

## Essay on Culture

Culture plays a role in the daily lives of teachers, students, and members of society. This concept may not be present in the foregrounds of our mind, but at some point we consider what functioning roles we play in society and what piece of our background affects the purpose we serve. A common misconception that many are guilty of, is considering that culture is simply instilled in the human at birth; ergo they fit this cultural role as their lives play out with no means of considerable change. However, author of *The Light in Their Eyes*, Sonia Nieto examines the fact that culture is not innate. Nieto creates sub-classifications that help explain the development of culture. She notes that culture has increased depth because it is dynamic, multifaceted, and learned. Through Nieto's explanations as well as detailed examples it is important for educators, future educators, and members of society to understand that culture is more complex than "good genes."

The first characteristic of culture, as denoted by Nieto, is culture being dynamic. Culture is not flat, it is full of action. Nieto explains that culture must be taken both within its original context as well as out of that context to analyze the change that a culture may undergo. She states, "Even within their native context, cultures are always changing as a result of political, social, and other modifications in the immediate environment" (79). Cultures are constantly evolving as society evolves. Changes happened to help further perpetuate the culture. In some circumstances the culture will still not last. However, learning the roots and understanding the natural progression of change, creates a further knowledgeable member of society. Nieto continues on to explain that, ". . .the reality is that cultures are always hybrids, and that people select and reject particular elements of culture as suitable or not, for a particular context" (79). Nieto is touching on the idea that people can have numerous cultures. Each subculture may come in to play at different moments when that person sees fit. Not all elements of culture are relevant to certain individuals and they may choose to never embrace it. An example can be seen in members of that Catholic Church who choose not to participate in weekly mass or Holy Communion. These actions may not be agreeable to all members of the culture, but it does not excommunicate the member from the culture.

Much like Nieto, Sharmistha Das examines the idea of culture being dynamic. Das feels that this idea is applicable to schooling. She explains that school is a major culture for students and that not every schooling culture is similar. In Das' article, "Should the Power Dynamic Embedded in School Culture Be Treated as a Threat or an Opportunity to Create Collective Knowledge?" she states, "Depending on the choice made by members of the school community, and the level of consciousness of the culture-shaping process amongst them, every school culture

takes different shapes or forms” (1). This shape and form that Das mentions is created by the idea of culture dynamic established by Nieto. Through the dynamic of culture each student brings something a little different to their schooling culture. Even students with the same ethnic cultures may not embrace their culture the same, which will increase the motion of the school’s culture and the dynamic in which the students and members of the school get to experience.

Teachers should allow every student to embrace their individuality and the individuality that they bring to their culture and the school’s culture. This freedom of expression will help students have an opportunity feel the dynamics of culture. This freedom will allow older students to experience this concept of culture dynamics first hand. Seeing that each culture can be represented differently by the individual, and it is entirely normal and acceptable, can be very cathartic. It may also help students interpret their culture in a more unbiased way. As educators, it is important to never pigeonhole a student by assuming what a culture should or shouldn’t be. Since schooling is a time to embrace acceptable and healthy experimentation it should also be a time to allow students to embrace the aspects they feel compelled to embrace in their culture and to allow the others aspects that they don’t agree with to fall away. Through this process teachers should show consistent support of their students as they explore cultural dynamics.

The next idea that Nieto examines pertaining to culture is that culture is multifaceted. Culture being multifaceted is a pertinent point. Societal members are not regarded as belonging to one cultural group. Nieto states, “Given the growing people in the United States who claim biracial, multicultural, or multiethnic identity, ethnicity alone is unable to fully define culture” (81). Culture does tend to confuse members of society because they regard it as predominantly having to do with ethnicity. These qualifications are not untrue of culture, but culture is really simply a classification of a group of people with the same ideals. Yet, noted above with culture dynamics ideals can or cannot be embraced and still allow individuals to be a member of a specific culture. Many students may fit into numerous cultures—making them culturally multifaceted.

Many European Americans have been regarding themselves as cultureless. This is indeed faulty. Most European Americans come from the multiethnic background, that Nieto notes, yet they do not see this. They instead see themselves as cultureless or being full of autonomy. Catherine Raeff examines students’ ideas of being independent from culture in her article “Within Culture Complexities: Multifaceted and Interrelated Autonomy and Connectedness Characteristics in Late Adolescents Selves.” Raeff is looking at the idea that students are connected

by their misconception of being cultureless, because they are in fact multifaceted. Raeff states that “. . .current data suggests that late adolescents are reorganizing themselves in relation to others, since they are certainly not becoming independent without being simultaneously connected to others” (76). Raeff is looking at the idea that students who feel that they are becoming culturally independent are really absorbing cultures of others as well as combining cultures because they are interacting with others.

