Is it a Melting Pot, Salad, or Buffet?: Culture and its Impact on Teaching.

Jim Berger

The purpose of this paper is to explore various cultural components that impact the teaching/learning environment. I examine some of the literature that focuses on time, community, and power as cultural factors that impact learning. I explore other cultural factors surrounding the type of instructor, the role of aggression, and the nature of learning. I argue that learning is also influenced by how one perceives the nature of knowledge, how the role of learning is embedded in society, and the modes of learning used. Finally, I argue that some cultural values have a larger impact on smaller cultural values and that it is necessary to identify how those cultural values impact learning and to find ways to measure such impacts. As a result of this exploration, I propose to develop an instrument that measures each of these dimensions and circulate such an instrument among different communities and cultures to assess how various cultures impact the learning environment. The results of such an instrument would aid instructors in better understanding their classrooms and the various cultures that are represented and make adaptations to better suit the needs of the learners.

Introduction

Teaching, while often carried out in a structured environment, is flush with cultural components that impact its effectiveness with adults. What does not happen often is a direct examination of the role culture plays in the teaching/learning environment. However, a careful examination of the classroom points to cultural values playing out during the learning process. Consider the notion of "collectivism", the focus of the impact of ones actions on the community or collective versus "individualism", focusing on impact of the individual (Triandis, 1993) and their roles within the classroom. How one perceives his or her role in the community necessarily changes how teaching and learning are approached. Another example is the use of narrative approaches of storytelling versus the didactic approach to transferring knowledge. The purpose of this paper is to explore various cultural processes and suggest a means for assessing their presence within the classroom/learning environment.

Components of Classroom Culture

While there have been many studies on teaching techniques and fewer on classroom culture, their has been little examining how culture can impact learning in an adult classroom environment. Before we get further, I would like to define culture. Culture is defined as ". . . shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world" (Barker, 2004. p. 45). Culture impacts everything in our daily lives. While much has been written about the role culture plays in the classroom environment, little has been written about exploring multiple cultural components in the classroom. Dimmock and Walker (2000) posit a cultural model of teaching and learning that focused on seven areas of culture. Definitions of teaching and learning are different for Asian and Western cultures. Nature of knowledge, the second area, examines how students and society view knowledge and the purveyors of knowledge. Asian cultures tend to view knowledge highly and instructors are given more respect than Western cultures. As a

result, the relationship between teachers and students are more hierarchical in Eastern cultures than in Western cultures. The third concept proposed by Dimmock and Walker relates to how parents and the community are encouraged to be involved in the learning process. Whereas in some cultures, parents are encourage to be involved with their children's learning, other cultures see learning as more school-based activities and, as such, the purview of the school alone. Parents are not to interfere. Teaching methods, the fourth area, identifies cultures surrounding teaching methods and approaches. In some cultures, teaching is more didactic versus more student-centered approaches which rely on more collaborative concepts. The fifth area of Dimmock and Walter's model examines the expectation of the role of the teacher/instructor. In some cultures, teachers are expected to be content experts while in other cultures, they are expected to be generalists, teaching many subjects. A sixth area is the importance of using learning outcomes as a means of assessing the effectiveness of the learning environment. The final area focuses on the importance of teaching and guiding students through the learning process. Dimmock and Walter's model proves useful in beginning to compare the nature of classrooms in differing cultures.

De Vita (2001) found that international students possessed the full gamut of learning styles as measured by Felder and Soloman's *Index of Learning Styles (ILS)*. The ILS contains four dimensions: Active-Reflective, Sensing-Intuitive, Visual-Verbal, Sequential-Global. The Active-Reflective dimension explores a learner's preference for getting involved or sitting back and thinking about the concept. Sensing-Intuitive dimension focuses the desire of the learner to learn facts or discover the hidden meanings and relationships. The Visual-Verbal dimension compares one's learning approach to seeing pictures or hearing words. Finally, the Sequential-Global dimension explores whether the learner works to understand a concept in a step-by-step manner or through a global connection of several factors into one "aha" moment. De Vita took the ILS and used it with several of his international students to compare with Western students. What he found was that while Western students concentrated their learning styles in active, sensing, and sequential learning process, international students were found to be much more varied across those three dimensions. Little difference was found between International and Western students on the visual-verbal continuum. While the report was unable to create a profile for each international student, it is apparent that culture does have an impact on learning and teaching.

Prowse and Goddard (2010) explored teaching international students in Canada and Qatar using a theoretical framework centered around six cultural phenomena. These six cultural dimensions were derived from a combination of Hofstede's (1980, 2001), Hall's (2003), and Dimmock and Walker's (2005) works and included: monochronic/polychronic time orientation; power distance; individualism/collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; generative/replicative; and aggression/consideration. Prowse and Goddard (2010) used a case study method to compare/contrast pedagogical practices at two sites: Qatar (four instructors) and Canada (six instructors). Participants, instructors in the program, were interviewed using questions focusing on each of the six dimensions to determine how they adapted their pedagogical approaches to fit the culture in which they worked.

The cultural dimensions used in this study are considered six cultural artifacts that are common among most cultures. The monochronic/polychronic time orientation considers the importance of task completion and maintaining a schedule (monochronic) as opposed to focusing on relationships over time obligations (polychronic). Power distance refers to the "degree to which less powerful people within a society accept inequalities" (Prowse & Goddard, 2010, p.

