

# Cultural Influences on Adult Teaching and Learning

## What is Culture?

Culture is the learned, shared knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience. (James Spradley, Participant Observation, 1980)

Much of the difficulty in our schools today stems from the fact that teachers try to inculcate and teach patterns that are partially or incorrectly analyzed... In fact, much of what the child [or adult] hears goes against everything he/she has learned outside the classroom.

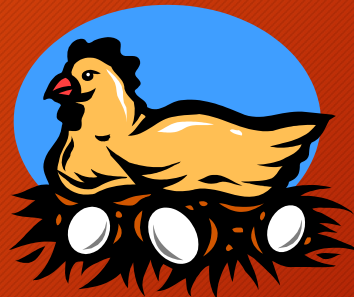
Edward Hall [The Silent Language](#)

The fact is, however, that once people have learned to learn in a given way it is extremely hard for them to learn in any other way. Edward Hall [The Silent Language](#)

# The same is true of teaching.

Once we learn to teach in a certain way, it is often difficult to change. We usually teach as we were taught, not as we learn. It is hard to change... until we do. We follow familiar models...until we don't.

Who is going to start changing - the system or the person? The teacher or the student? The chicken or the egg?



# What Culture Influences You?

(Briefly share with the person next to you.)

## GUT REACTION

1. How do you feel about waiting in a doctor's office up to 2 hours?
2. If you are in an empty movie theater, how do you react to a group of people coming in and sitting right next to you?
3. \*On a taskforce with a timeline, how do you react to chit-chat about someone's new car?
4. \*Do you want rules that apply to you clearly spelled out?

HO

# What Culture Influences You?

5. How do you approach people in authority?
6. How do you want to be approached as a teacher?
7. \*What type of student rewards your efforts the most?
8. How do you feel about students talking in your classes?

# What Culture Influences You?

9. \*What is your personal space? How close do you want me to come as a stranger?
10. Do you like to teach students in a closed circle?
11. What kinds of rules do you communicate to your students in writing or speaking?
12. \*Do you want students to ask questions when they don't know something? If so, how do you feel when they don't?

# Group or Individual Context?

**Context** is probably the most important cultural dimension- and the most difficult to define. It refers to the entire array of stimuli surrounding every communication event - the context - and how much of that stimuli is meaningful (Hall and Hall, 1989).

## Individual Culture: Low Context

Relationships:  
Societies or groups where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. Cultural behaviors and beliefs may need to be spelled out so that new people know how to behave.

## Group Culture: High Context

Relationships: Societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. People know what to do and what to think from years of interacting with each other. Your immediate or close family is probably an example of a high context, or group environment.

# Individual Culture Relationships (Cont.)

- Are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration.
- Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend.
- Are accustomed to short-term relationships.

# Group Culture Relationships (Cont.)

- Are committed to people and human relationships.
- Are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy.
- Borrow and lend things often and easily
- Have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships.

## Individual Culture: Time

- Do one thing at a time.
- Concentrate on the job.
- Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously.
- Emphasize promptness.

## Group Culture Time

- Do many things at once.
- Are highly distractible and subject to interruptions.
- Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, *if possible*

# Individual Culture Perceptions

- I am the center of my universe.
- I compete with others and myself to succeed and make the world better.
- If you respect me, you will look me in the eye.
- Ask questions. The squeaky wheel gets the oil.
- I adjust easily to new environments.
- People need rules to help them know how to act.

# Group Culture Perceptions

- I am part of the universe.
- I cooperate with others and we all win.
- I honor you by dropping my eyes.
- I honor your authority. My silence shows you that I am observing so that I ask a question when I know enough.

**GROUP CULTURE**  
**High Context**

Japanese  
Chinese  
Arab  
Greek  
Mexican  
Spanish  
Italian  
French  
French Canadian  
English  
English Canadian  
American (US Dominant)  
Scandinavian  
German  
German-Swiss

**INDIVIDUAL CULTURE**  
**Low Context**

# IC

- Linear
- Linguistic/Verbal
- Logical
- Competitive
- Direct
- Experimental
- Concerned with outcomes

# GC

- Holistic
- Visual
- Intuitive
- Cooperative
- Respectful
- Observant
- Concerned with process

# Howard Gardener

*Frames of Mind, 1983*

Our schools and [dominant] culture focus most of their attention on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. We esteem the highly articulate or logical people of our culture.

[http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple\\_intelligences.htm](http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm)

# High Context/Group Beliefs

- Observe, don't ask.
- Look down, not into someone's eyes.
- Never compete with others.
- Don't try until you know what you are doing.
- Don't answer if you don't understand the question.
- Time belongs to the universe, not to man.
- Family is all you have. Family comes first.

What are some behavioral patterns in our dominant classrooms that conflict with those beliefs?

# SUMMARY OF EVERYDAY TIPS

- Provide time for reflection and observation.
- Look at teaching through a keleidescope of different cultural colors. That's more fun.
- Forget outcomes. Think process. The outcomes will be there.
- Use both deductive and inductive approaches.
- Emphasize collaboration over competition.
- Go into neutral when your emotions rev up negatively.

Always remember that you  
are unique. Just like  
everyone else.

Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in his or her shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you are a mile away and you have their shoes.