

Culture, Language, Understanding and Schools

By William Scott Browning

Culture (kul ch r) *n.1.* sum total of beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns of a group of people, acquired by a member of the group through social learning and transmitted from one generation to another

Culture

I chose this definition arbitrarily as a beginning point of discussion. We will improve on its inadequacies.

One problem is with the word “group”. One can visualize a number of non-overlapping sets of individuals. Each set is mutually exclusive and homogenous. Each member of each group has acquired clear “beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns” in common with other members of the group. These have been transmitted from one generation to another. No one changes groups.

The reality is that each individual is a member of many overlapping and varied groups of varying size and influence. Often there are groups within larger groups within still larger groups. Sometimes one subgroup holds “beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns,” that are in direct conflict with a larger group of which they are a member. We call this a counterculture.

I am an American. I am a member of that group that attended government-run schools during the second half of the Twentieth Century. We can be sure that I acquired a great number of “beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns” that were transmitted through this method.

I occasionally watch news programs on television. I have channel surfed during those programs enough to know that the same news stories are being presented from the same viewpoint at almost the same time on all the networks. Under pretense of presenting information these programs are designed to transmit “beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns” to members of our group.

I am a member of those people who listen to talk radio. Most talk show hosts are part of a counterculture within the news media group. They are actively engaged in transmitting “beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns” that are in contradiction to those of the larger group.

I am a Christian. That means that I am a member of the group consisting of all people who believe in Jesus Christ. We are a diverse group and often disagree on important issues, but anyone who is not willing to modify his belief structure to match that of Jesus, does not truly believe, and is not a Christian.

Although America was founded mainly by Christians as a Christian nation, the “beliefs, accomplishments, and behavior patterns” of Christians and Americans have never been identical. As a Christian American I often find that the beliefs and behavior patterns that I have learned from one group are opposite to those I have learned from the other. I often find that my view is not in agreement with that of Jesus and must adjust to Truth.

Cultures are complex and separating the individual from the group is difficult. One could think that each individual is merely the product of his culture. Such a view promotes stereotyping. It would also be ridiculous because people often choose to join groups that oppose those in which they were acculturated. One could also think that since groups often believe opposite things, that there is no objective truth, and each view is as true as all others. Such a view is self-contradictory since it attempts to state a higher truth that is objectively true and above those provincial views that claim truth.

One objective truth about who I am culturally is that I am an individual that may belong to many groups, but am not defined by those labels and stereotypes. This is true of us all.

Language

Lan-guage (lang'gwij) *n.* 1. means of communication in which vocal sounds are combined into meaningful units to convey thoughts and feelings; human speech. 2. written symbols representing these sounds

We use language to communicate, but we may communicate more than we intended to share. We use language to form groups around us and we use language to separate people into groups that are different from us.

People have a natural tendency to find something positive in those whose speech matches theirs. While travelling across west Texas, my brother and I stopped for gas. Suddenly he said, "All right! You guys are from southern California." He went over and started talking to them. When I asked him how he knew where they were from, he replied that he recognized the accent.

We also see that people have a natural tendency to find something negative in those whose speech differs from theirs. This tendency is exaggerated toward certain groups. I remember seeing a video of a northern man and hearing him say that he did not like Southerners because, "Even white people talk like niggers."

The ancient Greeks had a word for those who did not speak their language or who spoke it with a foreign accent. To them the foreign sounds reminded them of a baby babbling, "Bar, bar, bar." The word "barbarian" still connotes someone less civilized than the speaker.

When Jesus was being tried, before His crucifixion, Peter was accused "Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaean, and thy speech agreeth thereto." (Mark 14:70) In the big city, Jerusalem, the accent of the disciples set them apart and marked them as less than the cultural elite. In this case it closed the minds of the powerful elite of that culture to most amazing visitation of human history, the presence of Jesus Christ.

Cultural prejudices based on language are not new and unique to Twenty-first Century America. They flow naturally from our need to make decisions about people before we know all the facts.

Human interactions require varied degrees of trust. Trust often includes risk. The presence of dishonest people has forced people to decide how much trust to invest in

which people. In violent times it has been necessary to decide immediately whether to welcome someone as an ally, to fight, or to flee.

