



Website context: Learning from internationalisation → Overseas Campuses

Exploring culture in international learning

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Overview

Because culture is so firmly embedded in society, which is itself dynamic and complex, 'culture' is a very elusive concept to define. This paper briefly looks at a major contribution to the field of cross-cultural or international understanding of culture, that made by Geert Hofstede (born 1928). Hofstede is an influential Dutch writer interested in the interface between national and organisational cultures. His work indicated that cultural groups persistently influence the behaviour of organisations and societies. In 2008 Hofstede's work attracted some criticism by Ailonⁱ yet his work remains an important contribution to the field that is worthy of attention.

Defining culture

When considering 'culture' and how it should be defined, who is it that decides the rules of any culture, and who legitimately represents a culture? When we study culture, what or who exactly, are the subjects of our research? Clearly cultural identities are frequently being reinterpreted and are regularly reinvented. Because culture is so complex and dynamic, problems of reliability and validity make it difficult to measure. Culture manifests itself through social action and interaction. Perhaps some aspects of a culture only become apparent when stereotypic misattribution of behaviour becomes evident. According to Louie, (in Carroll and Ryan 2206:17ⁱⁱ) the best method to successful cross-cultural work is in developing meta-cultural sensitivity and awareness.

According to Hofstede (1980)ⁱⁱⁱ culture is:

is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values.

In this view, 'national culture' is what distinguishes the people of one country from those of another. Clearly national cultures have many sub-cultures, but according to Hofstede these are often variations of national cultures without school systems and legal systems to reinforce their values. Culture can also be defined with respect to organizations. Edgar Schein (born 1928) professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management has had significant influence in the field of organisational development. Schein (1985)^{iv} defines culture as:

the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic 'taken for granted' fashion an organization's view of its self and its environment."

Five dimensions of Culture: Hofstede's contribution

In an early study, (1980) Hofstede's analysis of more than 100 000 individual IBM employees from more than 40 cultures, there emerged a generalised framework of characteristics by which the cultures of the world could be described, (although not each individual of these cultures necessarily conform to such a framework).

The significance of this study is in its suggestion that culture may be complex but it is not chaotic - clearly defined patterns can be observed, and these mark distinct cultural values and practices. Hofstede's work identified this framework as corresponding to five significant issues (value dimensions, or 'problems') in social life: identity, hierarchy, gender, truth and virtue.

According to him, as children and young people are socialised within their respective cultures, they internalise their society's responses to these five fundamental 'problems' of life. By taking each of these issues to their extremes, and creating 'synthetic' cultures, Hofstede provides a useful framework for positioning cultural identities and thus makes analysis of inter-cultural communication and learning possible. Such synthetic cultures are simply magnified versions of aspects of culture value-systems and provide a useful tool for analysis of interactions between cultural types. Societal responses to these problems, in this view, produce distinctive 'cultures'. These extremities are represented in the figure below:

**The Five basic problems of society
(that societies respond to, to produce 'culture')**

Identity	Identity has to do with the relationship between the individual and the group. Collectivism is an adaptation to poverty and limited resources and individualism as an adaptation to wealth and plenty. As societies become wealthier, they move towards individualism, but remain collective as they deal with the challenge of scarcity.
Hierarchy	Hierarchy has to do with the extent and nature of inequality between people and groups, and whether or not this is seen as natural or not. The ' power distance ' in different countries varies according to prosperity - generally in more wealthy, there is a smaller power distance between individuals, this becomes larger in less wealthy countries.
Gender	Unequal role distributions between men and women is consistent with tougher societies because there is more emphasis on achievement and fighting and less on caring and compromise. Where there is more equal role distribution, a more 'feminised' society results. Unequal role distribution equates to masculine , equal distributions would equate to feminine societies.
Truth	Anxiety and the search for (the) truth are closely related. Cultures which are concerned with Truth with a capital 'T' are usually unfriendly to outsiders. What is different is dangerous. This is referred to by Hofstede as ' Uncertainty Avoidance ' in contrast to Uncertainty Tolerance .
Virtue	Some cultures value virtue more than truth, and this aspect of culture revolves around choices between future and present virtue - long-term orientation versus short-term orientation .

According to Hofstede the cultural differences illustrated by the five 'value dimensions' he derived have important implications for teachers and their learners. In his view (Hofstede 1986:301^v) the challenge for teachers wishing to teach inclusively is to realise cross-cultural adaptation rests primarily on the lecturer.

Building inclusivity through 'meta-cultural' sensitivity in cross-cultural teaching

Clearly whilst gathering culturally specific information about students may deepen rapport with the student, the lecturer's attitude and empathy towards cultural difference is what matters in cross-cultural encounters that produce learning that can be described as international. Cortazzi and Jin (1997)^{vi} argue that what is required to support international students, and overcome the problems of the intercultural classroom, is synergies of academic culture, including the culture of learning and culture of communication (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998:118^{vii}) Earlier Cortazzi and Jin (1997^{viii}) suggested some guidelines for improving intercultural understanding in the university lecture room:

1. Be aware that academic cultures vary
2. Don't generalize by transferring conclusion about cultures to individuals. Individuals don't necessarily conform to cultural trends;
3. Reflect the communication patterns within a classroom setting and try to develop an understanding of the presuppositions and cultural values impinging on this communication;
4. Try to understand cultures of communication and learning in the setting and assist learners to interpret these, by being explicit about them

Appreciating the complexity of cross-cultural interaction assists in exposing ethnocentricity when relating to cultures that are different to our own, or individuals whose behaviour does not conform to our norms. Clearly an essential aspect of communicating cross-culturally is learning to separate observation and interpretation. Normally we attribute intention and meaning to behaviour since our response is conditioned by the cultural norms of the society we are associated with. Being culturally sensitive, means that we delay attribution until more is understood about the cultural context from which the individual's behaviour comes (Hofstede, Perdersen and Hofstede 2002:17^x). Developing meta-cultural sensitivity is an important part in developing cross-cultural or international learning environments.

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ⁱ Ailon, G. (2008) "Mirror, mirror on the wall: Culture's Consequences in a value test of its own design". *The Academy of Management Review*, 33(4):885-904.

ⁱⁱ Louie, K. (2006) "Gathering Cultural Knowledge: Useful or use with care?" in Carrol, J., and Ryan, J., *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. Tonbridge: Routledge pp 17-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications.

^{iv} Schein, E.H. (1985) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. Jossey Bass.

^v Hofstede, G. (1986) "Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10, pp. 301-320.

^{vi} Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (1997) "Communication for learning across cultures". In D. McNamara & R. Harris (Eds.), *Overseas Students in Higher Education* (pp. 76-90). London and New York: Routledge.

^{vii} Jin, L. & Cortazzi, M. (1998) "The culture the learner brings: A bridge or a barrier". In M. Byram & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography* (pp. 98-118). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^{viii} Op cit.

^{ix} Hofstede, G.J., Pedersen, P. and Hofstede, G. (2002) *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures*. Boston: Intercultural Press.