Cultural Diversity
From A Different Place: The Intercultural Classroom
By Jaime S. Wurzel and Nancy K. Fischman

Culture defined has many aspects to it. Culture is the shared and learned patterns of information a group uses to generate rules and meaning among its members (Goodenough 1971).

Every culture must create a system of shared knowledge if it is to survive as a group and foster communication among its members. These shared patterns of information are both explicit (obvious) and implicit (hidden). They encompass subjective dimensions (beliefs, attitudes, and values), interactive dimensions (verbal and nonverbal language), and material dimensions (relevant objects, artifacts). The sharing of these patterns encourages communication and a relatively high degree of coherent functioning among its members.

The concept of culture is too complex to reduce to simple definitions. A common culture not only facilitates cohesion and communication, it also affects the identity, the sense of belonging, and the self-esteem of individuals within the group.

Building the metaphors, we might think of culture as "the habits of the heart and of the mind."

If culture is knowledge, then culture is dynamic. It can be learned and thus is constantly changing. But how should it change? Most often, attempts to change habits of the heart and of the mind result in undesirable behaviors that mask resentment and anger towards those responsible for the attempts. Change, whether it occurs as the result of war, of the undemocratic imposition of power, or simply of ignorance, creates divisiveness among cultures.

Collision, or "cultural conflict," occurs when the interpretation of cultural patterns of information are withheld from others. It is reflected in the internal (personal) and interactional (social) tensions that arise when systems of cultural knowledge confront one another. Most often these conflicts remain unresolved and unexplained, perpetuating cultural isolation, prejudice and mistrust. If the assumptions underlying the clash of cultures can be uncovered, we may be able to ameliorate the conflict.

Subjective culture is defined as a group's characteristic way of perceiving its social environment. People who share similar basic life experiences develop similar and integrated cognitive and emotional structures. This causes the cultural group to perceive its environments in certain and consistent ways. To understand other cultures we must learn the cognitive and affective structures that shape their members' perceptions and hence influence their behavior.

Value Orientation:
Value orientations are the cognitive and affective categories that guide our assumptions about life. We rely heavily on them. They imply preferences for certain types of action.
Because our value orientations are programmed early in our lives, we are rarely aware of them. They are "ends, not means and their desirability is either non-consciously taken for granted or seen as a direct derivation from one’s experience or from some external authority" (Bem, 1970).

Value orientations are especially powerful because we are rarely aware of how they shape the way we communicate with others, the way we approach learning, and the way we organize sharing information. They are acquired informally. That is, they are neither taught explicitly nor learned consciously.

Value orientations are passed on from generation to generation as guiding universal perspectives. They are, of course, reinforced, directly and indirectly, by religious, social, and educational institutions, and by what is perhaps more compelling, the standards that educational, social, and economic organizations use to evaluate competence and determine success or failure.

### Four relevant Dimensions of Value Orientation:

#### Authority Dimension

How does the cultural group define and perceive authority?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Egalitarian</th>
<th>Hierarchical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
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</table>

Egalitarian orientation stresses a horizontal or more informal perception of authority. For example, in a United States classroom, the focus is on student initiative and an atmosphere of equality. A hierarchical orientation stresses a vertical perception of authority where teachers keep a formal distance from students and the instructor initiates all activity.

#### Relational Dimension

How do cultural groups perceive social relationships?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independence</th>
<th>Interdependence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Collectivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>High Context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The orientations on the left stress independence and individualism in human relations, while those on the right denote interdependence and collectivism (feeling a part of a group). In most societies, the interests of the group prevail over the interests of the individual. Interdependence is strongly reflected in the social interactions of those societies. Only a minority of the global population lives in societies that value independence or individual interests above group interests. In those societies, children are expected to become self-reliant and leave home as soon as they are able. This value orientation inevitably stresses competition whereas the collective society emphasizes cooperation and adaptation. Low context cultures reinforce the separation of language from other aspects of communication. In this orientation, verbal clarity and specificity are required, because the speaker is responsible for communicating his/her thoughts. In high context cultures, however, non-verbal communication and environment play a significantly greater part and the responsibility for communicating then rests with the listener who must uncover meaning in the “big picture” of the interaction process.
**Activity Dimension**

How do cultural groups define and perceive activity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doing</th>
<th>Being</th>
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</table>

Doing identifies preferring externally measured action as a way to solve problems and demonstrate competence. Individuals are recognized and praised for their deeds and accomplishments. Being is a preference for the less visible and concrete emphasizing a more reflective or theoretical orientation toward activity. There is little or no distinction made between being and not being active (i.e., just sitting is considered “doing something”).

Doing-oriented persons consider their Being counterparts as inefficient, lacking individual creativity, unassertive, and submissive. Being-oriented persons consider Doing people to be selfish, self-centered, and uninterested in personal qualities.

**Temporal Dimension**

How do cultural groups define and perceive time?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited</th>
<th>Abundant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evolving</td>
<td>Historical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The way we perceive and define time regulates the conscious and unconscious priorities that we set, the way we interact, the way we define success, and the way we deal with contemporary problems. Limited-time oriented cultures equate intelligence and competence with quickness and efficiency with little time expended for personal exploration. Abundant-time cultures measure success in terms of establishing a preliminary personal context and a desire for completeness in communication.

Cultures with an Evolving-time orientation perceive time as moving linearly from the past, barely slowing for the present, and rushing into the future. The present is superior to the past and the future is even more progressive with nature dominated by technology. Decision-making is often influenced by a perspective that considers an examination of historical context as inefficient. Conversely, an Historical-time orientation sees the past closely integrated with the present with ancient histories an integral part of their world view. They also see the future as closely related to the present, but too far ahead to be practical. Problem solving is done without distinguishing between the past and the present contexts.

In the context of cultural variation, dominance implies that certain characteristics are prevalent over other existing orientations in the culture. That is, the prevalence of specific value orientations does not preclude the existence of less powerful orientations in the society.

Dominance is illustrated in the values and assumptions that are usually reflected in the life of organizations. We evaluate others including leaders according to expectations formed mainly by culturally based dominant value orientations. Similarly, we draw our perceptions of others from the same dominant value orientations that guide our lives. Inevitably, where there is cultural dominance there is cultural conflict.

This conflict is manifested in the collision between deep cultural systems that, consciously and unconsciously, form the identity of a culture group. These value orientations are reflected in styles of communication and assumptions about learning, achievement, and success.

In the context of dominance, the collision between contrasting concepts of self can be particularly detrimental to international and minority cultures. Unheeded, this collision can lead to self-concepts of deficiency, alienation from institutions, and self-segregation.

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*Our flag is red, white and blue,*  
*but our nation is a rainbow—*  
*red, yellow, brown, black and white— and we're all precious in God's sight.*

*Jesse Jackson, July 1984.*