

Culture Definitions/Applications

When asked to define what culture is, many things pop into my mind. The arts are considered cultural. During the summer in the Youngstown area, a different cultural festival can be found every weekend. When I step into my grandmother's house, I see our Jewish culture in every room. And, as I look around every classroom I'm in, many different cultures are seen in the many different students. There is no easy definition for culture, but as teachers, it is imperative that we understand and adapt to every aspect of culture we encounter in our classrooms.

There are so many different components to culture that no person can be identified by only one. In her book, *The Light in Their Eyes* (2010), Sonia Nieto says, "That cultural identifications are multiple, eclectic, mixed, and heterogeneous" (p. 80). For example, I am Jewish, American, a college student, a member of several professional organizations, a dog owner, a supporter of local theater, and the list goes on. Each component that helps make me the person I am has its own culture. This is just one example of how my culture is multifaceted. Now think of all the students we will meet in our classrooms and how many different cultures we will encounter each year. We will need at least an understanding of the many different cultures our students may have just to get through that first day and to show our students the same respect for them as individuals that we expect to receive from them.

Teachers want to get students invested in their education. But with so many different cultural aspects each student has, how do we get the individuals involved? Nancie Atwell explains one way this can be accomplished: reading/writing workshop. In her book, *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning* (1998), Atwell explains how giving her students choices in what they wrote and read got her students excited about

learning. One way she encourages her students to interact with each other is through her analogy of “the dining room table.” By allowing her students the ability to choose what they want to read, Atwell created an atmosphere where students were talking about reading. Suddenly, the conversations her students are having, “isn’t sterile, grudging, or perfunctory. It’s filled with jokes, arguments, stories, exchanges of bits of information, descriptions of what we love and hate and why” (p. 32). The students are now influencing and teaching each other while they are allowed to make choice based on who they are.

People are not born knowing anything about the culture that surrounds them. They don’t know what type of music they will like, what religion they are, or what their heritage is. They will have to experience and learn these different aspects before they apply them to their lives.

Nieto says:

Culture, especially ethnic and religious culture, is learned through interactions with families and communities. It usually is not consciously taught, or consciously learned. That is why it seems so natural and effortless. Although this process does not hold true of all cultures...we predictably learn culture while sitting on our mothers’ or grandmothers’ laps, standing by our fathers, listening to the conversations of family members around us, and modeling our behavior on theirs. (p. 86)

This means that people learn culture through everyday interactions, not through conscious learning. Because of this, teachers can have a great deal of influence over the type of people their students will become. This makes understanding multiple cultures that much more important.

As teachers, we need to accept the fact that students will learn different cultures simply by being in our classrooms. While we will influence them, peers and classmates will have more of a cultural influence than we can ever have. One way teachers can facilitate students encountering and exploring different cultures in our classrooms is through the use of inquiry

circles. In an inquiry environment, teachers are backing away from the “I talk, you listen” and the expectation that students will work individually and promoting the students to work together in small groups. In *Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action* (2009), Harvey Daniels and Stephanie Harvey tell us that through these interactions, students develop, “better social attitudes, stronger work habits, and more persistence in school” (p. 7). Allowing students the opportunities to interact with their peers, and therefore interacting with other cultures, creates an environment for the students to teach each other and to help each other nurture the skills necessary for individual success.

The most important thing to remember about culture is that it is always changing. Nieto tells us that, “Culture is dynamic, active, changing, always on the move. Even within their native contexts, cultures are always changing as a result of political, social, and other modifications in the immediate environment” (p. 79). Cultures cannot survive in a vacuum. It is a living, breathing thing that will continuously change to adapt to the environment within the culture exists. Therefore, teachers must also be dynamic and have the ability to change themselves and their instruction to fit the cultural needs of their students.

A perfect classroom match for dynamic cultures of our students is Atwell’s workshop. In this environment of choices, students can find books that meet their interests and they can produce written assignments that represent who our students are and their beliefs. Part of workshop is individualization: each student is evaluated and instructed as an individual. In this environment, Atwell says, “there is no basis for comparing one student against others” (p.79). Most importantly, students can make changes in their education as they change, which in the case of middle and high school students, might be daily.

Much like the students we will encounter in our classrooms, culture is a multifaceted, learned, and dynamic thing. In order to keep up with the everyday changes, teachers need to have the tools to adapt to these changes. Without this knowledge, education and our classrooms will become stagnant and unable to adjust to the many different aspects that make up culture.

References

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- Nieto, S. (2010). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.