ETHICS, CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING, AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

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Having been an instructor of Spanish at a junior college for part of my career, I experienced occasionally a little of what I will call depth deprivation. Teaching students how to count to one hundred and how to conjugate verbs is good, noble, and important, but occasionally I experienced an intellectual hankering to wrestle with some of the more poignant issues concerning our sojourn on this planet. As we know all too well, the world is currently boiling in a stew of violence, misunderstanding, fear, false needs, and socially-induced stress and sorrow. I understand that my happy experience as an instructor of beginning Spanish classes will serve, in its own small way, to help ameliorate some of these problems. Yet, as the world suffers from a dearth of ethics, critical thinking and consciousness raising, I have trouble resisting my cravings to jump a little more into the fray. I have felt that the best conduit for addressing the deeper issues of our existence is in the brief moments in my classes when I address culture.

As foreign language professionals, we have all experienced the richness and the enormous power of what is commonly referred to as culture. As instructors we attempt to share our experiences and assist our students to touch its immensity and comprehend, at least in part, its pervasiveness. Time and time again, however, many of us fall short in our noble yet difficult cross-cultural crusades. We focus in on the cutesy and the superficial, oftentimes ignoring things that inherently possess significant potential for the raising of consciousness (Phillips, 1999; Webber, 1987). The quintessential lesson on French bread, although beneficial, does not normally stimulate the type of reflection necessary to cause the student to ponder the very tacit assumptions upon which his or her reality is based and, as a result, bring his or her consciousness into the more contemplative and ethical realm.
How is this deeper cultural instruction to be realized? I am not sure any of us has the answer. However, I believe that we can more closely approach our goals if the study of the target culture is considerably enmeshed with the study of the students’ native culture. A legion of educators has continually advocated the use of the target culture to enhance the understanding of one’s own (Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984; Fantini, 1999; Fischer, 1996; Graman, 1988; Heusinkveld, 1985; Kramsch, 1983, 1993; Lange, 1999; Mantle-Bromley, 1992; Nostrand, 1996; Wallerstein, 1983). Lange (1999) claims that the teaching of culture should have more emphasis on the process of discovery than on the memorization of “static” cultural information. Fantini (1999) says that many intercultural experts claim that self-awareness is the most important benefit of cross-cultural experiences. Most human beings are, of course, self-aware of particular, often rather superficial, cultural differences. Many people, when they think of culture, think of clothes, dances, food, and well-publicized traditions and activities. This is all fine and nice; however, such concepts rarely provide powerful ethical and contemplative fodder. The ethical realm most often merges with culture at a more complex point in culture’s development — what some experts call deep culture. Deep culture involves the mental models that we utilize to interpret the reality around us. Deep culture involves diverse interpretations such as what constitutes hypocrisy, arrogance, and justice. It involves often questionable metaphors and paradigms that possess the rather pretentious power to bring about humiliation, shame and embarrassment in members of some cultural groups and not in others. In this essay, when I use the word culture, I am referring to its more poignant potential, rather than the relatively benign, and oft-noted, superficial characteristics.

In the following I will propose some examples of cultural themes that tend to enhance a deeper self-discovery and examination of one’s native culture and at the same time assist the students in acquiring an enriched cross-cultural consciousness. Before we proceed however, it needs to be made clear that I am not presenting a program for the teaching of culture. I will simply provide suggestions for adding a little more depth to the cultural instruction that one already has in place. The methodology below should be tangential, not basic, in one’s approach to foreign language cultural instruction. Lange (1999) explains that cultural instruction should not be limited to a single orientation. What I am proposing would fit nicely into the orientation he calls emancipatory inquiry. Emancipatory inquiry is when exposure to foreign cultural models may cause an upsurge in a student’s introspection. Self-examination is not triggered by
exposure to different holidays and foreign movie stars. It is triggered by the challenging of assumptions and the scrutiny of alternative paradigms. Such inquiry allows one to engage in critical reflection on his or her own culture and society. Such reflection is the first step to the recognition and amelioration of both individual and collective suffering brought about by less than helpful cultural paradigms.

