

## **CONCEPTS OF MULTICONTEXT THEORY**

- **THE U.S. MODEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION WAS CREATED AND IMPRINTED WITH BOTH HIGH CONTEXT (HC) AND LOW CONTEXT (LC) PATTERNS**
  - Graduate education in the U.S. was fashioned after the mid-nineteenth century German research model created by and for LC people and culture in Europe. It is successful because it focused on combining Western analytical thinking and hard scientific teaching and research. That incipient graduate school component was ensconced on the liberal arts college structure (another LC British colonial import) to evolve into the vertical university infrastructure we are familiar with today.
  - The graduate educational setting, (teaching seminar or research lab consisting of a small group of graduate students), and learning mode (one-to-one apprenticeship) actually contain HC principals which transformed into other academic cultures over time.
  
- **THE FIRST NOTABLE HC POPULATIONS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION WERE PROBABLY HC MALES ASSOCIATED WITH SOUTHERN EUROPEAN ETHNIC GROUPS WITH MEDITERRANEAN HERITAGE**
  - For example, HC Italian and Jewish males entered academia and eventually into the faculty with the aid of the GI Bill in the late 1940's. It provided admission for ethnic populations previously denied access into academia and their arrival began changing the elitist mind set associated with the professoriate and higher education. These early populations were satisfied with the status achieved by simply joining and becoming accepted into academia but they were not intent on changing academic culture to suit their needs. Many of those in these cultures strived to assimilate into the LC academic culture.
  
- **ENROLLMENT OF HC POPULATIONS (WOMEN, ETHNIC MINORITIES) IN HIGHER EDUCATION BEGAN INCREASING IN THE MID 1960'S**
  - The advent of the Civil Rights Acts and associated affirmative action programs opened up the pipeline for Women and minorities to enter higher education in greater numbers than before. In the last ten to fifteen years, Women have had the greatest impact on changing the academic climate by introducing more High Context values into higher education.

- **CHANGES IN ACADEMIA AFTER 1964 FOCUSED PRIMARILY ON AD HOC STUDENT SERVICES PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO FIT THE NEEDS OF NEW KINDS OF ETHNIC STUDENTS. NONE OF THESE PROGRAMS INCLUDED CHANGING THE CORE ACADEMIC CULTURES**
  - Building minority-disadvantaged or M/D programs presented a double-edged sword for many colleges and universities. These programs were effective in creating greater access to higher education, but they also tended to separate, polarize, and marginalize ethnic minorities and others from mainstream student life and the core learning systems in academia. The conflict generated between these M/D populations and academic cultures was perceived by many institutions as a consequence of acclimating the educationally disadvantaged and from the opposite perspective as racism or sexism. Turbulent times from the late 1960's through the 1970's further fueled the fires of campus unrest and socio/political divisiveness among ethnic minorities. Political protests fostered ethnic centers and women studies catering to HC needs by providing demarcated ethnic boundaries and enclaves to physically recharge around others with similar HC ethnic proclivities.
  
- **BY MID-1980'S A DIFFERENT COHORT OF HC POPULATIONS BEGAN ENROLLING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**
  - New kinds of students are entering the university school today. They are more non-traditional, notably High Context/Field Sensitive women and ethnic individuals, with common concerns over the Low Context insularity growing more prevalent in academic culture. Almost imperceptible changes associated with the clusters of women, ethnic minorities, and even some majority males, all of whom tend to gravitate toward HC attractions (i.e. certain academic fields, ethnic and gender issues, etc.). Although this cohort is outwardly as different from each other as their genders and ethnic cultures, inwardly they possessed a common perspective of cultural context and cognition. These individuals were imprinted by families with High Context cultural preferences, from expanding populations of recently arrived immigrant Latino groups to the established majority populations with HC ethnic heritage linked several generations back in Southern Europe. Cultivated by parental generations with HC cultural origins, these culturally variable HC populations can be aligned into a unified field associated by High Context preferences (i.e. mutual affiliation toward HC student services programs or HC type academic fields). This hidden cohort of diverse populations is bound together by unseen contextual commonalities that surface as issues in conflict with academic cultures. For instance, these diverse populations may encounter similar performance problems on standardized tests, or share similar preferences in other cognitive ways which remain hidden due to the standardized formats used to describe and identify cultures, ethnicity and gender. These populations are also closely

associated with more than one set of context and cognition (**Multicontext**). Outwardly, each group maintains distinct socio/cultural patterns relating to gender and ethnicity (**multicultural**).

