

“Cultural Learning Styles”: Should Students’ Culture Inform Instructional Choices?

Chapter Seven

- I. “Good Teaching Is Good Teaching” for Whom?
- II. General Principles of “Cultural Learning Styles” for Low-Income and Minority Students
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I. “Good Teaching Is Good Teaching” for Whom?

Among teacher educators in this country, there are two conflicting perspectives on the relevance of students’ culture to classroom decision-making. Probably the majority (and more traditional) view stresses that “good teaching is good teaching”—that the methods, strategies, and techniques that good teachers learn and master are equally valuable for students of a variety of cultures. This theory holds that “no special knowledge and skills other than the mainstream, traditional knowledge bases of teacher education are needed to train teachers for classrooms of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.”⁹⁰ The key to serving students of diverse backgrounds, according to this view, is simply vigorous and intense work, using the same techniques as you would with a non-diverse class.

Additional Readings

After this chapter, please read the following selections found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- *Speaking, Relating and Learning: A Study of Hawaiian Children at Home and at School* (abstract) by Steven Bogs, Karen Watson-Gegeo, and G. McMillen
- “An Indian Father’s Plea” by Robert Lake (Medicine Grizzlybear)
- “American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice” from ERIC Digest by Karen Swisher
- “Culture, Identity, and Learning,” by Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode from *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*

A competing perspective, however, argues that what works for White, middle-class students (which, some would argue, represents the conventional canon of teaching methods taught to new teachers) may not necessarily work for less affluent, minority students. This research on “cultural learning styles” (which was in large part originated by African-American scholars in the 70’s and 80’s who were concerned that schools were not meeting the needs of children of color), holds that “there really is a body of special knowledge, skills, processes, and experiences that is different from the knowledge bases of most traditional teacher education programs and that is essential for preparing teachers to be successful with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.”⁹¹ According to this view, teachers must learn the ways in which students’ cultures impact their learning styles and must study students’ cultural backgrounds because “matching the contextual conditions for learning to the cultural experiences of the learner increases task engagement and hence increases task performance.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Smith, G. Pritchey, *Common Sense about Uncommon Knowledge: The Knowledge Bases for Diversity*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. 1998. p. 17.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 18.

⁹² Allen, B. A., & Butler, L. “The effects of music and movement opportunity on the analogical reasoning performance of African American and White school children: A preliminary study.” *Journal of Black Psychology*, 22(3), 1996, p. 317.

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Education scholar Geneva Gay argues that the nexus of cultural influence is a student’s “learning style,” shaping the way children receive and process information most effectively. “[T]eachers must understand cultural characteristics of different ethnic, racial, and social groups so they can develop instructional practices that are more responsive to cultural pluralism. Cultural characteristics of particular significance in this undertaking are communication styles, thinking styles, value systems, socialization processes, relational patterns, and performance styles.”⁹³ Thus, the theory holds, by knowing about a student’s culture, one can make predictions about the student’s receptivity to various styles of teaching.

Note that this perspective does not discard traditional teacher training models altogether. Rather, it holds that those conventional knowledge bases (instructional planning, classroom management, etc.) must be supplemented with additional cultural and social knowledge to most effectively lead students of color.

Proponents of culture’s power to inform instructional choices point to examples of classrooms and schools in which educators have studied students’ cultural norms and then tailored instructional methods to align with those norms. Consider, for example, a well-known study conducted in Hawaii:

One graphic illustration of these effects is the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP). Several researchers have been documenting the effects of this language arts program for young native Hawaiian children. The results have been phenomenal. When the communication, interpersonal, and learning styles of native Hawaiian students were employed in the classroom, both their social and academic skills (including time on task, attention span, quality and quantity of participation, school attendance, reading ability, and language arts skills) improved significantly. Reading test scores increased from the 13th to the 67th percentile in four years.⁹⁴

[For more on studies of native Hawaiian children’s learning styles, and for a more thorough model of this “cultural learning style” reasoning, please read the short abstract *Speaking, Relating and Learning: A Study of Hawaiian Children at Home and at School.*]

For some, the notion that we can generalize about the learning styles of an entire ethnic or racial group is mistaken, if not offensive. Other skeptics of this culture-focused approach do not question the success of the applied teaching methods (for the numbers are unquestionably impressive); rather, they contend that these same methods when applied deliberately in any classroom with any group of students would produce good results. As one researcher labels it, “culturally contextualized instructional variability” (meaning an instructional approach that considers cultural propensities but also greatly varies instructional methods) may hold great promise of academic achievement for both minority and White students.