QUIET DESPERATION

I have found that Henry David Thoreau’s celebrated statement about most people living lives of quiet desperation can provide a nice starting point for our journey into deeper cultural contemplation. Before one begins on the themes, it must be made clear to the students that a significant degree of suffering on this planet is culturally caused. Culture has a way of creating its own particular false needs and false problems. The very famous anthropologist, Edward T. Hall (1976) briefly defines culture as “a series of situational models for behavior and thought” (p. 13). These models of reality often provide us with standards that we utilize to interpret the appropriateness or acceptability of certain actions. They direct us, often dangerously, into interpretations of the value of others and also our own self-worth. Culture is one of the most powerful forces in existence. We, more often than not, tend to allow this powerful current to sweep us along through life, rather than at least exercising our prerogative as boatmen in a storm. All cultures have their own particular quiet desperations. These quiet desperations are pain-inducing. According to Rousseau, the greatest pains are culturally-created and are much more severe than physical pain. As educators, many of us entered the profession to either directly or indirectly ameliorate pain. We hoped that somehow we could alleviate, in a small way, the suffering of others by the dispensing of knowledge from both our instruction and our example. Most of what is taught in schools serves, at least indirectly, this purpose. However, one of our goals could be to make the “indirect” a little more “direct” whenever academically feasible. Sometimes, in class, it is better to overtly discuss cultural sources of pain, and examine the ramifications, rather than simply ignoring them and hoping that by the teaching of the normal, everyday, centuries-old curriculum, we will somehow assist the student in achieving a more pain-free existence.

Foreign language instruction serves a great purpose, however, after we masterfully teach our students to more effectively conjugate Spanish verbs, the unpopular young woman still goes home and cries on her pil-
low and the ostracized young man still moves awkwardly through the hall with his head down and anxiety in his eyes. I admit there is not a whole lot we can do about this, but these cruel realities should never be far from our thinking and our teaching. We will never be able to completely ameliorate culturally-induced pain, but we can at least inculcate the realization that much pain is culturally-engendered and, hopefully, such recognition may effect a sort of praxis where knowledge gives rise to more positive action and attitudes. Since school is, by its very nature, a microcosm of the world, it, unhappily, is a place where a significant quantity of pain originates. Idealistically, the only pain a student should undergo in school is that bitter-sweet pain of high expectations and academic rigor.

The following themes represent only a few out of numerous possibilities. They serve only as examples of what could be done. Many could be generated that would both educate the students concerning the target culture’s views and enlighten them concerning the baggage and blessings of their own. They have been selected as cultural subject matter that has the potential to directly, more than indirectly, address cultural suffering and to raise consciousness concerning it. The idea of quiet desperation could serve as a very tacit main theme to those below. The following themes are to be presented via class lecture and then discussed in the class as a whole or in groups. Some possible discussion questions are provided at the end of each one.

Theme #1: “To be is to have.”

Very few concepts present an instructor with a more widely recognized, yet more widely practiced absurdity than what is known in the vulgar as materialism (often referred to as consumerism by academics). This allows one ample opportunity, combined with abundant need, to facilitate a certain degree of deep reflection. I assume that materialism exists to one degree or another in all cultures. However, the U.S. is generally considered to be on the high end of the scale (Althen, 1988; Condon, 1985). The Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) brilliantly summed up the state of materialistic cultural mesmerism when he lamented that “to be is to have” (p. 44). The degree of our cultural imprisonment within the paradigm of materialism is shocking. Although I recognize that many bankruptcies are caused by unforeseen circumstances, it is interesting to note that in 1996 more Americans declared bankruptcy than graduated from college (Affluenza, 1998). Americans make up only 5% of the world’s population yet we consume almost one third of its resources (Affluenza, 1998). Since 1950, Americans have used
up more of the planet’s resources than all of the people who inhabited it before them (Affluenza, 1998). Polls of college students in the 1960s saw roughly 80% seeking to devise a personal and meaningful philosophy of life with only 40% responding that they were committed to developing considerable wealth. By the late eighties, the percentages were exactly reversed (Magnet, 1987). The competition created with the resultant winners and losers is equally disturbing. For example, some psychologists are beginning to diagnose what they call “materialistic depression” especially among low-income minority groups (Azibo and Dixon, 1998).

