



Website context: Learning from internationalisation → Teaching Strategies

Culture Shock, Learning Shock and Re-entry Shock

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Overview

This paper outlines the thinking of several anthropologists, business consultants and educators all concerned with the effects of individuals interacting with others in learning contexts, within cultures perceived to be foreign, over a sustained period of time. Culture shock concerns not only 'off shore', but also 'on shore' international students and staff. The literature discerns several stages of culture shock, and its converse, reverse or re-entry culture shock. The paper considers how acculturation is likely to proceed, depending on the extent to which links with the originating culture are maintained, and how important links with new groups are perceived to be. The role of 'identity' in the acculturation process is also considered.

Seminal thinking about culture shock

The term 'culture shock' was first coined by the world- renowned anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1901-1973)ⁱ in the 1950's. He defined culture shock as "precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life"ⁱⁱ. Within the literature associated with higher education, it is the "offshore" international student or staff member travelling to a foreign country who is typically considered the subject at risk of culture shock. However, "on shore" international students and staff, studying or working within their own countries in overseas institutions, may also experience culture shock.

Culture shock may also impact on home students. Influential Dutch writer Geert Hofstede (b1928-) (in Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede 2002:22) makes the point that culture shock may not necessarily be related to visiting or residing in a new country, and may be part of entering a new working environment, family, school, town or organisation. He defines it as

a sudden immersion into a non-specific state of uncertainty where the individual is not sure what is expected of him or her, nor what to expect from other people. It can occur in any situation where an individual is forced to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies.

Paul Pedersen (1995:1ⁱⁱⁱ) argues that ultimately cross-cultural encounters often begin with culture shock and can stimulate the process of self reflection and personal growth, leading to expanded awareness and adaptation to multiculturalism.

A phenomenon related to culture shock is learning shock which acknowledges the transition most learners undertake on entering new learning environments, especially in the university context. The term 'learning shock' was coined by Griffiths, Winstanley and Gabriel (2004)^{iv}, and affects adults who return to education after a protracted absence. It refers to

experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students (who) find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching

methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subject to ambiguous and conflicting expectations (Griffiths, Winstanley and Gabriel 2004: 2-3)

Stages of Culture Shock

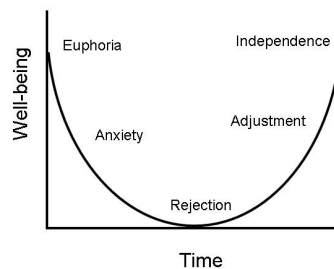
Oberg identified four stages of culture shock as: incubation, crisis, recovery and full-recovery. Adler (1975)^v described five stages as contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence. In the popular literature influencing university education^{vi} these perspectives, known as the U-curve, (attributed to Lysgaard, 1955 and Adler, 1975) are often represented as a linear pattern of adjustment following five stages:

1. honeymoon stage;
2. distress (disorientation/disintegration) stage;
3. re-integration stage;
4. autonomy/ adjustment or integration stage;
5. independence (or biculturalism) stage.

Pederson argues that culture shock is best understood as an intrapersonal process in which stages do not necessarily follow one another sequentially but may occur alone or simultaneously. In this direction Stewart and Leggat (1998:84)^{vii} described six aspects or symptoms of culture shock:

1. strain due to the effort needed to make the necessary adaptations to an unfamiliar environment;
2. a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation about friends, status, profession and possessions;
3. rejection by and/or rejecting members of the new culture;
4. confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity;
5. surprise, anxiety, and even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; and
6. feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope in the alien situation.

The 'U-curve' pattern in adjustment to a new culture
(Culture shock)



Adapted from Lysgaard 1955

Responses to culture shock: acculturation

Reactions to the phenomenon of culture shock can be understood using the multidimensional acculturation model of Berry (1997)^{viii}, which lists four responses or types of acculturation:

1. **Assimilation:** where people replace their native culture and customs with the culture and customs of mainstream society.
2. **Separation:** where people choose not to take on the customs and culture of mainstream society and remain segregated.
3. **Marginalization:** where people fail to fit into either their native society or mainstream society.
4. **Integration/biculturalism:** where people maintain values and customs of their native culture and take on the values and custom of mainstream society that allow them to become full participants in society.

This model describes possibilities of response around two dimensions of acculturation. The first, based on maintaining cultural identity and the second around maintaining links with other groups. Depending on how respondents react to these two dimensions, Berry's (1989)^{ix} model yields the fourfold classification of the acculturation mode chosen by individuals.