In this chapter, we will explore both sides of this debate in hopes of giving you the knowledge you need to decide whether “cultural learning styles” will present a net-benefit to your students. We will begin this discussion with a general overview of some of the lessons that theories of “cultural learning styles” claim to teach us. Then we will simultaneously consider (a) some specific guidelines these theories suggests for teaching African-American, Latino, and Native American students and (b) some common critiques of the idea that different ethnic and cultural groups have different “cultural learning styles.” Finally, we still step back and discuss the implications of this debate for your classroom.

⁹³ Gay, Geneva. *At the Essence of Learning: Multicultural Education*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1994, p. 2.

⁹⁴ Smith, G. Pritch, *Common Sense about Uncommon Knowledge: The Knowledge Bases for Diversity*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1998, p. 19.

II. General Principles of “Cultural Learning Styles” for Low-Income and Minority Students

Setting aside for the moment the scholarly and practical disagreements about whether or not a teacher should consider a student’s culture, race, ethnicity, or gender in his or her instructional planning, let us briefly survey the lessons purportedly learned by the multicultural education researchers about how to most effectively teach students of color or low-income students. What techniques or strategies are reported to be more effective with our students than with middle-class, White students?

One general finding of this research has been that minority students (which in most studies include African-American or Latino students) generally do not respond as well to traditional lecture formats as do middle-class White students. As one reviewer put it, “[I]f research has shown anything at all, it has shown that dull didactic instruction consisting only of teacher talk and seatwork is not effective with most minority students.”⁹⁶ Such findings counsel teachers of students of color to use more interactive methods than lectures and worksheets.

Cooperative learning is often cited as an excellent alternative to “dull didactic instruction” for minority and low-income students:

Cooperative learning leads to more positive racial attitudes for all students, more interracial friendship choices, and academic gains for students of color (especially Hispanics and African-Americans). It has no apparent effects on the academic achievement of Anglo students, since they perform about the same in cooperative and competitive learning environments. Cooperative, cross-racial learning also increases student instruction, self-esteem, and ability to empathize.⁹⁷

Are Teachers Who Share Their Students’ Race or Ethnicity More Effective?

One possible implication of the “cultural learning style” perspective is that teachers who share their students’ culture are more effective. Although a teacher who shares his or her students’ culture may more quickly understand and appreciate that culture, our experience over the years working with diverse groups of new teachers has demonstrated that teachers who do not share their students’ culture certainly have the ability to appreciate and engage with that culture in ways that are beneficial to their students’ learning. As one researcher explained, “White teachers are more likely than Black teachers to be out of cultural sync with the Black students they teach. These conclusions do not ignore the fact that some White teachers are excellent teachers of Black children or that some Black teachers are ineffective with Black children...”⁹⁵ We also believe that there are other factors at play that make teacher diversity important. Students should, for example, have educated and responsible role models who share their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; such role models can serve as an important source of motivation for students. At the same time, students need to have role models who are diverse in every respect—race, class, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, and other forms of diversity—for this exposure will help break down students’ assumptions about people from different backgrounds. Thus, while we believe that this country needs more teachers who represent the identities of minority and low-income students, we are confident—given the fact that in our experience at Teach For America we have seen teachers of all different backgrounds with students of all different backgrounds make dramatic academic gains—that one does not have to share the same race, class, gender, or orientation identity as one’s students to successfully lead students to dramatic academic gains.

A related strand of research has found that “cross-age peer teaching and role modeling are effective strategies that are significant factors in the lives of minority students who have overcome the odds to

⁹⁵ Irvine, Jacqueline Jordan. *Black Students and School Failure: Policies, Practice, and Prescriptions*. Oxford: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990, p. 61.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 60

⁹⁷ Gay, Geneva. “A Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education,” North Central Regional Educational Library, p. 18. Available online at <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0qay.htm>, accessed 7/1/2010.

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become successful academic achievers.”⁹⁸ (Below, we will consider more specifically the reasons researchers believe these techniques are more effective.)

As mentioned above, a primary critique of this line of reasoning is not that these techniques are ineffective, but that it is wrong to think of them as effective with only one subset of students. In fact, especially when we consider teaching techniques for a group as ill-defined as “minority” or “low-income,” some of the same scholars who develop these ideas assert that “much of the present research indicates that effective strategies for minority students—except for the deadly combination of didactic teacher talk (lecturing, asking simple questions, and giving instructions) and pencil-paper seatwork—are also effective strategies for most White middle class students.”⁹⁹

III. Group-Specific Theories and Their Critique

More targeted suggestions for teachers come from research that focuses on a more distinct cultural group (than the catch-all notion of “minority” or “low-income” students). African-American and Latino students in particular have been the subjects of many studies looking for a connection between culture and learning style, and a number of studies have claimed to have discovered that certain teaching methods are particularly effective with those groups.

