Academic Culture: The Hidden Curriculum*

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Many college faculty teach the way they were taught, emulating favorite teachers while updating specific techniques. The pedagogical choices they make --- the HOW as distinct from the WHAT of teaching --- often reflect the teacher-student interactions they themselves once experienced. As academic success stories, or at least as academic survivors, college faculty feel reasonably well served by the prevailing academic culture, understand its values and norms, share in its beliefs and have learned to participate in the rules of its games.

In academe, as in any culture of origin, many of the most sacrosanct practices remain unstated, unexamined and unacknowledged unless they are challenged by divergent beliefs from outside the predominant culture. Not surprisingly, many of these traditionally sanctioned classroom procedures constitute an "implicit" or "hidden" culture for students who have not already been socialized into the academic culture through previous schooling or a congruent home or community culture (Condon, 1986). For example: classroom engagement in competitive or assertive behavior; acceptance of grading curves by which one's gain is the other's loss; these are likely to be in conflict with cultures that do not endorse individual success at the expense of one's peers or that value modesty over assertiveness.

The role of college faculty in transmitting a dominant cultural system is especially important since, in higher education, all roads lead back to the faculty, who have control in matters of teaching, evaluation, and curriculum. Thus, the teaching/learning discourse in college classrooms is in itself a cultural situation, even before one begins to consider the multicultural challenges mounted by students coming to college from non-European racial, ethnic, or non-English-speaking backgrounds. Examples of this dominant academic cultural style, characterized by the acquisition of course content or disciplinary knowledge and practices, exposition and coverage of information, and the lecture as the method of choice, reinforce one set of culture-specific classroom practices, while making alternatives seem awkward or cumbersome (Moore, 1990).

However, if all roads in higher education lead back to the faculty, then the call for multiculturalism depends upon faculty acceptance and implementation. The difficulty for faculty of knowing how best to facilitate content-driven learning within a multicultural classroom can lead them, unwittingly, into the stance of seeming to preserve academic standards when in fact transmitting an unexamined culture. It seems urgent, given our acceptance of multiculturalism as a 21st Century norm, that college faculty be shown some teaching strategies that help them make informed teaching and learning decisions in the process of reconsidering their norms as well as their practices.

It is helpful to acknowledge two major ironies that multicultural teaching approaches bring to light in traditional classroom practice. First, although the match of the traditional classroom culture to the learning style of traditional students was never perfect, actual cases of mismatch were disguised by student drop out, stop out, shifts of major or transmutations of learning style accomplished in all sorts of personal ways. Ironically, the issue of classroom culture did not emerge for general discussion until it was dramatically raised by divergent cultural values and beliefs or by a level of unsuccessful academic performance at odds with commitments to educational access and opportunity.

But a second and even more insidious irony is presented by the general absence of conscious cultural identity among many students

of white European-American descent. This absence of conscious cultural identity obscures the larger issue of cultural difference, reduces all cultural experience to a single dominant norm, and dismisses as frivolous the culture-consciousness of other students who have learned how to value their own ethnic roots.

In other words, it has remained possible for students from the dominant culture to disregard the fact that theirs is also a culture and thus to regard "difference" in culture as meaning merely a greater or lesser departure from their norm.   Even the mistakenly-termed "model minority" of Asian-American college students can be faced with cruel and unnecessary bicultural dilemmas as they attempt to balance learned cultural values of conformity, modesty, non-assertiveness, interdependence and cooperation with the new behavioral expectations of assertion, independence and individualism demonstrated daily in college classrooms.   Students from social groups not holding to the dominant cultural framework can easily be misunderstood by their teachers as underprepared, unmotivated or "culturally deprived" (meaning "unintelligent").

From Culture-deficit to Culture-difference So powerful and pervasive are the folkways of academe as reinforcers of traditional academic practice that it is understandably difficult for college faculty to see beyond their own acculturation and to imagine alternative possibilities for instructional design. Individuals who work with international students are continually confronted with their own academic cultural assumptions as they try to explain the mysteries of American student behavior to international teaching assistants. Such forced confrontation with implicit values raises their overall level of sensitivity to the potential for intercultural conflict.

The cultural pathways which differentiate African American, Latino, Asian and Native American racial and ethnic cultures' "ways of knowing" from ways of knowing traditionally sanctioned by college instruction and assessment have been described in a school ethnography research tradition that documents the ways in which students from non-dominant ethnic groups experience incompatibility with the dominant culture of higher education (Tharp, 1989). This research calls attention to the ways in which racial and ethnic cultures experienced in families and home communities of

students from non-European non-white backgrounds --- possibly the first generation family members to attend college --- are not likely to match the dominant culture of higher education.

And there are further complications: <u>First</u>, there is no <u>consensus</u> within the research tradition to connect cultural "ways of knowing" based on race or ethnicity directly to classroom learning, although some studies of cognitive style are headed in that direction. <u>Second</u> is the danger of creating new stereotypes. Broad generalizations about culturally different learning styles can too easily be misunderstood as euphemisms for "deficits" calling for "remediation" or acculturation on the part of the student rather than flexibility and response on the part of the instructor.

Earlier it was noted that all roads lead back to the teacher. More exactly, all roads lead back to the flexibility of the teacher's instructional design repertoire, and his or her readiness to draw upon a range of cultural styles. The reasons to do so are various and it is worth repeating them briefly in conclusion here.

1. A variable, flexible repertoire of teaching strategies will enable college teachers to match the cultural styles of students from targeted social groups with complementary teaching strategies.

2. Because such teaching is <u>effective</u> teaching, it will also match individual learning differences among traditional students as well.

3. A college teacher's repertoire of flexible and variable teaching strategies exemplifies for all of his or her students the multicultural value of reciprocity rather than the monocultural expectation of acculturation.

4. Finally, active engagement in collaborative group learning enterprises might well foster student to student experiences across cultural differences, establishing a better basis for mutual understanding and trust.

References
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