

SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING CULTURE

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...It is specifically in the area of culture that the traditional skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing take on an expanded dimension in the standards-driven classroom (Klee, 1998). While language teachers have long acknowledged that learning another language is inextricably bound with learning another culture, classroom practices have not given adequate attention to the role that culture plays in conveying or interpreting meaning (Seelye, 1993). Clearly, knowing how to speak to a native speaker of Spanish requires some basic knowledge of courtesy in the language. In the past we have had students practice when to use *tu* or *Ud.*; we have taught the difference levels of politeness implied when making requests using the present vs. the subjunctive (e.g., *quiero* vs. *quisiera*, *¿puedes?* Vs *¿podieras?*). However, there are far more subtle and important kinds of information we have not focused on, even from the first day of class as we teach greetings. How important are greetings to native Spanish-speakers? How extended should the greeting be? When is it polite to switch from social greetings to task-oriented topics? While as Spanish teachers we have tried to help students avoid making grammatical errors—errors that in reality do not often interfere with establishing good relationships with native speakers of Spanish—, we have neglected the significant role that culture plays in how native speakers interpret what our students say to them. Indeed, a very small culture error can lead to serious interference with communication. In designing standards-based communicative, interactive tasks we will need to build in opportunities for students to practice more than words, that is, more than vocabulary or grammar, so that they also attend to the cultural aspects of their interactions (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 1999).

If cultural information is a key to successful interpersonal communication, it is even more vital when the opportunity for direct negotiation of meaning is absent. Successful listening and reading require use of extensive cultural knowledge for making accurate interpretations. Precisely because learners cannot negotiate meaning by directly asking questions of the speaker or writer, students need to bring to bear additional knowledge to the interpretive task. Students who read the Spanish equivalent of “Reds down Cards five to one” will find it meaningful only if they bring the necessary cultural knowledge to that message. Students will need to know that someone whom we would call a ‘friend’ in English is not necessarily someone who would be ‘un amigo’ in Spanish, that in Spanish an ‘amigo’ implies a much closer relationship. Knowing the difference between friend/amigo is critical to understanding correctly the implied relationship when the word is used by a Spanish speaker. Similarly, students will need to know the cultural information implicit in their style of written communication, their choice of words, or the ways they decide to address an audience if they want the message that is in their heads to be consistent with the one interpreted by a native listener or reader. At the higher levels of proficiency, such as those likely to be attained by heritage learners or students who have followed a long sequence of study, the culture embedded in language takes an increasingly vital role. These cultural aspects of communication will need to be built into the tasks and activities students carry out in classrooms, and from the earliest level of

language learning. Students will need to work with a variety of texts to gain interpretive skills, because text types and organization are highly influenced by culture. For example, although in the U.S. students are taught to look for the main idea in the topic sentence of a paragraph, they are not likely to find that organization typical of many expository texts in Spanish. Correct interpretation of tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language depend on cultural knowledge, and such interpretations need to be practiced by students exposed to a range of contexts and speakers that differ in gender, social status, or country of origin (Seelye, 1993). One implication for instruction is that a far greater role than ever before will need to be marked out for listening, reading, and viewing if we expect students to perform successfully in authentic situations when they leave the classroom. If we do not give students frequent access to such learning opportunities, they are not likely to attain the national standards we have worked so hard to set.

Not only will culture be integrated more closely with language learning, culture learning will take other forms as well. In the recent past we have done a very good job in helping our students acquire knowledge of other cultures, both in terms of big ‘C’ and little ‘c’. Our students have been presented with many facts and information that have helped them function more effectively in other cultures or become more aware of the major contributions that the culture(s) of the Spanish speaking world have made. Because much of culture learning has been informational, transmission forms of instructional delivery have been common and quite adequate. Whether through readings, videos, or lectures, students have had access to culture learning in the classroom. As we move toward standards-driven instruction, much more of student learning will need to derive from inquiry processes facilitated by teachers rather than from information given by teachers.

Most salient in the conceptualization of the culture standards is the interplay between perspectives, products, and practices. Perspectives are the underlying attitudes, values, and beliefs that determine why people do what they do and how they do it. Perspectives determine (and may be determined by) customs, traditions, daily life patterns, aesthetic contributions, or the products used in daily life (whether fast food or cell phones). Far too little attention has been paid to cultural perspectives in the past, and for good reason. Many of us do not know the perspectives that shape some products and practices—indeed, perspectives may be implicitly understood but not explicitly known even by native speakers. Further, in discussing perspectives many teachers have been uncomfortable trying to explain the value systems of other cultures, particularly when they differ from our own. Moreover, discussions of attitudes, values, and beliefs may easily fall prey to stereotyping and over-generalization (Morain, 1995). It is far easier to clarify the definition of ‘punctual’ in another culture than to explain why.

It is unlikely that many of our reservations about teaching cultural perspectives will change dramatically in coming years. How then, will standards-driven culture instruction manifest itself in classrooms? First and most importantly, teachers will need to ensure that students recognize that there are perspectives in every culture that determine products and practices. We may not always know them, be able to recognize or articulate them, or even discover them; but, they are always there (Rosenbusch, 1997). Knowing

that every culture has a set of values and beliefs that shape cultural behaviors and practices is the first step in understanding other cultures.

Although some perspectives may not be known to teachers, some may be discovered through inquiry. Student projects that undertake to discover cultural perspectives are likely to be effective tools for discovering the *why* of culture. Research into the historical bases for customs, the attitudes of current native speakers, or the belief systems that generated certain products and practices can be carried out by students. Teachers are not the primary source of information but rather guides in helping students carry out projects of cultural discovery (Lange, 1999). Face-to-face, telephone, or electronic surveys are ways in which acquiring cultural perspectives can be blended with *Goal 5/ Communities*, allowing students to use authentic contacts with native speakers to learn culture. These kinds of culture projects will go beyond many of those currently found in Spanish classrooms where poster board displays proudly present information students have researched about countries or famous speakers of Spanish. Data collected from student surveys (who is the most important person in your life?), sample pages from numerous newspapers that provide evidence of the sports information wanted by readers, or statistical data (average length of annual vacation leave given to workers), provide authentic sources of information about what a culture or sub-culture values. Students will be active participants in creating their own understandings of cultural products, practices, and perspectives rather than digesters of information handed out by teachers.