



Cultural Relativism and Educating for Character

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Cultural Relativism and Educating for Character

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness...”

Mark Twain

If the opposite of prejudice is careful judgement; the opposite of bigotry is generous respect; and the opposite of narrow-mindedness is thoughtful open-mindedness, then it stands to reason that travel and, by indirection, intercultural education contribute significantly and perhaps immeasurably to educating for good character. Anything that can vanquish prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness has to appeal to thoughtful character educators. Travel affords a helpful image for intercultural education because it always involves movement from one culture to another just as the course of one's education is fundamentally a journey toward a more precise understanding of new places, ideas, people, and experiences.

The image of travel as intercultural education developing good character becomes more clearly focused by clarifying how educators can make students good intercultural travelers rather than cultural tourists. Tourists glide through a new experience to see it, photograph it, and visit its famous sites. They are on vacation from their home, but they remain in their personal comfort zones. Travelers take the time to immerse themselves in the local culture, explore less-traveled paths, and adjust their itinerary as new ideas and interests develop. Paul Theroux, renowned

travel writer, captures it well, “Tourists don’t know where they have been; travelers don’t know where they are going.” Educators easily recognize this significant distinction because they have seen many passive students as tourists who are actually unclear about what they have studied as opposed to the adventuresome, curious, reflective students who productively make sense of new experiences. But young traveler-scholars quickly find themselves facing the complexities of cultural and moral cultural relativism.

Aristotle’s reluctance to place much value on cultural relativism is clearly one important side of the coin. Those who argue against cultural relativism base their argument on claims that across all cultures human beings have so much in common that cultural differences can be basically regarded as merely superficial. On the other side of the same coin Herodotus noticed that while the Greeks cremated their deceased, the Callatians comfortably devoured theirs. This he saw as substantially more than a superficial cultural difference. Thus, the Western world began to question whether there is such a thing as objective, universal validity to cultural practices.

So how can educators make sense of the challenges presented by moral and cultural relativism in ways that help teachers enrich the insights, skills, and attitudes of

intrepid young traveler-scholars? Even though a source of wisdom as profound as Wikipedia has advised that cultural relativism, “should not be confused with moral relativism,” ultimately educators cannot productively disentangle these two categories. Educators are largely responsible for passing on to the next generation the moral values of a culture so that each individual can know how to behave in that community. This delicate process involves helping students build their own moral code carefully, steadily, and thoroughly in accordance with the basic values of one’s community. Defining the boundaries of “one’s community” is the first complex task for moral educators.

Substantial challenges immediately arise in students and teachers trying to identify their simultaneous membership in diverse communities, for example the subculture of this year’s 8th grade boys who are athletes in the Maplewood Middle School and at the same time they are American citizens. What understandings can educators develop that will help students as they clarify their thinking about moral choices and about cultural diversity living in an endless array of evolving subcultures? Before even engaging the issues involved in both moral relativism and cultural relativism serious character educators need to convince both their educator colleagues and the larger community that complex moral and cultural matters often include controversial topics of considerable educational value. One component of this effort to convince

must focus on the value of engaging students in ways that broaden their perspectives, deepen their need for understandings of specific details, and enable them to make better decisions in a wide range of situations. Successfully meeting this challenge depends to a considerable degree on persuading all that the entire educational process needs to slow down. Slowing down often seems counter-intuitive in an atmosphere of high-speed technology with so many new demands on instructional time and steady refrains along the lines of “so much material to cover.” A second component focuses on defining controversies as important and interesting problems to be solved with creative solutions instead of as binary one-side-or-the other, win-lose situations. Often an important complex, interesting issue such as choices for disposing of waste material does not first appear to include significant individual or cultural values, but as options are laid out and become more specific vital personal and communal value choices nearly always emerge.

