefs about their students (Canniff, 2008; McCalman, 2007). In her article about critical reflection, Canniff (2008) explains how she used a class assignment on her student teachers' educational history to help them to understand how educational policies of the past impacted their families. She instructed

her pre-service teachers to reflect on how their families' social identity shaped the direction of their educational journeys. When they learned how certain laws in the past had benefited some students families and disadvantaged others, they came to realize that one's' social identity (race, gender, class, for example) played an important role in determining the quality of education and the level of education attained in the family. Another reason why critical reflection is vital to becoming culturally responsive is that it forces one to understand how positionality influences a person's social location as well as interpersonal relationships with members of diverse groups. Therefore, before educators can become culturally competent, they have to examine themselves and acknowledge their biases as well as their privileges (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Quezada & Romo, 2004) and work from that knowledge base.

Another way to spur meaningful dialogue is to use role-playing or simulations as a part of the learning experience. One of us is a cross cultural communication facilitator (China) and uses simulations often to get the participants engaged in cultural dialogue. A particular favorite to use is called the Albatross (Goshenour, 1993). In this simulation, the participants watch as a barefoot woman dressed in strange clothing enters the room following a shoe-clad strangely dressed male. The "Albatrossian" couple engages the audience in a ceremony that appears to be very demeaning to women. During the debriefing of the simulation, the participants are asked to discuss what they observed. Without fail, most of them will answer that they witnessed an oppressive society that mistreated women. Then, it is revealed that the fictional Albatrossians worship and revere women because they bring forth life. To the participants chagrin, they learned that they judged the behavior of what they witnessed through their own cultural values. The Albatross simulation helps the participants to see how easily they judge others based on their cultural values. It stirs much dialogue about how we see everything through our own cultural lens. This exercise has been successful because it helps the learners to see that they do not always understand what they see and that many people interpret the same event differently.

### **Conclusion**

Culturally relevant educators also need to be aware of how they teach. As the college student body grows more diverse, universities nationwide have experienced an increase of underserved minorities, first generation students, foreign students and older adults in undergraduate enrollment. With them come a variety of skills, experiences, languages, and ages that set them apart from the traditional college student. As teachers, the one-style-fits-all teaching strategy hinders the access to some student groups. Therefore, an understanding of the characteristics of these different groups will aid the instructor in planning more responsibly for learning to occur. In developing culturally responsive pedagogy for inclusive learning, adult educators are encouraged to rethink their practices (Guy, 1999). They are reminded to engage in a discourse of criticality(Brookfield, 2001) or sociocultural consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). They learn and reflect upon their "ethnic self"(Santoro, 2009), know the sociocultural histories and schooling of their learners, integrate nonwestern knowledge in the curriculum, acknowledge the cultural differences among diverse learners, de-emphasize assimilation in curricula and practices and foster inclusive learning communities.

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