~Cultural Variables in the Classroom~

The following is a list of cultural variables that may affect the educational climate and outcome of your teaching experience. This list is to serve as an initial guide for consideration. It is not an exhaustive list or a definitive resource. Use it as a starting point and make additions or modifications as you gain more experience teaching diverse groups.

Communication Style: Verbal and nonverbal communication varies greatly from culture to culture. Communication is a complex interaction and miscommunications are often subtle. Listed below are some components of communication that may differ according to the culture.

Assertiveness: Assertiveness is highly valued in U.S. culture. This is not true of all cultures, and some people may experience difficulty ranging from being assertive to coming across as aggressive. These differences can affect at least two important aspects of the classroom dynamics: the level of participation and a person’s comfort with saying 'no'.

Eye Contact: The practice of eye contact when speaking and listening varies in different cultures. Consequently, a student who does not maintain eye contact or stares too long may not be challenging your authority. In fact, that student’s behavior may indicate great respect.

Humor: Humor and the ability to laugh are some of the best attributes that all people share and are a valuable tool for an instructor. However, humor that is considered appropriate can vary dramatically. Feel free to use humor, but think about what you are saying. Depending on where they are from, International students may not understand idioms or be familiar with pop culture, so it is good to be sensitive to that fact.

Family: All cultural groups recognize that the family is important. However, the relative importance placed on the family can vary significantly. Oftentimes this is reflected in the amount of obligation that the family expects of its members. At times, these obligations can conflict with educational values, goals, and procedures.

Gender: The role of women and how they are shown respect varies significantly from culture to culture. Be aware of how you treat women students. You may be asking the women in your class to engage in activities that are unfamiliar to them or that go against their notion of appropriate behavior.

Authority/Status: Some cultures emphasize status differences, while others try to minimize them. The United States was established through rebellion and revolution. In some ways, this attitude continues to affect the nature of our society in that the U.S. is a seemingly informal country. Students may call their teachers by their first names and teachers may dress casually and/or joke with students. In some cultures, rank, status, and authority are accepted and expected. Consequently, some students may award total respect to virtually any authority figure. As a result, you may find that some students consider you an absolute expert and never question your ideas, whereas others may show you little respect. Many of the variables already mentioned, such as eye contact, level of participation in class, and assertiveness may be influenced by how a person responds to authority.
Time: Our concept of time as a resource to be used efficiently, and our expectation of strict adherence to a schedule are shaped by our culture. Before labeling a student as ‘lazy’, ‘forgetful’, or ‘uninterested’, you may want to consider their cultural influences. Americans are sometimes viewed as so dominated by their schedule that they don’t have time for the people around them.

Importance of Spirituality: Spirituality can take at least two forms that are important in education. The first is religion, and you must be sensitive to the fact that the nature or timing of an activity may conflict with a person’s religious beliefs and practices. The second way spirituality can affect education is in the relative importance placed on facts and concrete ideas versus metaphors and concepts.

Control of Nature: Some cultures believe that people control nature; others believe people are controlled by it. In general, Americans believe that humans have the power to maneuver in most circumstances, and find the concept of fate difficult to accept. One reason for this is that accepting fate as a controlling force limits possibilities for personal achievement. Approximately seven-eighths of the world’s population comes from cultures where fate is considered a pervasive force in shaping the outcomes of their lives.

Academic Integrity: A lack of academic integrity (more commonly known as ‘cheating’ or the practice of ‘plagiarism’) is considered a serious offense in the United States educational system, and as such, can carry severe consequences. In other cultures, ‘cheating’ may be looked upon as ‘helping’ and students may feel obligated to ‘help’ when the call arises. This ‘assistance’ may not be recognized as cheating in another cultural climate. It is important to discuss with students the educational policy on academic integrity and the concept of intellectual property before the opportunity for cheating arises.

Conformity and Creativity: Many cultures encourage conformity, while others reward creativity. In the United States, students are encouraged to be creative and independent when solving problems. Students in the U.S. are also expected to challenge the ideas of authority figures when their own ideas conflict. In some cultures, the assumption is that the inexperienced learner will gain knowledge from listening and following the advice of the “expert”.