In successful schools controversies are neither ignored nor suffered. Good teachers recognize instead that controversies and cultural differences provide frequent teachable moments while also establishing the principle of respectful and productive interaction with those who differ. Effective anthropologists delving into the potential value of fully understanding different cultures come to recognize that what may seem odd, exotic, or unacceptable in one culture is entirely normal in another

culture's moral-value system. And, of course, vice versa. This process becomes a social-cultural version of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," as he explained this vital approach as essential for productively experiencing and understanding art. With that kind of approach schools can better prepare students as they come to realize that decisions need to be made, courses of action planned, and creative innovations developed. This process is closely linked to issues of cultural relativism in classrooms because the strategies for teaching controversial issues and for tackling cultural relativism both end up requiring, and therefore teaching about, the skills of good judgment. Some controversial issues and cultural differences have at one end of the continuum a category of controversies that are truly irreconcilable differences and at the other end faux controversies or superficial differences. Political-legal communities that are truly mono-cultural and are fundamentally isolated face zero or very limited controversial issues or concerns about cultural relativism, moral relativism, or learning how to handle differences and controversies. But basically all other political-legal communities include diverse cultural heritages with frequent interactions with other cultures or other political-legal communities.

By the year 2020 more than 5 billion people will have mobile devices. The era of cultures being able to live independently from diverse cultures is diminishing

rapidly. Therefore schools must plan how to best educate their youth for dealing with not only cultural differences, but also with internal cultural transformations and the attendant moral complexities.

Teachers dealing with issues of cultural relativism benefit from those who have worked with teaching controversial issues and value conflicts. Often in facing conflicted individual moral choices such as deciding whether to be honest or kind in the face of a question such as “Did you like the dinner I cooked?” one can turn to a third undisputed value such as diplomacy or tact. If the third value is more abstract such as broader happiness or general peace, it will lead to an answer along the lines of “I think I prefer the casserole you prepared last week.” The burdens and consequences of pure honesty are thus removed from the situation as are the distasteful aspects of an answer that is artificially kind. Similarly, those trying to resolve complex or difficult cultural differences can search for points of view that two cultures have in common while at the same time imagining ways to compromise. The first requirement in controversial issues or in cultural differences should be to find common ground and search for an agreed-upon third value or common custom. For example, as difference cultures deal with widely variant concepts of the role of women in the culture, they often can find common ground on the importance of family in each culture’s value system. As that common value is explored, valuable

and important insights become clear to each culture as they look more closely at what “the importance of family” means in practice with finer details. This helps contextualize the issue of how women are treated and in doing so it leads to more precise, less-polarizing discussions and analyses.

As educators embark on plans for addressing issues of cultural relativism they meet five broad options identified by intrepid education reformers who have gone before them. The basic approaches are assimilation, acculturation, multi-cultural, cross-cultural, and inter-cultural. Though each carries a distinct set of principles and ideas, in good classroom practices, and therefore in real life, the categories and choices we make become more a eclectic blurring of the boundaries between categories. Thus, in the final analysis students and teachers learn how the key to these various approaches is the development of clear-eyed good judgments.

Educators often steer away from both controversial issues (especially involving complex moral choices) and cultural diversity (especially when entangled with the complexities of cultural relativism.) Too many do so because they errantly understand that one side of a controversy will lose the dispute or that one of the two cultures being compared will be disparaged in the comparison. This error is based on an incomplete understanding of effective ways for teaching about controversial

issues or cultural differences. Successful classroom techniques and models look beyond mere binary, win-lose, either-or processes. Good classroom models and strategies stimulate fruitful exchanges of rationales, values, and finely detailed nuances leading to sound resolutions of differences, compromises, as well as creative fresh alternatives. These models move students well beyond polarizing and paralyzing arguments.