To many of our students, materialism or consumerism is a fact of life, an innate universal. After describing the current conditions in the United States (or any other home country for that matter) the instructor should contrast the home culture’s attitudes with those of the target culture. For example, in the Spanish-speaking world we see considerable contrast in the perception of one’s “needs.” Ladu (1968) many years ago made a statement that from my experience still rings true today. He claimed that to the typical inhabitant of Latin America “the acquisition of material possessions is generally less important than considerations such as romance, beauty, courtesy, graciousness, and intellectual interests. They are apt to give greater value to a smooth turn of phrase, a gracious gesture, or a line of poetry than to a well-made material object or a piece of machinery” (pp. 18-19). Many Mexicans seem to be more concerned with the direct development of the inner person, whereas in the U.S., probably due to our Calvinist origins, we may focus on the accumulation of outward manifestations that serve to somehow legitimize the existence of some rather vague and problematic inner greatness.

Deeply ingrained in the cultural psyche of Japan is a concept called wabi. Wabi means “poverty” but its deep cultural implications are that one should never become dependent on human artificialities such as wealth, power, and reputation (Suzuki, 1959). Although the vast majority of Japanese of the present day would not subscribe to such a philosophy, there have been many individuals over the centuries in Japan who have longed for wabi, just as now, all over the world, myriads long for its opposite. The nobility of the ascetic life, the ethical richness of poverty, is a theme that has been repeated again and again in probably all major cultures. This concept has an interesting twist in that it is well known that individuals in some Native American societies, especially in Latin America, will often throw extravagant parties to get rid of excess wealth, thereby equalizing themselves to their neighbors. In those societies, no one needs to keep up
with the Joneses. The Joneses will knock themselves down to size whenever necessary.

After the students are exposed to the diverse viewpoints through a brief lecture, the class should be afforded the opportunity for discussion and reflection. It is the teacher’s call as to whether this should take place in small groups or in the class as a whole. It is also the teacher’s call as to whether the native language or the target language should be employed. The target language is the obvious call if one’s priority in the cultural instruction remains language acquisition. Target language use, however, could be problematic at some lower levels if one’s priority is deep discussion with potential for significant consciousness raising. At the risk of being heretical within my profession, I see nothing wrong with native language use when discussing deep cultural topics. The following are examples of questions that could be provided to the students from the instructor to enhance class or group discussion:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of both cultural views?
- In the realm of materialism, what are your personal quiet desperation?
- Do you utilize materialistic paradigms to determine your own self-worth and that of others?
- Do materialistic paradigms rule you or do you rule them?
- How would the paradigms of the target culture influence your self-worth and your conceptions of others?
- Would you feel more flattered by a compliment from a rich person than from a poor one? Why?

Theme#2: What is the problem?

Just as culture creates false needs, it also creates a vast ocean of culturally-created problems. A culturally-created problem is a socially-generated situation (or socially-generated attention to a situation) that would tend to inflict unpleasantness on members of that particular social group, but not necessarily on members of other social groups. If I am ill with a serious disease, I suffer with what would be universally considered a legitimate problem. If my home, clothes, physical appearance or acquaintances are not quite up to the speed necessary to facilitate the enhancement of my image in my particular social circle, I suffer from a culturally-created problem that is only legitimate in the context of other artificially-generated realities. To better assist the instructor in recognizing the power and diversity of culturally-created problems, I will give several examples.
The Japanese have a proverb that goes something like this: “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” In one of the most group oriented societies in the world, a member of Japanese culture is taught how not to stand out among his or her peers. According to Hall (1983), “The rewards do not go to the show-offs in Japan” (p. 98). If people desire to progress in their organizations, they must cultivate a rather inconspicuous persona. The reverse of such a philosophy can be found in North America, where to progress, it is advantageous to be considered a mover and shaker — one who stands out from the norm. In North America, the problem may be in not attracting enough attention, whereas in Japan, the problem may be in getting too much of it.