While these studies take many forms and are conducted in many contexts, they are similar in their attempts to (a) identify meaningful commonalities in a given cultural group and (b) discern the impacts of those commonalities on how members of that group best learn. They also have in common some degree of controversy; some scholars vehemently deny that the concept of “cultural learning styles” has any meaning to educators.

Consider, for example, some of the reported findings on the best ways to teach African-American students.¹⁰⁰ We are told that “Many African-American students “tune in” more in a classroom that encourages interpersonal interaction, multiple activities, and multiple modality preferences than in quiet classrooms in which students are supposed to pay attention to tasks more than sound, and only one thing at a time (Shade, 1989).”¹⁰¹ Shade distinguishes between two different cognitive styles: analytical and synergetic. Her primary thesis is that schools are designed for an “analytical style” of learning while most African-American students (and she extrapolates to minority students including Latino or Native American) students tend to function in a “synergetic style:”

Analytical learners are competitive and independent, and they focus well on impersonal tasks. They learn well through print, focus best on one task at a time, and work in a step-by-step sequence. Synergetic learners, on the other hand, prefer to work cooperatively rather than independently; they do not block out their peers, but rather attempt to integrate personal relationships into learning tasks. Synergetic learners are stimulated by multiple activities and become bored when only one thing is happening. They often prefer kinesthetic and tactile involvement as well as discussion.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Smith, G. Pritchey, *Common Sense about Uncommon Knowledge: The Knowledge Bases for Diversity*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1998, p. 66.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Of course, not all Black students are “African-American.” Consider, for example, the degree to which West Indians and other immigrants from the Caribbean should or should not be lumped together with these generalizations.

¹⁰¹ Sleeter, Christine and Grant, Carl. *Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*. New York: Wiley Text Books, 2002, p. 66.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 55.

Native American “Cultural Learning Styles”?

As with African-American and Latino students, some would say that the notion of any common “Native American culture” is a fallacy given all of the rich, independent cultures represented in that group. And yet, a considerable body of research does claim that its results can be extrapolated from the particular tribal group studied to Native Americans generally. Some of the seminal research, moreover, has focused more on the *inappropriateness* of conventional teaching strategies for Native American children, rather than the particular teaching methods that are uniquely suited for Native Americans.

For her 1983 work, *The Invisible Culture*, researcher Susan Urmstrom Philips studied Native American children in Warm Springs, Oregon and observed that they generally hesitated to participate in large- and small-group recitations. On the other hand, they were more talkative than non-Indian children when they started interactions with the teacher or worked on student-led group projects. According to Philips, those “learning styles” were directly linked to a set of cultural norms that includes observation, careful listening, supervised participation, and individualized self-correction or testing.¹⁰⁵ A similar description of cultural patterns had been previously reported by other researchers studying classrooms attended by Sioux and Cherokee children.

Some scholars have latched on to “whole language” instruction as particularly aligned with traditional Native American culture, on the grounds that it is “compatible with the style of Native American children because whole language emphasizes meaning and process over product, uses cooperative work, capitalizes on oral language, and integrates subject areas. These features are compatible with Native American students’ preference for communal learning and personal meaning, use of time, and holistic world view (Kasten, 1992).”¹⁰⁶ For a brief overview of some of that research, please read “American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice” from ERIC Digest by Karen Swisher. In addition, read “An Indian Father’s Plea” by Robert Lake (Medicine Grizzlybear).

Similar findings are suggested for Latino students. Teachers are advised to create heterogeneous (rather than homogenous) learning groups on the theory that such methods can help their Latino students feel valued and feel that social pressures have been lifted, leading them to perform better.¹⁰³ This type of grouping should be utilized often, the theory goes, as Latino culture places an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition when working towards the attainment of goals.¹⁰⁴

As just mentioned, not all educators are bought into, or comfortable with, this line of research. For a number of reasons, some teachers and scholars bristle at the notion that Black, or Latino, or Native American students need different forms of instruction to succeed.

First, as mentioned before, many educators look at these lists of teaching methods and, instead of seeing a list of strategies tailored to a particular group, they see a list of strategies that all teachers in all classrooms, no matter what the cultural make up of the class, would benefit from.

