

## TEACHING/LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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As an educator, how can you enter into and learn about a new community in a way that will maximize your chances of making a positive contribution to the educational experiences of the students with whom you will work? There are no simple prescriptions in response to that question, but there are some strategies you can draw upon to guide you into a new teaching situation and help you adapt your teaching practices to better serve the unique educational needs of that cultural community. The compilation of tips and advice that follows is a distillation of the experiences of many educators who have learned to adapt their work to the physical and cultural environment in which they are located. Although the author's experiences have been drawn mostly from work in Native villages in rural Alaska, the issues will be addressed in ways that are applicable in any setting involving people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

While a condensed version of such a complex subject runs the risk of over-simplification and misinterpretation, it is offered here as a starting point for an on-going journey of personal exploration and cross-cultural sensitization that each of us as educators—Native or non-Native—must undertake if we are to relate to people from other cultural backgrounds in a respectful and constructive manner. When we learn to relate to each other and teach in a culturally considerate way, we benefit not only those with whom we work, but we benefit ourselves as well. We are all cultural beings, and accelerating changes in the makeup of the world around us makes that fact an increasingly obvious and inescapable aspect of our daily existence. How then can we take culture into account in our work as educators?

### How do you enter a new cultural community?

First impressions count! The way you present yourself to people in a new community will have a lasting impact on how they perceive and relate to you, and consequently on how you perceive them. This is especially true in a small village where everyone lives in close proximity to one another, but it is also true in the context of classrooms as micro-communities. The first thing to remember is that many other teachers have come and gone before you, so students and parents have developed their own ways of making sense out of their relationships with strangers. While this may be a new experience for you, it is not for the host community. The background and perspective you bring to the situation, particularly in terms of cross-cultural experience, will have a major bearing on how you present yourself in a new setting. If you have taught previously in a comparable community, or are yourself from a similar cultural background (e.g., an indigenous teacher), you will have relationships and experiences to build upon when you enter the new community that a beginning teacher

without that prior experience will not have available. For the purposes of making this limited review as useful as possible, the emphasis will be on the latter situation, where the teacher is assumed to be starting from scratch in a new community and/or cultural situation.

The biggest challenge you face is getting to know people on their own terms and letting them get to know you as a person, rather than just as a “teacher.” The tendency for people who make their living off the printed word is to turn to the nearest library or bookstore when confronted with a new situation about which they lack information. While it may be useful to acquire some basic factual information about your new cultural home beforehand, most of what you need to know about the people and community you will be working with is probably best acquired firsthand, with minimal influence from someone else’s perceptual filters. The fewer prior conceptions and the less cultural baggage that you carry into the situation, the more likely that you will be able to avoid jumping to superficial conclusions, leaving you free to learn what it takes to make a constructive entry into the local flow of life.

There are many layers of shared understandings in any cultural community, and for an outsider to even begin to recognize that the deeper layers exist requires a considerable openness of mind and a great deal of time and effort. Our first impressions of a new culture are usually formed in response to the more obvious surface aspects that we can see, hear, and relate to our own prior experience, so it is important to withhold judgement and defer closure on our interpretation of behavior and events as long as possible. Once we arrive at a conclusion or form an opinion, we begin to rely on that explanation for guiding our subsequent behavior and hesitate to assimilate new information that may lead to a deeper understanding. The resulting myopia can contribute to numerous problems, including inappropriately low expectations regarding student abilities.

We can minimize the potential problems outlined above and accelerate our immersion into a new cultural community in a number of ways. If the opportunity exists, one of the most useful steps you can take is to get involved in the community well before you assume the role of teacher. Let people get to know you as a person first, and this will have enormous payoff in everything that you do as a teacher. If possible and appropriate, get involved in the community where your students live early enough to join in traditional summer activities, so you can get to know people on their terms and begin to see life through their eyes. If early arrival is not possible, start the school year with an extended camp experience with your students and other members of the community. This will enable you to make your classroom lessons much more meaningful for your students, and it will open up avenues of communication that will be beneficial to everyone involved.