One educational tradition for schools dealing with matters of cultural diversity is the assimilation model. Simply put this means that any form of a minority culture must steadily adapt, adopt, and accept the folkways, mores and values of the majority culture. It may well be a gradual assimilation, but it does not include any significant attention to matters of cultural relativism because the customs of the minority culture are regarded as a deficit that can never be regarded as an asset in the majority culture. The minority culture custom is either abandoned or it goes underground. The assimilation model is completely at odds with long-standing pedagogical principles holding that teachers educate more productively when they respect and build on what students already understand. As a common corollary of that in effective teaching-learning settings it becomes clear to all that good teachers regularly learn from the exchange of fresh ideas. The assimilation model is a serious barrier preventing such healthy exchanges. The value of students observing teachers having authentic

learning moments is immeasurable. It provides students with an exemplar of life-long learning. These are both lost in the assimilation model.

In the acculturation model a minority culture is able to preserve key qualities of its own culture while it generally integrates into the majority culture. In the process of integrating the minority culture often adopts characteristics of the majority culture. The result is that the members of the minority culture become bi-cultural so they are able to adjust their behaviors as they meet a wide range of various situations. Successfully integrating majority and minority cultures requires careful understanding and respect on both sides to be sure the minority culture is not rejected or marginalized. The best ways for teachers to prepare students for these important and delicate processes is through examples of successful and unsuccessful interactions between minority-majority cultures. Often this hinges on the occurrence of micro-aggressions. These are a contemporary form of what Dickens' identified in Mrs. Pardiggle as "distinguished for rapacious benevolence," in which her apparent kindness cloaks a harsh denunciation. A common 21st century instance of that would be, "My goodness, you have done very well for yourself as a member of (-insert any racial or ethnic minority here-)" Of course, that could possibly be uttered as a legitimate compliment about overcoming the barriers created by the majority culture. But more typically, while it commends the achiever, it involves no

considerations of changes needed in the majority culture that built the barriers in the first place.

An example of acculturation working effectively is worth a closer look. A 20th century court case is rich with complex cultural and legal issues. It provides a good, positive point of reference for the acculturation process. A 1943 U.S. Supreme Court Case, *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, represents a concrete example of two cultures resolving a dispute of moral-cultural values through an agreed upon system and agreed upon third value beyond the conflicting values in the case. Significantly, the case was decided in the midst of World War II when nationalistic loyalty was an especially high value in nearly all countries. In Nazi Germany hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses were sent to concentration camps for refusing to salute the Nazi flag. Their religious code believes fervently that the laws of God must prevail over the laws of man, and they interpret a particular biblical passage as prohibiting them from a salute or declaration of allegiance. At the same time the state of West Virginia required all students to stand while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag. The Jehovah's Witness community refused to do so and they initiated a claim that was finally resolved in the U.S. Supreme Court. It is a clear example of how a majority culture-minority culture can resolve a dispute by appealing to a broader value, in this case the Constitution's First

Amendment protection of religious freedom. The Supreme Court concluded that, “The very purpose of a Bill of Rights was to withdraw certain subjects from the vicissitudes of political controversy, to place them beyond the reach of majorities...”

In response to the claim from the Board of Education that these were matters of school discipline best left to local officials the Court’s decision asserted that the Jehovah’s Witness students held rights which are much more dear than that, noting instead that none should fear

“that freedom to be intellectually and spiritually diverse or even contrary will disintegrate the social organization. To believe that patriotism will not flourish if patriotic ceremonies are voluntary and spontaneous instead of a compulsory routine is to make an unflattering estimate of the appeal of our institutions to free minds. If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.”

This kind of reasoning, especially given the historical period in which it was rendered, is a valuable guide for understanding the power of larger guiding principles as well as an open decision-making process that helps resolve specific cultural variations. In today’s pressures of renewed nationalistic fervor the importance of distinguishing between nationalism and patriotism cannot be over-estimated. Charles de Gaulle drew the distinction sharply,

“Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; nationalism is when your hate for people other than your own comes first.” American newspaper columnist Sydney J. Harris plumbed the issue more precisely,

“Patriotism is proud of a country’s virtues and is eager to correct its deficiencies; it also acknowledges the legitimate patriotism of other countries, with their specific virtues. The pride of nationalism, however trumpets its country’s virtues and denies its deficiencies, while it is contemptuous toward the virtues of other countries. It wants to be and proclaims itself to be “the greatest”, but greatness is not required of a country; only goodness is.”

