Chapter 5
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, National Culture, and Online Instruction:
Leading to Learning

David Starr-Glass

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4769-0558

SUNY Empire State College, USA

ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity is the anticipated norm in online learning environments that include international students, or which are part of international educational programs. Expressions of national culture inevitably shape the ways in which international students respond to the learning experience and perform within it. This chapter considers the roles and responsibilities of the culturally responsive online instructor in creating and facilitating online distance learning spaces that are inclusive, diverse, and supportive. It reviews a conceptual framework, derived from Hofstede's culture model, which may be useful in recognizing and anticipating national culture difference. The chapter also provides suggestions and recommendations to assist the instructor/facilitator in leading culturally different students to a place where they can learn successfully.

INTRODUCTION

In introducing any chapter on culturally responsive pedagogy, it seems appropriate to first clarify what is meant by culturally responsive and what is understood by pedagogy. A starting place might be found in the definition that Gay (2010) gives for culturally responsive *teaching*—a teaching practice which uses "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). This definition addresses issues relevant to cultural responsiveness surrounding *learning encounters*, but what are learning encounters—more specifically, are learning encounters, teaching, and pedagogy synonymous?

Some have noted that the constructs *culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy*, and *culturally compatible teaching* are used interchangeably in the literature and by practitioners (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sobel & Taylor, 2011). However, in this present chapter, it is understood that teaching and pedagogy are quite different in their assumptions and approaches, and that pedagogy is always situated within a cultural matrix that may, or may not, be appreciated by practitioners (Zyngier, 2016). It is further argued that the relative success or failure of any pedagogy depends on the degree to which it recognizes, appreciates, and navigates the cultural context within which it is situated. This is reflected in the definition offered by Alexander (2008):

Pedagogy is not a mere matter of teaching technique. It is a purposive cultural intervention in individual human development which is deeply saturated with the values and history of the society and community in which it is located. Pedagogy is… the act of teaching together with the ideas, values and collective histories which inform, shape, and explain that act. (p. 92)

From a cultural perspective—and this is our central theme—it is important to recall that the word "pedagogy" is itself embedded in a set of cultural assumptions and practices that have shaped the ways in which it has been historically expressed and which shed light on how it might be presently expressed. The word originally came from the Greek (*pais +agögos*) and can be translated as "leading the child". It was the custom among the Greek upper and middle classes to entrust their children to a servant (*pedagogos*) who would lead them to a place where their learning took place. Later, when the term was incorporated into English usage, the role of the *pedagogos* was mistakenly understood to be that of a teacher—often a rather uncompromising and pedantic teacher: the pedagogue. In the original Greek, however, no instruction was involved: there was only the act of leading the learner to where his or her learning would occur. It is contended that this historic and culturally mediated notion has a still has relevancy and resonance in our own times. Pedagogy was focused, and should continue to focus, on the *act of leading*—leading learners towards learning—and should not to be conflated with acts of instructing or teaching (Smith, 2006).

In the very language that we use, there are culturally embedded relics that continue to shape behavior and expectations—either distancing the activities of teaching from learning, or seeing them as essentially the same but involving different actors, efforts, and outcomes. In culturally homogenous environment, differences in the roles or assumed priorities of teachers and learners might be simply taken for granted and have little pragmatic consequence. However, in situations of cultural diversity—whether between instructors and their students, or among students themselves—there is at least a pressing invitation to reconsider pre-existing cultural assumptions, to challenge them, and to find new meanings (or perhaps old resurrected meanings) in these new contexts.

Whether in a new culture or in a new language, it is vital to acknowledge that "human beings don't only search for meanings, they are themselves units of meaning, but we can mean something only within the fabric of larger significations" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 279). For the culturally perceptive and responsive pedagogue designing her online learning space, the issue is not of adaption and accommodation. Rather, the issue is about personal discovery and consideration of the process, dynamics, and outcomes of the teaching-learning encounter. From a culturally responsive perspective, creating and facilitating a learning space is an invitation to question self-identification, self-identity, and the larger *significations* of diversity. In this chapter, culturally responsive pedagogy is understood to be the deliberate, mindful, and caring ways in which an instructor brings learners to a place in which they can engage in learning.

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