If you are looking for a place to live, consider how your housing and life style will set you off from, or help you blend into the community. While housing that sets you apart from the community may be convenient (when available), you pay a price in terms of your relationship to the rest of the community. Whenever possible, choose immersion over isolation, but don’t forget who you are in the process. You will be more respected for being yourself than for “going Native.” Seek advice from the practitioners of the culture in which you are situated, and always convey respect for their ways, recognizing that you are a guest in someone else’s community. If you encounter situations of apparent social breakdown and

dysfunctionality, be especially careful to exercise discretion and obtain the views of others before you take any precipitous actions.

The most important consideration when entering a new cultural community is keeping an open mind and accepting people on their own terms. A little attention to how you present yourself in the beginning can make a big difference in your relationships for the remainder of your stay in the community. First impressions do count!

### What do you need to know?

Since learning a culture is a lifetime undertaking, where do you as a newcomer start, and what are the most important aspects to be considered? One of the first things to recognize is that the more you learn about another culture, the more you will find out about yourself. We all carry around our own sub-conscious culturally conditioned filters for making sense out of the world around us, and it isn't until we encounter people with a substantially different set of filters that we have to confront the assumptions, predispositions and beliefs that we take for granted and which make us who we are. To illustrate how those differences can come into play, the following chart summarizes some of the characteristics that tend to distinguish the view of the world as exhibited in many indigenous societies from that embodied in Western scientific tradition.

#### Indigenous World View

#### Western World View

Spirituality is imbedded in all elements of the cosmos	Spirituality is centered in a single Supreme Being
Humans have responsibility for maintaining harmonious relationship with the natural world	Humans exercise dominion over nature to use it for personal and economic gain
Need for reciprocity between human and natural worlds - resources are viewed as gifts	Natural resources are available for unilateral human exploitation
Nature is honored routinely through daily spiritual practice	Spiritual practices are intermittent and set apart from daily life
Wisdom and ethics are derived from direct experience with the natural world	Human reason transcends the natural world and can produce insights independently
Universe is made up of dynamic, ever-changing natural forces	Universe is made up of an array of static physical objects
Universe is viewed as a holistic, integrative system with a unifying life force	Universe is compartmentalized in dualistic forms and reduced to progressively smaller conceptual parts
Time is circular with natural cycles that sustain all life	Time is a linear chronology of "human progress"
Nature will always possess unfathomable mysteries	Nature is completely decipherable to the rational human mind
Human thought, feelings and words are inextricably bound to all other aspects of the universe	Human thought, feeling and words are formed apart from the surrounding world

Human role is to participate in the orderly designs of nature	Human role is to dissect, analyze and manipulate nature for own ends
Respect for elders is based on their compassion and reconciliation of outer- and inner-directed knowledge	Respect for others is based on material achievement and chronological old age
Sense of empathy and kinship with other forms of life	Sense of separateness from and superiority over other forms of life
View proper human relationship with nature as a continuous two-way, transactional dialogue	View relationship of humans to nature as a one-way, hierarchical imperative

(Adapted from Knudtson and Suzuki, 1992)

Differences in cultural perspective such as those outlined above have enormous implications for all aspects of how we approach the tasks of everyday life, not the least of which is the education of succeeding generations. In most indigenous communities today, it is apparent that aspects of both the indigenous and Western perspectives are present in varying degrees, though neither may be present in a fully cohesive fashion. Furthermore, it is not necessary (nor is it possible) for an outsider to fully comprehend the subtleties and inner workings of another cultural system (even if it is still fully functional) to be able perform a useful role in that cultural community. What is necessary, however, is a recognition that such differences do exist, an understanding of how these potentially conflicting cultural forces can impact peoples lives, and a willingness to set aside one’s own cultural predispositions long enough to convey respect for the validity of others.

The particulars of an unfamiliar cultural system can be effectively attended to without a thorough knowledge of that culture, as long as you know how to make appropriate use of local expertise and community resources. As you come to understand how another cultural system works, you will also be learning more about how culture influences behavior generally, so the particulars of the new situation will lead to tentative generalizations in your own understanding, which in turn will help you decipher the next set of particulars. This should be a never ending cycle through which you continue to learn as much about yourself as you do about others, and along the way you can expect to face some tough questions, like “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” - questions that we rarely encounter in our own familiar cultural worlds.