On the specific issue of requiring children to pledge allegiance routinely the U.S.

Supreme court rejected the West Virginia law firmly observing,

“Love of county must spring from willing hearts and free minds, inspired by a fair administration of wise laws enacted by the people’s elected representatives within the bounds of express constitutional prohibitions.”

Patriotism and nationalism conventionally refer to political units, but we can easily substitute cultural pride for patriotism and cultural chauvinism for nationalism to help students understand cultural relativism. The concrete example of this court case gives us a good road map for handling moral-cultural differences when majority and minority cultures dispute.

While it is valuable for teachers to be fully aware of the issues surrounding the assimilation vs. acculturation processes this understanding is really limited by two conditions. First, it is limited to situations with a conflict between a majority and a minority culture. Second, it is limited to situations involving only two cultures that are generally static. In the 21st century those two conditions are rapidly becoming extinct. Across the globe educators need to think of deepening student's understanding of pluralistic multi-cultural situations involving a variety of sub-cultures. And they need to expand the definitions of cultures and sub-cultures well beyond race, ethnicity, and national affiliation to include religions, sects, gender, language, generation, and socio-economic class among many others.

The assimilation vs. acculturation distinction is of some value to educators enabling students to understand issues involving cultural relativism. But in the students' real world static bi-cultural situations are quite rare. Three other distinctions are more helpful in equipping students for the 21st century and global community. In that community efforts to decide whether there is such a thing as a set of absolute, immutable, universal cultural standards are essentially futile. Similarly, making claims that each culture has a right to its own independent cultural values also becomes futile as culturally the globe shrinks with increasing cultural inter-activity. Three somewhat different approaches help teachers deal with complex cultural

relativism issues; they are multi-cultural, cross-cultural, and inter-cultural approaches. These are general categories; in reality teachers and students need to realize that in various situations the lines between the categories are blurred and overlap.

The multi-cultural perspective is a common situation involving more than two or three cultural groups. For young people especially this is made more quickly complex because a variety of sub-cultures are almost always in play also. In the multi-cultural model groups live alongside each other, respect each other, and interact satisfactorily with each other. They share some customs, food, and festivals without deeply engaging each other. It relies on a significant acceptance of the relativity of moral and cultural values. Each culture and sub-culture is able to essentially preserve its own cultural customs and values. Significant differences are tolerated as long as they do not interfere with another culture in the larger group, or with the larger group's customs, standards, and laws. For the multi-cultural model to work peaceably there must be two general agreements. First, that the laws of the broader group prevail over the cultures of the smaller group as long as compromises are forged and differences are resolved comprehensively and fairly. Second, members of each of the various cultures must freely consent to formal or informal membership in the particular subculture. This presumes the freedom for an

individual to change their membership. Without the “freely consent” element the majority culture will readily claim that they are rescuing members of the minority culture.

The cross-cultural model is more elusive and therefore less frequently turned to by educators. It usually involves analytic comparisons between cultures wherein one culture is established as the norm. A common purpose is to guide members from one culture how to avoid offending or creating uncomfortable misunderstandings interacting while in another culture. In many of these moments where cross-cultural offenses have occurred they frequently remain unspoken and small distresses begin to build up. For example, in Western culture eye contact during a conversation indicates sincerity, careful attention, and honesty. In China the same eye contact is regarded as disrespectful. Many argue that mere recognition of these kinds of differences is a sufficient goal. But teachers recognize good learning opportunities in pursuing such differences further. For example, understanding this difference in cultural customs can expand into a richer understanding about what the pros and cons of “respect for teachers” mean in a variety of other situations. Respect can become an elusive concept when placed in specific, real-life situations. Savvy teachers know how students can easily manufacture insincere expressions of respect, which would further complicate the issues for sharp-eyed teachers. Thus,

thoughtful steps to fully understand most any cultural custom present valuable teachable moments.