What culture giveth, culture often taketh. What individuals want and need, culture often denies. Countless people are continually refused basic social and emotional necessities on cultural whims. For example, women who do not conform to culturally-created standards of beauty may be denied many options. Opportunities for marriage and children may be found wanting. Love and affection could be in short supply. Social and professional advantages might not be as readily available as to their more lucky counterparts whose physical appearance happens to be more consistent with the current ideal. Men are far from immune to similar cultural absurdities. Studies have shown that, in the U.S., shorter men are less likely to get promoted, and earn smaller salaries, than taller men with similar qualifications (Althen, 1988). The self-esteem of millions of men and women are continually devastated due to artificial cultural standards.

Much work has been done recently in evolutionary psychology to explain physical attractiveness based on potential fertility, ease of child-bearing, potential of passing on genes that enhance survivability, likelihood of being an excellent provider and protector, etc. I have no reason to doubt these findings. There will always be a certain degree of interplay between culture and the demands of the natural world. A strong example of cultural-biological interplay could be that schizophrenia, which has been linked to biochemical imbalances, seems to abate faster in members of some cultures than others (Matsumoto, 1996). Also, anorexia nervosa, which plagues many women in Western industrialized society, is pretty much nonexistent in third-world circumstances (Matsumoto, 1996). However, returning to the idea of physical attractiveness, I would guess that in areas such as ideal weight, some aspects of personality, tanned or untanned skin, and other traits, cultural capriciousness still seems to hold sway and it may be that a person generally considered unattractive in one culture could be generally considered attractive in another. It could very
well be that there is hardly a person on earth that would not be generally considered attractive at some point on the cultural space-time continuum. Unfortunately, many of us find ourselves at the wrong point.

After the instructor lectures on the cultural information similar to the above, the following questions could be utilized for class or group discussion:

• From what culturally-created problems do you or your friends suffer?
• What, if anything, can be done to lessen the damage inflicted by these problems?
• Are you acquainted with people whose self-image has been provided to them by temporary, artificial cultural whims? Briefly discuss them.

It is important that through questioning and reflection, the individual recognize that he or she may be a casualty of a cultural perspective of dubious scalability rather than an innate, quantifiable reality to which they just happen to find themselves in opposition.

**Theme #3: Whose fault is it?**

Many of the greatest philosophical questions begin with the word “Why?”. Why do we and others suffer failures, enjoy successes, experience certain mishaps and triumphs? Well, sometimes the obvious answers to these questions are only obvious within the paradigmatic realm of the culture to which one belongs. Psychologists work with what are called models of attribution. To what do we attribute our personal failures and/or successes as well as the failures and/or successes of others? There are internal attributions as well as external attributions. Internal attributions generally revolve around giving credit or blame to oneself, whereas external attributions usually involve giving the credit or blame to circumstances, bad/good luck, God, or other people. When assessing blame for negative outcomes, North Americans typically use internal attributions for interpreting the failures of others (they were lazy, dumb, untalented) and external attributions for interpreting their own failures (bad luck, bad teachers, parents, etc.) (Matsumoto, 1996). North Americans, however, tend to explain personal successes through internal attributions (Matsumoto, 1996).

The above information on attributions concerning the failures of others is supported by how often we assume bankruptcy is caused by personal irresponsibility rather than unforeseen circumstances. Also, the attributional tendencies concerning personal successes and failures is quite
easily understood by teachers (and parents for that matter). How often, out of the blue, have we heard, *Thank you for being so fair* compared with *I don't think this is fair*?