Two of the most useful steps a new teacher can take to begin to see beyond the surface features of a new cultural community are getting to know some of the Elders or other culture-bearers, and becoming familiar with aspects of the local language. By visiting Elders in the community, you will be giving evidence of your respect for the carriers of the local culture, while at the same time you will be learning about the values, beliefs and rules of cultural behavior that will provide a baseline for your teaching. Showing enough interest in the local language or dialect to pick up even a few phrases and understand some of its structural features will go a long way toward building your credibility in the community and in helping you recognize the basis for local variations on English language use in the classroom. At no point should you assume, however, that you know everything you need to know to fully integrate the local culture into your teaching. When learning about another culture, the more you learn, the more you find that you don’t know. Always assume the role of learner, so that

each succeeding year you can look back on the preceding year and wonder how you could have been so naive. When you think you know it all, it's time to quit teaching.

### What should you teach?

Having negotiated your way into a new cultural community, how do you now integrate what you have learned into your teaching? Some of the first concerns you will have to confront revolve around the expectations of the other teachers, the school district and the community, not all of whom may be in agreement on where or how the local culture fits into the curriculum. As a professional educator, your first responsibility is to the students in your charge, but they do not exist in isolation, so you will have to balance consideration of their individual needs with consideration of the many other immediate and distant variables that will come into play in the course of their experiences as students and as adults in a rapidly changing world.

Your task is to help the students connect to the world around them in ways that prepare them for the responsibilities and opportunities they will face as adults. That means they need to know as much as possible about their own immediate world as well as the larger world in which they are situated, and the inter-relationships between the two. To achieve such a goal requires attention to the local culture in a holistic and integrative manner across the curriculum, rather than as an add-on component for a few hours a week after attending to the “real” curriculum. The baseline for the curriculum should be the local cultural community, with everything else being built upon and grounded in that reality.

Whatever piece of the curriculum you are responsible for, imbed it first in the world with which the students are familiar and work outward from there. Adapt the content to the local scene and then help the students connect it to the region, the nation, and the world. Keep in mind the adage, “Think globally, act locally!,” as you prepare your lessons. If students are to have any influence over their lives as adults, they need to understand who they are, where they fit into the world, and how “the system” works. It is your responsibility as a teacher to help them achieve that understanding.

When considering what to teach, keep in mind that the content of the curriculum is heavily influenced by the context in which it is taught. Think less in terms of what you are teaching and more in terms of what students might be learning. How can you create appropriate learning environments that reinforce what it is you are trying to teach? Does an Elder telling a traditional story have the same meaning and significance when done in a classroom setting as it would have out on the riverbank, or in the Elder's home? Most likely not, so carefully consider the kind of situational factors (setting, time, resources, persons involved, etc.) that may have a bearing on what your students are learning. Content cannot be taught apart from context - each influences the other, and this is especially critical when cultural differences are present. In the end, your most important task is to help students learn how to learn, so while you are teaching subject matter, you also need to be attending to broader process skills, such as problem solving, decision making, communicating, inductive reasoning, etc. - skills that are applicable across time and place. It is skills such as these, learned in culturally adaptive ways, that enable students to put the subject matter they acquire to use in ways that are beneficial to themselves, their community and society as a whole.

### How should you teach?

There are as many ways to teach as there are teachers, and for each teacher there are as many ways to approach teaching as there are situations in which to teach. The first axiom for any teacher, especially in a cross-cultural setting, is to adapt your teaching to the context of the students, school and community in which you are working. In other words, build your teaching approach in response to the conditions in front of you, and don't assume that what worked in one situation will work the same in another. While it is useful to have a "bag of tricks" available to get you started, don't assume the bag is complete—continue to develop new approaches through trial-and-error on an on-going basis.

Whenever possible, make use of local community resources (parents, elders, local leaders, etc.), and extend the classroom out into the community, to bring real-world significance to that which you are teaching (Barnhardt, 1990). To facilitate this, incorporate experientially oriented projects into your lessons and put students to work performing everyday tasks and providing services in the community (e.g., internships, student-run enterprises, local histories, community needs assessments, etc.). Take students on extended field trips to cultural sites, local offices, businesses and industries. Whether in the classroom or in the field, create a congenial atmosphere that draws students into the activity at hand and allows them to experience learning as a natural everyday activity, rather than a formality confined to the classroom. Natural settings are more likely to foster mutually productive and culturally appropriate communication and interaction patterns between teacher and student, than are highly structured and contrived situations created in the confines of the classroom. To the extent that you as a teacher can make yourself accessible to the students, you will be that much more successful in making what you teach accessible to them. This requires much patience and a willingness to risk making mistakes along the way, but the payoff will be greater success with the students in the long run.

