

# TEACHING CULTURE: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

By Lorenzo A. Trujillo

*Among good teachers, the idea persists that teaching is about transmitting culture. 1*



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Often culture is taught through simplifications and stereotypes. However, for learning to be meaningful, the transfer of knowledge must have validity. Teachers of culture must stretch beyond the simple to the complex in their approaches to the subject. Language is the fundamental basis for in-depth understanding of social structure and world view. Teach a song or food within the context of the reality of aesthetics, usage, practice, science, or other constructs. This teaching gives birth to the tangible symbol being used as the representation of the values of a society and gives the tangible symbol the essence of culture with integrity. To do less is to share myth and not reality.

All too often classrooms are plagued with superficial treatments of other countries, peoples, and cultures. The superficiality is taught through the reinforcement of stereotypes of peoples and nations. When foreign visitors attempt to interact with our citizenry, a reluctance to accept their accents or behaviors that might be different from those that are common to suburbia occurs. Yet, the myth prevails that people are learning about the world and how it functions.

Culture is the symbolic system that encodes the values of humanity at the levels of **language, social structure, and world view**. Humans are distinguished from the general animal kingdom because we have language, a complex social structure, and a world view based on history and experience. We are beings of reason. Our reason is based upon a cultural value system. The system is manifested through numerous symbolic means, but primarily through language. Culture is learned either

through first-hand experiences or vicariously. The total of these past experiences is what we refer to as history. It is through history that a culture is established, developed, and learned.

Language has many manifestations. Chomsky tried to define language through transformational grammar which diagrammed the deep structural meaning of language. Transformationalists attempted to codify language from a connotation base, whereas, structural linguists who preceded Chomsky described language in terms of how the language was structured. The problem with structure alone is that one can make serious mistakes of meaning in the decoding process. On the other hand, although the transformationalists were on the right track, they failed to achieve success because the human spirit is not definable by codified structures alone. Therefore, the deep structural meaning of a language could vary from speaker to speaker based upon the speaker's culture.

Then to complicate matters, we know language is heard, spoken, read, and written. In each manifestation, language assumes nuance of meaning through semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. Their interplay communicates subtle shades of difference that are unique to the domain of the interlocutor in his objective of exciting, convincing, pleasing, or just presenting information. And all of these are influenced by the essence of culture. For culture is the decoding device we use to give meaning from the symbolic messages transferred. It would seem apparent that the student or teacher who chooses to understand other cultures must first be able to communicate with the people of that culture.

Anthropologists have long struggled over the validity of their studies. They often take a microcosm of an experience and then generalize it to a reality of a people. The investigator will then publish a book on the findings to be understood later as a reality, when in fact, the researcher may have witnessed a unique and bizarre happening that is not common to the majority of the society studied. If only the researcher had understood the language, maybe the insight would have been considerably different.

Understanding a society will have greater accuracy when interpreted by individuals who are able to interact with a culture through the native language. In Spanish, the interlocutor generally **walks**. However, in English, the interlocutor generally **runs**. "Time runs on." "There is a run on the bank." "People run away from home." "Candidates run for office. In Spanish, "el reloj camina," (The watch walks); "el coche camina," (The car walks). These subtle differences take on greater meaning when

put into practical applications. In September of 1980, a Soviet soldier went to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, to defect but no embassy staff could figure out why he was there because no one spoke Russian. In corporate America, the Pepsi Cola Company had their slogan "Come Alive" translated into Chinese. The Chinese read, to their dismay and wonder, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave." Chevrolet sales of the Nova were not occurring in Latin America. The General Motors research department eventually realized that "No va," means "It does not go." Therefore, I believe that to understand a culture's social structure, the student must first understand the language.

Social structure refers to the strata or levels of society. Anthropologists agree that whenever there is more than one person, a hierarchy will exist. In common vernacular, class status is often noted: middle class, upper class, lower class. In every organization, there is a formal organization and an informal organization of social structure. The formal organization is easily defined by charts and official publications. However, the informal organization provides the deeper understanding of the essence of culture. To penetrate the formal and to equilibrate knowledge of the informal, communication through language understanding is the *sine qua non* of accurate data compilation.

World view is the third aspect of culture. World view is what we see and think from a personal point of view. It addresses how we perceive others and how they perceive us as a group and as individuals. It is that window screen of life experiences through which we analyze and interpret reality. Through this window screen the interpreter projects values on all that is seen. By viewing an environment through an undisciplined window screen, stereotyping becomes the norm. It occurs among novice researchers who define other cultures and people by their own personal definitions. This is a common phenomenon for the investigator or teacher who does not know the code of communication and social structure of a group being defined.

The reader may ask, "Where do the dances, music, and foods fit into this paradigm?" Each of the symbols of language, social structure, and world view has meaning through seven aspects of interpretation. The seven categories are secondary manifestations of the primary three symbols presented. The seven aspects of interpretation are (1) general usage; (2) morals; (3) religion; (4) aesthetics; (5) politics; (6) practice; and, (7) science.<sup>1</sup>

General usage refers to how the tools of a society are used. For example, a word,

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## THE WHITE WATER CHALLENGE OF "CHANGE"

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judge there to be conflicting interests, we do not label a social relation a "power" relation. Taking an authoritarian role and privilege has a cost in terms of future potential of the relationship. Persuasion and consensus tend to preserve the relationship and emphasize **common** interests, thus avoiding problems of power and domination. We must see our methods of determining interests and power relations as potential power issues themselves. Often a major rationale of assuming power of others, or justifying it to them, is the presumption that one knows better and can best serve their interests.

Relations form a continuum, beginning with the extremes of domination at one end and of consent at the other, with degrees of reluctant or willful compliance in between. Consent is an ideal in human relations. It involves a situation in which there is no background conflict of interests, and persons join together because they recognize a common purpose that they each approve. The relational concept of power broadens our understanding while binding and constraining the activities of both persons. Each person defines his/her purposes and range of alternatives partly in terms of the other. Each person gains a

particular gratification from the negotiated balance between compliance and resistance.

The best approach to solving power issues is to inquire of others what they believe their interests to be, to question them, to pose alternative versions of their interest, and to disclose inconsistencies or ambiguities in their own versions. In the end we may convince them or be convinced ourselves; in either case our judgment then is more likely to be accurate and less likely to be authoritarian. A practical process within the context of the situation is the best guard against extreme subjectivism or pretentious objectivity. To the extent that we attempt to inform ourselves about how others understand the world and their interests, we can at least be confident of putting forth our best effort. In matters of power, this is often the most that can be hoped for.

1. David Nyberg, *Power over Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.; Cornell University Press) 1981.
2. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Anatomy of Power* (N.Y.; Houghton Mifflin) 1983.
3. Michael Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books) 1980
4. Nicholas Burbules, "A Theory of Power in Education," *Educational Theory*, Vol. 36, #2, Spring 1986, pp.95-114.

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symbols of a culture; secondary resources should be presented with a primary base of understanding. The primary sources are accessible to speakers of the language of a culture. It is through the primary sources that the social structure and world view of a people can accurately be interpreted and understood.

Approaching the teaching of culture, whether it be European, Latin American, Asian, or American must be accomplished with integrity to have meaning. Otherwise, true learning will not occur. Recitation of facts void of cultural essence is not quality education. The teaching profession requires a high degree of responsibility. Our students will become the decision makers of tomorrow's multicultural society. The quality of their decisions will be based upon the myths or realities they have learned as students.

1. Lynne V. Cheney, *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools*, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1988, p.6.
2. The specific definition was developed by E. Seda-Bonilla, Ph.D., psycho-anthropologist.



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