The intercultural approach is more comprehensive and much more interactive. The key to success in this approach is clarifying how each culture and sub-culture is constantly changing and growing. Connected to that basic principle is an understanding of how each culture can preserve much of its individual identity while at the same time learning new ideas and practices from other cultures. Cultural systems practices and principles evolve over long periods of time. Nearly always a change in one practice learned from a different cultural system will be connected to other cultural norms; thus, any changes must be very carefully considered. Using the example of contradictory meaning of eye contact in eastern and western cultures, a good teachable moment would be for students to conduct thought experiments and perhaps interview older citizens in each community to anticipate what else would change if each culture adopted the other culture's habits. The result is always a richer understanding of the complexities of each, and actually of any, culture. In this model students come to learn how intercultural interactions leave no one unchanged. These kinds of transformations are constantly unfolding anyhow. Our best option is to gain precise understandings about many diverse developments so that those

involved conclude that they have grown positively as a result of deeper understandings undergirding a particular nuanced skill, insight, or attitude.

In optimal intercultural approach schools gain confidence in teaching about diverse cultural values and soon are able to create “an attitude of mind, an orientation that pervades thinking and permeates the entire curriculum.” (Mansilla, p. 14) In her article, “How to Be a Global Thinker,” Veronica Boix Mansilla identifies four dispositions that comprise global thinking:

- 1.) “a disposition to inquire about the world including the tendency to explore local-global connections and gather information from unfamiliar environments
- 2.) a disposition to understand multiple perspectives – others and our own including cultural systems and contexts and the value of shared human dignity.
- 3.) a disposition for respectful dialogue
- 4.) a disposition for responsible actions

These broad principles can be made effectively operational in classrooms at multiple points in the K-12 curriculum gradually building a model formula for a set of lessons. These lessons best begin by identifying and inspecting any current international or intercultural news event. After the teacher and students create a clear picture of what is going on for both, or multiple, sides of an incident students pursue three key “Why Questions”:

- 1.) Why does this situation matter to people around the world?
- 2.) Why does it matter to our town?
- 3.) Why does it matter to me?

(Mansilla, p. 13)

Other teachers have built on this model by having students design courses of action to settle the incident peacefully. They create learning communities inside the classroom, their school, and across their neighborhoods and communities. Others connect with students around the world through actual and virtual exchange programs.

A well-designed curriculum for the 21st century must include basic ideas about global competence. That competence is best defined as “one’s capacity for and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance.” Mansilla, p.4 Each word in that definition is especially well chosen. The most effective education for creating that competence infuses these “capacities for and dispositions to understand and act” across the K-12 curriculum/ A key hallmark of well-educated global citizen is one’s ability to move beyond their own familiar ways of thinking. This includes enjoying a fresh perspective when experiencing cultural differences. An enormous vitality is locked up in cultural diversity. The key to success in helping students experience that vitality is captured in a T.S. Eliot poem from the Four Quartets:

“We shall not cease from exploration, and

the end of all our exploring will be to arrive
where we started and know the place for the
first time”

“Little Gidding,” Part 5, 1942

With this enlarged perspective educators can move beyond simplistic, either-or attitudes toward cultural relativism. If educational leaders sense a polarized, and therefor paralyzing, situation with extreme views prevailing such as:

1.) Every culture has a right to establish its own norms, values, and priorities. Thus those cannot be challenged by anyone from a different culture.

Or,

2.) Accepting the principles of cultural relativism means that a particular culture could endorse patently unacceptable behaviors such as murder or stealing,

they need to move the conversation to a more productive perspective on the issues associated with culture relativism. A richer perspective urges us to be very cautious about condemning another culture; to regard culture differences as teaching and learning opportunities; to understand how cultural differences can be irreconcilable, trivial, or interestingly valuable; and, to learn how to re-consider our own culture’s values in light of how particular customs, morals, beliefs, folkways mores, and laws fit into the deeper values of any cultural system.

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