36). This plays out in different ways in the classroom. In a high power distance classroom, teachers are seen as the authority, students used a title when addressing instructors, were always polite to their instructors, and expected the instructor to guide them through the material. In low power distance classrooms, students may be more casual about their relationships with their instructors, may drift away from the topic at hand, and be more assertive in their responses. The individualism/collectivism dimension examines the extent to which individuals work for the betterment of themselves or the collective (e.g. society). The aggression/consideration dimension examines the degree an individual embodies ambition and competitiveness. The generative/replicative dimension focuses on the propensity of some cultures to create or generate innovations while others are more likely to emulate or imitate other's work. Generative cultures tend to focus on critical thinking (deep processes) while replicative cultures focus more on memorization (surface processes). The uncertainty avoidance continuum measures the degree to which people are comfortable in uncertain or unanticipated situations. The authors found marked differences between the Qatar site and the Canadian site that resulted in the instructors modifying their approaches depending on which group of students they worked with. They recommended that, when considering adapting curricular and pedagogical approaches for differing cultures, it is important to understand how the respective cultures fall along various dimensions that can impact the effectiveness of teaching/learning.

While each of these models provides a strong basis for understanding the role culture plays within the learning environment, I would like to propose a few more areas of consideration. The following is a brief description of cultural components that could have an impact on adult learning and learning effectiveness.

Views of Knowledge

Much of the literature identified the modes of learning or constructing knowledge, i.e. surface processes versus deep processes; however, few authors explored the view of knowledge based on its nature. Consider the spectrum of knowledge that says that useful knowledge when it is developed through scientific methods and codified in journal articles and textbooks. At the other end of the spectrum valued knowledge is gleaned from visions or through the use of dreams is considered more valuable (Merriam, 2007). Consider, in our Western setting, what would happen if a student from Africa were to tell the instructor that she knew that an approach was the most effective approach because she gleaned it from a dream. Or, that a spirit came to her in a meditation. Or, a friend of hers had a vision of this approach. Such a comment would likely endure scorn and be disregarded in our classrooms, despite the fact that the end result may be the same as one we found through diligent experimentation and research.

Knowledge can be transferred or constructed in a variety of ways. Consider the Western approach of transmitting knowledge through entertaining and enthusiastic lectures while Latin cultures (Merriam, 2007) may use a more narrative approach, storytelling, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, puzzles, etc. In other non-Western approaches to learning, knowledge can be gained through observation, exploration, or reflection. Another aspect of knowledge transmission is the setting in which it is carried out. Common Western approaches to learning new material is through the use of the lecture or individual learning activities (e.g. studying alone, reading a book, looking up research, etc.). While this is used often in Western settings, it is used less often than in non-Western settings which rely on more social and interactive approaches.

Role of Community

While the literature focusing on individualism/collectivism centers around the desire of the person to act with their self or community's interest in mind, how that plays out in the classroom varies. In Western classrooms, being independent of thought and in control of one's life is considered mature and an effective learner. Many Westerners engage in learning to become a productive member of society and to earn more money. Westerners view learning as a means of getting ahead within society or to meet individual needs. Competition and individual accomplishment are more important. Benefits to society are considered secondary in many cases. However, Korean cultures see independence from their community as "dysfunctional and self-centered" (Merriam, 2007, p. 176). Other cultures see learning as important for the benefit of the community, to connect with a spiritual being, or to maintain the culture of their society. The focus is on being collaborative so that everybody learns together. The community is the source of knowledge and the community's performance is assessed as a group. Learning is done as a benefit to the larger community and individuals are expected to internalize the community's preferences.

Modes of learning

Learning takes place in a variety of settings and through multiple processes. In Western classrooms, learners are asked to take notes, listen to lectures, read materials, and study to gain knowledge; all very passive or self-directed approaches. In non-Western approaches, learners are engaged with the material by experimenting, collaborating with others in group projects, observing, discussion, mentoring, dialogue, role-modeling, storytelling, and spiritual revelations. While it can be argued that Western instructors often use non-Western approaches, the balance of Western approaches usually favors the learner acting alone rather than in a group. Overarching in these approaches is the concept of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures and their impact on the learning environment. Such concepts are common among the other constructs as well and indicates that larger cultural values necessarily impact smaller cultural values.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that numerous cultural values have an impact on the teaching and learning environment. I have tried to show that teaching and learning can be impacted by individualistic/collectivistic communities, power distance in the classroom setting, one's view of time, and other cultural factors. However, I also wanted to shed light on the role other cultural factors play in shaping events in the classroom and between learners and instructors. As you can see, where members fall along the individualistic/collectivistic continuum necessarily shapes how they work together or alone to learn new material. Power distance, somewhat connected to individualistic/collectivistic cultural values, plays a part in the role instructors fill with their students. However, I have also tried bring in additional concepts of how communities view knowledge, respect within the community, and transmission of knowledge to one another and how those views can impact the learning process.

As one can observe, concepts identified in this paper do not necessarily fall into neat categories making it difficult to understand which cultural value has the biggest impact on the learning environment. My hope is to develop an instrument that measures one's cultural values and determine where individuals fall along a variety of continua. My belief is that learners and

instructors will benefit from having a clearer picture of the classroom participants and be able to identify ways to shape the classroom environment to better suit the needs of our adult learners. The constructs to be measured would be: Nature of Knowledge, Modes of Learning, Power Distance, Deep-Learning/Surface-Learning, and Purpose of Learning. Embedded in the instrument will be questions that can answer broader questions regarding the individualistic/collectivistic beliefs.

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Dr. Jim Berger, Associate Professor, Adult Education, Educational Administration, Leadership, and Research, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY, jim.berger@wku.edu, http://www.wku.edu/ealr/aded