- **NO SINGLE HC ORIENTED GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL IDENTIFIES COMPLETELY WITH ALL THE CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH ANY ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER OF THE HC/LC BINARY CATEGORIES**
  - If individual women and ethnic minorities were measured and plotted along a continuum of context preferences, one would likely find them selecting variable preferences from both HC and LC categories. Plotted as groups of significant size, (i.e. Mexican American, African American, Women, etc.) they would tend to demonstrate more HC than LC characteristics with varying intensity depending on variables such as generation or immigrant experience, gender or ethnicity, intra and inter-ethnic variations, class, socio/economic status (SES), and so on. There is emerging evidence for this pattern from examples described in Chapter 7 in *Beyond Affirmative Action* (Ibarra, 2001). The F.A.M.E. (Fairness, Access, Multicultural, and Equity) Report (1995) analysis conducted by ETS on its new testing initiatives for the GRE, hold clues for the association of cultural context and performance on standardized testing for women and certain HC ethnic minority populations. The 1995-96 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey offers another extensive set of measurable responses to questions that may be determined by HC or LC characteristics.
  
- **IF ALL HC POPULATIONS ENCOUNTER SOME TENSION OR CONFLICT WITH LC ACADEMIC CULTURE TO A GREATER OR LESSOR DEGREE, THEN THE MORE TRADITIONAL HC CULTURAL POPULATIONS WILL LIKELY ENCOUNTER MORE ADVERSE IMPACT UNDER THESE CONDITIONS**
  - One should note that the more traditional HC, such as Native American populations in this country, have indeed the greatest difficulty with the academic culture in higher education. Tribal populations have the lowest enrollments in Higher Education. In proportion to the total population of Latinos in this country, there are very few Latinos in graduate education for perhaps similar reasons. If constructs about cultural maintenance and ethnic persistence hold true, then there is very likely a correlation between traditional culture, contextuality, cognition and the success/performance patterns among various HC ethnic populations.
  
- **CONFLICT BETWEEN HC POPULATIONS AND LC ACADEMIC CULTURE HAS PROBABLY ALWAYS BEEN A HIDDEN ISSUE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**
  - This unified cohort of HC populations have been loosely recognized by their commonality of issues and often lumped together into generic categories (i.e. minorities, underrepresented, gender, etc.). They have not been clearly identified until now for a variety of reasons:

- **There were fewer HC populations in higher education prior to the 1980's.**
- **Other paradigms (e.g. the Pipeline), other objectives and goals (e.g. to increase the critical mass of underrepresented groups on campus), and other beliefs and theoretical perspectives (e.g. racism, sexism, educational disadvantage, etc.) took priority in research designs.**
  - These tend to cloud or mask the potential patterns for demonstrating influences derived from cultural context or cognition. The factors highlighted above demanded more research attention or higher institutional priorities and thus tended to blur the issues or mask the context and cognition patterns.
- **HC immigrant populations entering the U.S. have steadily increased since the mid 1940's.**
  - The first and second generation offspring of those early immigrant groups, especially among Latinos, are now entering higher education in greater numbers and beginning to have a contextual impact on undergraduate and graduate education and beyond. A significant event fueling this surge of HC culturally predominant Latinos in higher education today was the burst of Mexican American manual laborers encouraged to immigrate to the U.S. Southwest during WWII. The Bracero Program was instituted by the federal government as a means to assure U.S. food growers an adequate workforce to tend their fields. Many stayed after the program ended and the legacy of that era is the higher numbers of HC Latinos and Latinas in this country today.
- **HC population increases have been fueled even further by relatively recent bursts of new immigrant groups that have no intention to conform to the cultural norms in this country as previous immigrant generations have done in the past.**
  - Unlike previous HC ethnic populations who came here from Southern Europe or Mexico during the 1940's, the more recent immigrant populations also from Mexico (e.g. Chiapas), Central America (e.g. Guatemala, El Salvador) and the Caribbean (e.g. Cuba, Haiti), are much less interested in acculturating, and much more interested in ethnic maintenance. These growing populations favoring their ethnicity over North American culture are often a product of political unrest, civil war or revolution in their homeland and consequently they feel less encouraged to allow their host culture and society to influence what they believe may be a possible return to their native countries. Maintenance of their HC cultures not only provides continuance of HC patterns but excellent opportunities for the current generations now entering higher education to adopt both cultures and

cognition, thus lending credence to the increase of Multicontextual Latinos and Latinas in undergraduate, graduate education and beyond.