### How do you determine what has been learned?

The question of what constitutes success is difficult to answer under any educational circumstance, but it is especially complex in cross-cultural situations. Different people can exhibit competence in different ways, and when cultural differences are added to the mix, the ways can multiply dramatically. In addition to determining what it is we want students to learn, there is the task of determining how it will be measured, and not everything we want students to learn lends itself to easy and reliable measurement within the timeframe that schools expect to see results. On top of all this, we have the issue of cultural bias in everything from the instruments we use to the way we use them.

One of the most important considerations in this arena is to recognize that there are multiple forms and ways of applying and displaying intelligence, and therefore, we need to provide multiple avenues through which students can demonstrate their competence. Recent studies indicate that there are at least eight prominent forms of intelligence, with each individual, as well as clusters of people, having strengths in some forms and weaknesses in others. These

include potential aptitudes in linguistic, logical-mathematical, naturalistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1991, Checkley, 1997). The problem is that schools tend to rely almost exclusively on the first two (linguistic and logical-mathematical) as the basis for measuring academic success, leaving other forms of intelligence largely on the sidelines. While you as a teacher are not in a position to unilaterally revamp the schooling enterprise to more fully incorporate the full range of intelligences, you are in a position to recognize them in your students and to provide a variety of avenues for them to access what you are teaching. At the same time, you can incorporate some of the more culturally adaptive modes of assessing student performance, such as portfolios, exhibitions, demonstrations, productions, etc. Through these more flexible and responsive approaches to assessment, it is possible to officially recognize the various forms of intelligence and accommodate cultural differences at the same time.

### What can you do in a large urban school?

While some of the strategies described above may seem most appropriate for small rural schools with a homogenous cultural population, there are additional ways to make large multicultural urban schools more culturally sensitive as well. One of the most culturally inhibiting factors in urban schools is size and all the impersonal and bureaucratic conditions that go along with a large-scale institution. Some of the negative effects of size can be ameliorated within an urban setting by rethinking the way students (and thus teachers) experience the school and by viewing it more as a community than as an institution. For instance, a large school can be broken down into several smaller “learning communities,” or schools-within-a-school. Students and teachers can form clusters that function as a cohesive unit with a support system based on personalized relationships. To overcome the constraints and inefficiencies of a highly compartmentalized schedule, classes can be organized in a block schedule format, where longer periods of time are made available for extended field trips and intensive projects without interfering with other classes. Through such arrangements, the economies-of-scale advantages of a large institution can be coupled with the flexibility and human dimensions of a smaller school.

The other area in which a potential problem can be made into an asset in an urban school is in the cultural mix of the student population. While it is not possible to fully attend to the cultural particulars of every student on a daily basis, it is possible to incorporate the rich mix of cultural backgrounds present in the classroom and school into the curriculum in ways that help students learn to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences among themselves and their classmates. The interests and strengths of each student can be recognized and rewarded through practices such as peer tutoring, cultural demonstrations, group projects, language comparisons, etc. Over time, students in culturally mixed schools can learn to treat cultural differences as part of the natural fabric of society, to be celebrated and identified as a strength, rather than as a threat. To this end, teachers in urban schools should be encouraged and supported in their efforts to capitalize on the diversity of cultures present in their classrooms.

## Summary

What has been presented above is but a sampling of the strategies that teachers may draw upon to make their classrooms inviting places for students from all cultural backgrounds and persuasions. Teachers must recognize, however, that to stop here and assume you are now ready to take on any teaching situation runs the danger of oversimplification and misapplication of practices that are much more complex than a short review such as this can convey. For further insights, strategies and guidelines, educators can access the *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools* (1998) through the Alaska Native Knowledge Network at <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu>. If you wish to put any of the above to use, you should enter into the task with an open mind and an open heart, recognizing that the journey has just begun and that it will take a lifetime to complete. Happy travels!

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