Since we never have literally all the facts about another, every judgment is partially a prejudice. As long as people are required to make decisions about other people for any reason, prejudice is inevitable.

In spite of my recognition of the reality of this situation I must also raise a moral outcry against it based on several points. Many of our judgments are wrong. Once judgments have been made, people often fail to modify them in light of further evidence. There are harmful consequences against those who make wrong judgments, those who are wrongly judged, and society as a whole.

Wrong judgments affect those who make them. Businesses that make wrong decisions about who is a desirable customer, and who is a thief, will suffer more theft and make fewer sales. Voters who elect someone based on his speech, appearance, and confidence are doomed to live under his leadership. Employers who wrongly judge prospective employees will suffer the loss of productivity that would have been theirs.

Those wrongly judged suffer wrong consequences. A teacher may give lower grades to a student with a particular dialect. That may prevent scholarship opportunities to a talented individual. A University may not grant entrance to a student with a strange (to them) accent. That may send a person to collecting garbage rather than gathering data professionally. A jury may not believe a person who pronounces their words in an unfamiliar way. That may send a person to death row.

Wrong judgments affect all of society. Justice denied to one is freedom limited for all. Wrong business decisions, and having employees beneath or above their skill level damage commerce. Wrong choice of political leaders results in people like Clinton greatly influencing the entire world.

Although it is necessary to make judgments without sufficient information, all people, especially teachers must continually revise our decisions based on further

evidence. We must seek out that evidence. And we must avoid using such flimsy information as a person's dialect to make those decisions.

Understanding and Schooling

Stereotypes are a part of American culture. Movies for example, by their very nature are depictions rather than reality, lend themselves to stereotyping. How can the essence of a complex human being be captured in a few fictional scenes? Characters need to be simplified. Only certain aspects of them can be depicted. To be understandable, they need to draw on ideas that the audience already knows. That pre-knowledge is often stereotype. Although filled with stereotypes, one message often missing in movies seems to be that once we get to really know each other those stereotypes often break down.

Schools on the other hand must focus on reality. For example schools include students from many ethnic groups and languages. This presents a challenge for educators. How can a teacher capture the complexity of a student when they are only together for a short part of the day? Students become simplified, only certain aspects are focused on and an effort needs to be made to break down the stereotype.

Saying that an individual is a member of a particular culture is an act of stereotyping. It calls up a person's understanding of that culture. That understanding may be accurate, or inaccurate when applied to the culture as a whole. When applied to an individual it is even less accurate.

Despite their faults, labels can be useful tools for understanding, as long as we recognize the fallibility of those stereotypes. When we try to understand our students, and help them understand each other, we must learn how they differ from whatever groups they may be a part of.

How can schools break down stereotypes and create complex visions of students? Some schools encourage students to create works that showed pride in their cultures. This is something that all schools should encourage. Students as individuals often have different goals in schools. Those goals should match the individual, and students should be evaluated based on those individual goals. Some teachers try to teach anything the

students want to learn. That is a move in the right direction, but it goes too far. It goes past allowing students to choose some of their own goals. Students need to learn basic skills in addition to things that arouse their natural curiosity.

Rules are often a point of contention for schools with mixes of students from different languages and cultures. If rules are too broad then they are totally ineffective in regulating a productive learning environment including students who are not attending school by choice.

The reason that rules are mentioned, however, is that over regulation is felt as oppressive and destructive of freedom. This is a valid concern. Rules should protect freedom rather than destroying it. Rules should also take into account the different perspectives of students. They need to be clearly thought out, clearly understood, and fairly enforced.

Children can be very cruel. They often call names and otherwise persecute other children. This is particularly true if there is anything that sets a particular child apart as different. One challenge teachers face is teaching children to respect each other.

If we are to teach children to internalize a respect for all people and their cultures, we must do more than merely punish the use of certain racial terms. We must help them understand people from other cultures than their own. They must have a forum for discussing their differences and similarities in a respectful way. This probably means that the teacher needs to make it a point to have many open discussions with the class when real issues are brought out.

Dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity in the schools is not a simple issue. Many differences are real, substantive, and natural. Emotions do make more than a casual appearance. If we are to deal with those differences in the schools, and we must. We must deal with them out in the open and honestly. That means that we must have open discussions in our classes including the viewpoints of all cultures and individuals present.