➤ **HC POPULATIONS TEND TO CHOOSE FIELDS OF STUDY IN THE HUMANITIES OR SOCIAL SCIENCES MORE OFTEN THAN IN THE PHYSICAL OR BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES (STEM)**

- This is not associated with inability or lack of interest in studying science, engineering or mathematics. Poor K-12 experiences among low socio/economic populations may be one cause, but another potential factor may relate to the degree of HC attractiveness and application in *any* academic field. Clinical Psychology is popular among HC ethnic groups because it provides an application to people and the community, as do some fields in engineering which tend to attract more ethnic populations for similar reasons. Many fields in the Humanities or Social Sciences are more people oriented, or naturally aimed more toward applied or community study (i.e. Social Work). Consequently, they are naturally more attractive to HC populations. But not all social sciences are attractive to HC populations for the reasons they inhibit important HC components. Anthropology, for instance, has a low level of ethnic minorities because the field has for a variety of reasons discouraged them from studying within their own communities and has historically valued observational research over applied research. Professions, such as Law, Medicine, even Business, are notoriously Low Context by nature. Yet they attract HC populations in surprisingly large numbers because they are recognized fields for upward mobility, prestige, high income, and they have been consistently traditional careers for Latin Americans in general. We may also include HC attractiveness factors for they are highly people oriented with tremendous potential for application to the community.

➤ **RESEARCH INDICATES THAT HC POPULATIONS ARE NOT LEAVING ACADEMIA. THEY ARE SIMPLY NOT ATTRACTED TO IT OR ARE SELECTIVELY ATTRACTED TO CERTAIN HC ACADEMIC PROGRAMS FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS**

- LC academic cultures, and graduate education specifically, is resilient to change and more reluctant to do so than organizations in the private sector. The private sector is moving much faster and more deliberately toward diversity in corporate culture than is higher education and academia. One likely possibility for this phenomenon not only includes higher salary and other benefits, but also that there are HC or LC cultural attractions and detractions that influence a multitude of individual adaptive strategies and decision-making processes. The concern for higher education, non-professional graduate programs specifically, is the potential to turn away one of the fastest growing populations in the country to the detriment of higher education.

- **THEREFORE, ACADEMIA IN THE U.S. MUST PREPARE FOR THE RAPIDLY INCREASING NUMBERS OF HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES AND PEOPLE**
  - Higher Education must first recognize than adjust to an emerging *Multicontext* world (Ibarra, 2001). To survive this challenge, institutions must seek ways to correct imbalances in their academic cultures and realign educational priorities toward building a new inclusive community of scholars based upon equal measures of *Comprehensive Knowledge* (concrete connected knowing and active practice) and *Analytically-Based Knowledge* (abstract analytical knowing and reflective observation). These concepts are based on the principals cited earlier of scholars like Boyer (1990) and Rice (1996) who call for higher education reform that match the current cultural evolutionary trends changing our institutions in both form and content (Ibarra and Thompsen, 1997, Ibarra 2001).

### **OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR MULTICONTEXTUALITY**

- **“MULTICONTEXTUALITY”** is a term (always capitalized) that was constructed to describe the theoretical and historical dynamics outlined above. It reflects the research findings (Ibarra 2003-07) that show that many more college-bound students and emerging faculty scholars and researchers are likely to combine High Context and Low Context preferences in their educational activities and pursuits.
- **“CULTURAL CONTEXT”** is the term defined by Edward T. Hall to describe the hidden dimensions in cultural communication. It assumed but did not include organizational culture.
- **“CONTEXT DIVERSITY”** is a term constructed to describe the conflict issues between populations that have been historically identified as “minorities” or women who have demonstrated difficulties with academic culture and underperformance in our educational institutions. The process of reframing educational systems to include both HC and LC components is the objective of Context Diversity with the goal toward increasing institutional diversity and in turn, increase the academic success of historically underperforming populations.
- **ALTHOUGH PEOPLE MAY BE LABELED OR ASSOCIATED WITH PREFERENCES THAT ARE MORE HIGH CONTEXT OR LOW CONTEXT, NEITHER SET OF CHARACTERISTICS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED GOOD NOR BAD.** These characteristics should neither label nor stigmatize people in general because people may vary their contextual preferences over time or depending on situations and circumstances as well as learning new strategies for life perspectives and experiences.

- **THE GOAL IN REFRAMING CULTURAL CONTEXT IS TO CREATE A BALANCE OF HC & LC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE ACADEMIC CULTURE OR COMMUNITY OF FOCUS FOR CHANGE, AND NOT TO ELIMINATE EITHER HC OR LC CHARACTERISTICS FROM THAT ARENA.**
  
- **ONE OBJECTIVE OF THE REFRAMING PROCESS IS TO DEVELOP STRATEGIES (e.g., POLICIES, PRACTICES, TRADITIONS, ETC.) THAT HELP EXPAND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE(S) AND NOT TO CHANGE PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN IT.**