Second, many educators and scholars would argue (and some researchers have reported) that this whole line of reasoning is shaky because of the great variation in “culture” within these supposedly culturally-defined groups. In fact, some commentators go so far as to argue that

over-zealous attempts at “cultural learning styles” amount to cultural bias themselves:

Instructional materials frequently reflect cultural bias through one size fits all generalization, by implying that there is a single Hispanic, African, Asian, and Native culture. This view fails to recognize that considerable cultural diversity exists within each of these groups and that even within a cultural subgroup, culture changes over time [Escamilla, 1993].¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Trueba, Enrique T. and Lilia Bartolome. “The Education of Latino Students: Is School Reform Enough?” *ERIC Digest*, No. 123, July 1997. (ED 410 367)

¹⁰⁴ Griggs, Shirley and Rita Dunn. “Hispanic-American Students and Learning Style.” *ERIC Digest*, May 1996. (ED 393 607)

¹⁰⁵ Philips, S. *The Invisible Culture*. New York: Longman Press, 1983.

¹⁰⁶ Sleeter, Christine and Grant, Carl. *Making Choices for Multicultural Education; Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*. New York: Wiley Text Books, 2002, p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ Abdal-Haqq, Ismat, “Culturally Responsive Curriculum.” *ERIC Digest*, June 1994. (ED 370 936)

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Is there enough of a generalized “African-American culture” to inform instruction? Are there enough common characteristics of Latino or Hispanic students to justify attempts to make generalities about how to teach these students? Or, is this research at its foundation a disrespectful and misguided attempt to lump together many distinct, rich, independent cultures into one, or to over-generalize about individuals within a group, when the differences among individuals within a group may exceed those among groups? One team of researchers who studied the education-related activities of four ethnic groups in Boston (Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, Chinese Americans, and Irish Americans) felt compelled to begin the summary of their research with the caveat that “[d]ifferences within racial or ethnic groups may be greater than differences between them on all of these family factors, including support for their children’s education, use of extended families and community networks, and involvement in schools.”¹⁰⁹

Finally, other teachers and scholars are dissatisfied with this “cultural learning style” approach to teaching because they see its process and results lending themselves to racially and culturally divisive thinking. As one commentator argues, there may be limitations and dangers to the culture-focused approach:

The dangers come from the likelihood that such knowledge will contribute only stereotyped categories and labels that then become barriers to understanding the behavior of a particular child working on a particular school task, and contribute to lowered expectations about that child’s possible achievement.¹¹⁰

Some academics and educators go so far as to consider these attempts to discern education-meaningful commonalities to be dangerously close to traditional racism. School Psychology professor Craig Frisby, for example, in his article “One Giant Step Backward: Myths of Black Cultural Learning Styles,” surveys all of the “learning characteristics” of Black children that various researchers have claimed to find in their research. Frisby argues that in addition to relatively neutral learning characteristics (i.e., “prefers cooperative learning situations”), that list is rife with negative stereotypes of Black children, (i.e., “behaviors appear impulsive” and “not motivated by achievement related goals”) that actually only perpetuate damaging lowered expectations. To make his point that this is little more than *nouveaux-*

Theories on Teaching Girls and Boys

While gender has not been our focus in this chapter, it is worth noting that in addition to these studies on how students of different racial and ethnic groups best learn, there are also instructional strategies that are supposedly more appropriate/effective with girls than boys, and vice versa. For example, some research indicates that boys may be more interested in objects and things while girls tend to focus on people and relationships; some teachers use these basic tenets to drive instructional decisions or to allow for differentiation of a lesson based on gender to ensure that boys and girls are both able to access the information. One study by Dr. Michael Gurian, author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, suggested that teachers may want to take care to ensure girls have a variety of leadership roles in the classroom during learning activities. Also, since girls tend to express their emotions with words rather than actions, they could benefit from more writing assignments or opportunities throughout all subjects. Of course, not every researcher in the areas of education or child development agrees that it is necessary to teach boys and girls in different ways; some have found that it can do more harm than good to girls if educators continue to expect of them what society has, and that teaching to gender stereotypes can only serve to reinforce them.¹⁰⁸

For more information on the differences in learning styles between girls and boys, please see the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit** (p. 7: “Resources for Gender Equity in the Classroom”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

¹⁰⁸ From “Parenting Debates” section of Parent Soup website. <http://parenting.ivillage.com/>, accessed 7/1/2010.