Raeff’s notion is true. Independent interaction between students can help to create multifaceted students. Still, as educators, there are things that we can do to help students understand the concept that culture is indeed multifaceted and not simply constructed of one culture per person. Teachers should take the time to explain the misconception of culture. Allowing students to see that culture can play more roles than just ethnicity in someone’s life may allow students who feel they have no culture, to see that indeed they have many. With that, teachers need to explain that students can have many or multifaceted cultures. Students can explore the cultures that they claim and then share their findings with their classmates. Sharing may help adolescents understand diversity as well as create newly formed bonds.

One of the last classifications of culture that Nieto examines is the idea that culture is learned. Nieto feels that culture is not biological or genetic. Culture in one form or another is taught as well as learned by the individual. Nieto notes, “Culture, especially ethnic and religious culture, is learned through interaction with families and communities. It is not consciously taught, or consciously learned. That is why it seems natural and effortless” (86). Culture is instilled in us through lessons which are taught to us by others. Whether it is through family or academia we learn ways that multiple cultures tend to act. Through learning these actions we are encouraged to duplicate and mimic the actions supported by our culture. Other times we have the opportunity through learning to establish ourselves as part of a culture that we desire to embrace.

Teachers play an important part of facilitating ideas about cultures. Teachers need to be unbiased when teaching these concepts and teach only factual information. Through this factual information the educated are able to formulate their own views on the culture that is being taught. Paul J. Colbert looked at the notion of teachers teaching culture in a classroom in his article, “Developing a Culturally Responsive Classroom of Faculty, Students, and Institution.” Colbert states, “When teachers have knowledge of their biases and accept different cultural qualities, it is easier for them to recognize the creative ways that students express themselves” (16). Student expression is an important goal in the classroom. As acknowledged by Colbert when teachers have a solid

background in what their biases are and accept and understand the cultures they are working with or explaining to students; students will feel more welcomed to be expressive. Conversely, if a teacher is giving false or bias information on a culture, students may see this and may be more reluctant to be an active member of the class. An activity that would allow students to learn culture, keep culture, and experience constructivism is through allowing students to do research on a culture that they associate with. Students can then use a graphic organizer to explain what ideas of their culture they knew prior to their research and then they can also show what ideas that were foreign to them and their feelings on these findings. Teachers would help with this learning by being more of a credible guide; while students would have control over the knowledge that they are taking in and sharing with their classmates.

Literature can play a very helpful and influential role in teaching students these classifications of culture. After these cultures are examined, students would then be able to apply their findings to what they know about their culture and how it has been built to what it is today. A novel that depicts dynamic culture is Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In this novel Alexie expresses his experiences of his teenage years on the Reservation. The dynamic culture comes in to play when Alexie decides to attend public school while still living on the Reservation. In public school his culture is represented differently than it is when he is hanging out with his friends from the Reservation or even family members. After students grasp the idea of dynamic culture through Alexie's writings, they would then be able to compare how they have used or experience dynamic culture in their lives.

Another example of using a novel to help students understand classification of culture is Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros' main character, a young Latino girl named Esperanza, is a character that experiences multifaceted culture. Esperanza understands and embraces her Latino heritage but she also knows that her culture stems from her schooling, her jobs, and the culture that she strives to be. Cisneros also inserts cultures that Esperanza has trouble understanding because of the cultures she is a part of now. Students could use this novel to examine how the protagonist of this novel embraces her multifaceted cultures. They could then examine the many cultures that they participate in and how the combination of these cultures makes them the person they are, or hope to be.

Lastly, *The Halloween Tree* by Ray Bradbury is a novel that helps explain the idea that culture is learned. In Bradbury's novel a group of young boys travel through different cultures on Halloween to attempt to save their

sick friend Pipkin, whose soul was stolen by a mysterious character. The boys do everything in their power to learn, respect, and embrace these cultures, which later the reader sees affect the boys' cultures as well. After reading and analyzing how important it was for the boys to learn these cultures that they weren't born into, students can look at the cultures that they had to learn and why the learning process and the culture was so important to them.

These three examples are primarily applicable to students between the grades of 7-12 dealing in the English realm; however, these ideas established by Nieto are vast enough that they can be facilitated to students from the beginning of their schooling as well as in different content areas. The principles behind these concepts need teachers who are willing explain that culture has depth and that it is much more intricate than an individual being born into it. Many things effect culture, but as explained by Nieto, culture is always going to be dynamic, multifaceted, and learned. These three cultural ideas easily morph together to show that students, as well as members of society, are made up of multiple cultures that they embrace and expose differently at different times. These ideas that they choose to expose are acceptable and learned from some aspect of society, whether it be school, family, politics, or media. Keeping these diverse thoughts in mind as well as keeping all biases at bay, a teacher should be able to continue to help students' growth of knowledge and culture continue to flourish inside and outside of the classroom.

#### Work Cited

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