Acculturation attitudes		Is it considered to be of value to maintain cultural identity and characteristics?	
		Yes	No
Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups?	Yes	Integrated	Assimilated
	No	Separated	Marginalised

Berry's Acculturation Attitudes (Berry et al., 1989)

When individuals maintain a strong cultural identity, yet build links with members of other cultural groups this leads to an integration strategy in which important elements of both cultures are blended. A separatist response refuses to identify with the host culture and idealizes the home culture, leading to increased ethnocentric societies and chauvinism. Individuals only weakly identifying with their culture of origin and strongly attached to the host culture are essentially assimilationist. The combination of weak cultural identity and poor relations with the host culture is essentially marginalized - because their value systems are incompatible and integration is not possible.

The role of 'identity' in culture shock and acculturation

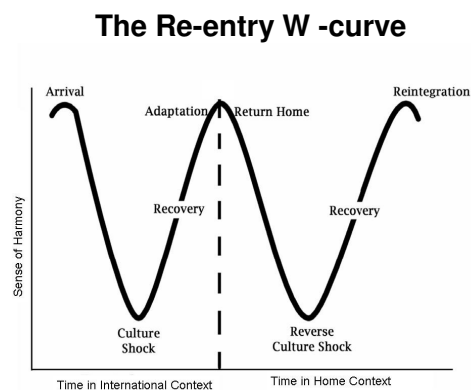
Culture shock may arise from the need within a new social situation for role adjustment and taking on different identities. Using detailed case study research, Wenger (1998:149)^x identified five dimensions of identity emerging from his subjects summarised by Sachs: (2003:125)^{xi}:

1. identity as **negotiated experiences** where we define who we are by the ways we experience our selves through participation as well as the way we and others reify our selves.
2. identity as **community membership** where we define who we are by the familiar and the unfamiliar;
3. identity as **learning trajectory** where we define who we are by where we have been and where are going;

4. identity as **nexus of multi membership** where we define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of identity into one identity; and
5. identity as **a relation between the local and the global** where we define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and manifesting broader styles and discourses

Reverse or re-entry culture shock

Reverse culture shock relates to the process of readjusting, re-aculturating and re-assimilating into one's home culture after living in another culture. Four stages are associated with this: disengagement, euphoria, alienation and gradual readjustment and is represented in the W-curve illustrated below (adapted from the 'Study Abroad Returnee Handbook' (University of Colorado: 2009)^{xii}.



Working through culture- and re-entry shock: personal growth

Four areas of personal growth and development are identified as a possible outcome of having worked through the personal issues associated with culture- and re-entry shock. Emerging skills and qualities suggest the importance of harvesting the positive outcomes of cultural interaction between individuals and groups: greater independence; awareness of international issues; sensitivity to difference and diversity and competence in other languages.

Dr Michael Davidson
November 2009

ⁱ Oberg, K. (1960) "Culture shock: adjustment to new cultural environments". *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177-182.

ⁱⁱ Oberg, K. quoted in Manz, S. (2003) "Cultural Shock: adjustments to new cultural environments" quoted in *Culture Shock - Causes, Consequences and Solutions: The international experience*. <<http://www.grin.com/en/fulltext/bwh/23471.html>> Accessed: 05 August 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Petersen P. (1995) *The five stages of culture shock: critical incidents around the world*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

^{iv} Griffiths, D.S., Winstanley, D. and Gabriel, Y. (2004) "Learning Shock - The Trauma of Return to Formal Learning". *Tanaka Business School Discussion papers: TBS/DP04/31* London: Tanaka Business School. <<http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/pls/portallive/docs/1/40419.PDF>> Accessed: 05 August 2009.

^v Adler PS. (1975) "The Transitional Experience: an alternative view of culture shock". *Journal of Humanist Psychology*, 15:13-23.

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- ^{vi} For example Kohls, R.L. "Survival Kit for Overseas Living".
- ^{vii} Stewart, L. and Leggat, P. (1998) "Culture Shock and travellers" in *Journal of Travel Medicine*, Vol 5 issue 2 pp 84-88.
- ^{viii} Berry, J.W. (1997) "Immigration, acculturation and adaptation". *Applied Psychology*, Vol. 46, p. 5-68.
- ^{ix} Berry, J.W., Kim, U., Power, S., Young, M., and Bujaki, M. (1989) "Acculturation attitudes in plural societies". *Applied Psychology*, 38, 185-206.
- ^x Wenger, R. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ^{xi} Sachs, J. (2003) *The Activist Teaching Profession*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- ^{xii} University of Colorado (2009) "Study Abroad Returnee handbook".
<http://www.studyabroad.colostate.edu/pdf/alumni_handbook.pdf> Accessed: 5 August 2009.