¹⁰⁹ Hidalgo, Nitza m. et al., “Research on Families, Schools and Communities: A Multicultural Perspective.” Published in Banks, James A. and Cherry Banks (eds.) *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. New York: MacMillan, 1995, p. 498.

¹¹⁰ Cazden, C. B., and Mehan, H. “Principles from sociology and anthropology: Context, code, classroom, and culture.” In M.C. Reynolds (Ed.). *Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher*. New York: Pergamon, 1989, pp. 54-55.

racism, Frisby puts side-by-side two quotes: one from a modern day proponent of the notion of a Black cultural learning style and one from a nineteenth century, overtly racist education commentator. To Frisby, the juxtaposition of these two (arguably similar) perspectives makes his point that this line of thinking will do more harm than good for students:

To characterize Afro-Americans as culturally different from Euro-Americans is not graphic enough. To the extent that the Black experience reflects a traditional West African cultural ethos, the two frames of reference are noncommensurable. There are fundamental incompatibilities between them: they are not quite polar opposites, but they are almost dialectically related. . . . This incommensurability makes it difficult to put Black cultural reality in the service of attainment in Euro-American cultural institutions, such as schools. The ideology that informs those institutes is a profound negation of the most central attributes of African culture.

From Boykin, A.W.

“The triple quandary and the schooling of Afro-American children.”

In U. Neisser (ed.) *The school achievement of minority children: new perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986, pp. 57-92.

The ground of distinction . . . is one of races, not of colors, merely. The distinction is one which the All-wise creator has seen fit to establish and it is founded deep in the physical, mental and moral natures of the two races. No legislation, no social customs, can efface this distinction. . . . We maintain that the true interests of both races require that they should be kept distinct. Amalgamation is degradation. We would urge our brethren of the African race, the duty of cultivating the genuine virtues peculiar to that race.

From Crowell, W., Ingraham, J.W., & Kimball, D. “Extracts from the majority report on the caste schools.” *The Liberator*, Vol. 16, No. 34, 1846.

Thus, to some scholars and educators, the downsides of attempting to discern universal cultural generalizations about certain racial or ethnic groups are simply not worth the risk of perpetuating negative stereotypes. These individuals believe that “[I]t is high time that BCLS (Black cultural learning style) models be laid to rest. Failure to do so may result in the realization that, instead of making significant steps forward, we have indeed made one giant step backward.”¹¹¹

IV. Conclusion: Treating Culture with Care

What are your reactions to these criticisms? Given the benefits and risks of utilizing cultural learning styles, what approach do you think you will take? To what degree, if any, will you tailor your teaching methods based on generalizations you make about how African-American, or Latino, or Native American students best learn? We encourage you to engage in discussions of these complex questions this summer with your instructors and co-workers.

As you have heard repeatedly in these various training texts, excellent teachers get to know their students. Knowing your students’ cultures and backgrounds, individually and collectively, is an important part of that process, and getting to know your students as individuals is, ultimately, the most effective

¹¹¹ Frisby, C.L. “One giant step backward: Myths of Black cultural learning styles.” *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 22, 1993, pp. 535-557.

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means of adjusting your methods to maximize each student’s learning. The degree to which “cultural learning styles” are a part of that calculation is a difficult question that you must continue to explore in your teaching practice.

To provide you with an additional perspective on the complexities of this issue, please read an excerpt of the book, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. This chapter, titled “Culture, Identity, and Learning,” focuses on the dangers of *not* appreciating students’ culture, race, or ethnicity in the classroom. Nieto encourages teachers to reject the “color-blind” mentality that ignores students’ culture. And, on the complex question of instructional decision-making, Nieto comes down squarely on the side of using one’s knowledge of students’ culture to affect instructional planning and delivery. For Nieto, this issue is closely related to the notion of differentiation: like any good teacher who differentiates a classroom based on multiple intelligences or different learning modalities, Nieto argues those practices can be applicable to cultural differences, if a teacher keeps in mind the all-important individual differences among students.

As you consider this chapter and Nieto’s perspective, think about what you already know and do not know about the culture and background of the students whom you will be teaching. How will you improve that knowledge? In what ways, if at all, can you imagine using it to improve your effectiveness as a teacher?

Once again, please stop at this point to read four short selections or articles, which have all been mentioned throughout what you just read: Abstract of *Speaking, Relating, and Learning: A Study of Hawaiian Children at Home and at School* by Boggs, Watson-Gegeo, and McMillen; “An Indian Father’s Plea” by Robert Lake; “American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles” by Swisher; and “Culture, Identity, and Learning” by Nieto and Bode. These selections can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. 