This widely used attributional model can be turned on its head when used cross-culturally. For example, people in Hong Kong or India would most likely use internal attributions to explain both personal successes or failures, whereas the Japanese have the tendency to be the exact opposite of the U.S. by using internal attributions to explain personal failures and external ones to explain personal successes (Matsumoto, 1996). Even here in the U.S., possibly due in part to our strong Calvinist roots, some North American subcultures might have the tendency to use more internal attributions to explain personal failures or difficulties such as financial problems, accidents, health, behavior of children, etc. They may tend to assume that such calamities are acts of God (external) based upon their own perceived unworthiness (internal).

The use or misuse of attributions has far-reaching consequences by ever-so-tacitly manipulating the basic philosophies we use to determine everything from our personal self-worth to broad and sweeping public policies. Deep cross-cultural discussions on attributions can provide the conduit whereby our personal and public self-examination can take on deeper and richer dimensions. After lecturing on material similar to the above, questions similar to the following could be used for class or group discussion:

- Are your personal attributional models consistent with those dominant in your culture?
- What are the pluses and negatives of diverse models of attribution when judging yourself and others?
- To what degree is your concept of “failure” culturally determined? Try to come up with examples of universal “failures” versus culturally-specific “failures.”

**CONCLUSION**

The above cultural themes should be considered as only examples for many other paradigm-stretching concepts to be generated by individual instructors. Lange (1999) cites research which indicates that comparing the target culture to the native culture is not advisable near the beginning of a student’s journey into the cross-cultural world. When injecting the above into one’s cultural curriculum, it would be prudent for the
instructor to wait until the students’ ethnocentricity has been at least rattled a bit by other more basic instructional orientations. Also, as can be noted from the examples above, I see nothing wrong with occasionally throwing in examples from cultures other than the native and the target languages. What we are really trying to do is develop a cross-cultural consciousness rather than impossibly expecting students to commit to memory all of the target language cultural phenomena. Also, the above methodology need not be limited to solely foreign language classes but could be utilized in many other subjects as well.

It is hoped that the reader noticed the depth, but also the relatively benign nature of the themes. The encouragement of deep probing into one’s world view is something that should be undertaken with caution and should be done with respect to diverse cultural and religious points of view. Also, sometimes we as instructors have the misguided notion that it is our responsibility to liberate students from certain religiously-fostered ideas that may not be in agreement with our own. If we confine ourselves to teaching the students to recognize their own particular cultural bearings, and to think clearly, they will eventually wrestle with their own personal philosophical orientations, affirming more of the positive and rejecting more of the negative.

When very young children say humorous things, we laugh because they obviously have not yet been imprisoned, like ourselves, within our culturally-created penitentiary. We laugh because, at those moments, we glimpse briefly the absurdity of our self-imposed servitude to particular ways of speech and distinctive ways of viewing the world. It is unfortunate that most people make it through life without understanding their potential for greater freedom. Japanese culture expert D. T. Suzuki (1959) laments that not recognizing one’s true inner freedom is responsible for much of the evil in the world. One of the tragic lessons of history is that people, as a whole, are very easily manipulated. This manipulation could stem from lack of recognition of one’s emancipatory possibilities.

We must continually act on ameliorating culture-generated injury in an attempt to create a more livable world. Foreign anthropologists studying U.S. culture have come to the conclusion that the American intellectual’s role as social critic is rapidly becoming extinct (Cerroni-Long, 1993; Pinxten, 1993). This I view with considerable alarm. What will become of us if this pesticidal effect continues to slowly eliminate our intellectual gadflies? I feel that we risk unnecessary stagnation and ongoing pain. We may become trapped in a world of ever-increasing technology governed and controlled by a rusty, leaky, coal-fired world view; a hunter-gatherer
culture of designer homes, cars, and clothes, directed by ethics carved of flint.

As teachers it is our duty to be responsible cultural critics; occasionally exercising respectful restraint and occasionally speaking out. Culture only loves conditionally. It does not always move in the direction of beneficence. At times it needs to be pushed a little. The world is replete with many individual wounds that a deeper understanding of culture can help to bind. Herein may lie some of the seeds of change, the engendering of more reasonable and ethical cultural models, and above all, the genesis of more individual tranquility.

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REFERENCES


