

Chapter XXVIII

Cultural Issues in Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

Adult educators internationally are being asked to transform the pressures of cultural diversity in their classrooms into opportunities for all learners in the Information Age. Good teachers not only convey a body of knowledge to their students, but they are also aware of how to convey that knowledge by connecting their own experiences with their students' experiences of the world. Only by the instructor understanding and respecting the students' language, culture, and knowledge will students be able to achieve optimal academic success to build their future. The challenge today for all adult educators is to develop a personal action plan for cultural competence that helps to ensure their classrooms are grounded on respect for cultural diversity and academic achievement for all.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Nobel Peace laureate Wole Soyinka, "culture is the primary source of knowledge" (Daniel, 2002, p. 3). The learning of culture, like the learning of language, begins with a child's first experiences with family, schools, and religious teachings. By the time children

begin their formal education at the age of five or six, they have already internalized many of the basic values and beliefs of their native culture, learned the rules of behavior which are considered appropriate for their role in the community, and established the procedures for continued socialization; they have learned how to learn (Hollins, King, & Hayman, 1996).

It is important to remember that culture is learned through language and modeling others; it is not genetically transmitted. Culture is encoded in the structure, vocabulary, and semantics of language. According to Gilbert, Goode, and Dunne (2007), persons acquainted with more than one language are aware that there are concepts, norms, and emotions that are available in one culture that are not available in the other, and this is a reminder of the inextricable link between language and culture.

The United Nations has estimated that the World has some 6000 communities and as many distinct languages. There were 6,809 “living” languages in the world with around 250 spoken by over a million people and 90% spoken by fewer than 100,000 people (Skutnabb-kangas, Maffi & Harmon, 2003). In terms of population size the dominant language is Mandarin, officially spoken by most Chinese. It is followed by English, Spanish, Hindi and Arabic (Arnold, 2007). Such global differences naturally lead to diversity of vision, beliefs, practice, and expression by all societies.

Cultural groups are not necessarily national origin groups, because most sizeable nations include more than one ethnic/cultural group, as in China or India where there are numerous indigenous or immigrant groups characterized by significantly different cultures. The U.S., for example, incorporates many different cultural and sub-cultural groups, both native born and immigrant. However, depending on historical and geographical factors, a nation may shift from homogeneous to heterogeneous in ethnic composition and vice versa creating the possibility of numerous ethnic cultures within an overarching national identity (Arnold, 2007).

This chapter outlines definitions of culture from a variety of perspectives and provides background information on the effects of culture in an educational environment. Secondly, teaching and learning components for building a culturally responsive classroom are discussed with an

emphasis on reaching the adult learner. There is a focus on the importance of lifelong learning concepts emphasizing the need for continued growth and development at every life stage. The chapter concludes with a challenge to all adult educators for developing a cultural knowledge base and creating a cultural competence action plan.

BACKGROUND

Adult educators must first begin with a working definition of culture and understand all of the various dimensions of culture when establishing a cultural knowledge base. One definition states “culture is an integrated pattern of human behavior which includes but is not limited to—thought, communication, languages, beliefs, values, practices, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors of an ethnic group or social groups whose members are uniquely identifiable by that pattern of human behavior” (Gilbert, Goode, & Dunne, 2007, p.14). “Culture is a system of collectively held values, beliefs, and practices of a group which guides decisions and actions in patterned and recurrent ways. It encompasses the organization of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and behaving collectively that differentiates one group from another. Values and beliefs often function on an unconscious level” (Goode, Stockalingam, Bronheim, Brown, & Jones, 2004, p. 14).

Other definitions include “Culture is a set of meanings, behavioral norms, and values used by members of a particular society, as they construct their unique view of the world” (Alarcon, Foulks, & Vakkur, 1998, p. 3). “Culture is conceived as a set of denotative (what is or beliefs), connotative (what should be, or attitudes, norms and values), and pragmatic (how things are done or procedural roles) knowledge, shared by a group of individuals who have a common history and who participate in a social structure” (Basabe, Paez, Valencia, González, Rimé, & Diener, 2002, p. 103).

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