

# THE ROLE OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN AN EMERGING MULTICONTEXTUAL WORLD

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The social dynamics of our educational systems are changing rapidly. In fact, they are evolving. When I began my study of Latinos in graduate education in 1995, I set out to explore two simple questions: why are there so few Latinos entering higher education, and for those in graduate school, what were the reasons for encountering academic conflict? I not only found new answers to these questions, I also found myself propelled into a world beyond multiculturalism, beyond affirmative action, beyond our current models for diversity in our society. I realized this was a hidden dimension that most of us sense in bits and pieces. The discovery came by reframing the bits and pieces into concepts and then linking all the pieces together for the first time in a systemic way. But this world had no words for these new ideas. I had to generate new terms to differentiate ideas that were forged in the paradigms of affirmative action and the educational pipeline, and I had to avoid being caught in those mindsets by terms that referred back to the current ideas on diversity. I also saw the foundation of this model was based on principles of people-oriented experiential learning. They are the cornerstones of the multicontextual model and the focus of my presentation to you today.

## Cultural Context

**“Culture”** refers to learned patterns or sets of group behavior and values imprinted on individuals, beginning at birth. These patterns, both conscious and unconscious, frame the “context” for individuals to perceive time and space, to interact and associate with one another, and to establish modes of perceiving and learning about the world. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1977, 1984, 1992) identified populations both here and abroad with similar patterns of cultural context and clustered them on a continuum from “High” to “Low,” signifying the importance or intensity of these patterns within certain ethnic and gender groups.

**“High Context Cultures,”** (HC) identified as predominantly ethnic minorities and females in the U.S., tend to focus more on streams of information that surround an event, situation or interaction in order to determine meaning from the context in which it occurs. Communication is in the context, while very little is in the transmitted message.

**“Low Context Cultures,”**(LC) predominantly northern European ethnic groups and majority males, tend to filter out conditions surrounding an event, situation or interaction to focus as much as possible on words and objective facts. Communication is the reverse of that in HC

cultures and has been described by Hall as “computer-like” (Hall and Hall, 1990). If information is not explicitly stated, the message is distorted for people in LC cultures. His model appears as a binary comparison, but in fact it represents a continuum of possible cultural patterns and preferences.

### **Hall lists ten primary message systems:**

***Interaction***--Refers to various forms of communication such as speech, tone of voice, gesture, writing, and so on

***Association***--Defines the various ways in which societies and their components are organized or structured

***Subsistence***--Reflects more than just food: implies social values and message systems regarding the nature of labor and work

***Gender***--Describes sexual differentiation; reflects group beliefs about masculinity and femininity. (Instead of the term gender, Hall actually uses bisexuality, which in 1959 was commonly used to mean “sexual dimorphism or differentiation” between the two sexes. Today, its common usage has shifted almost entirely to refer to people who have sexual relationships with both men and women. Because I believe this was not Hall’s original meaning, I will substitute *gender* wherever he uses *bisexuality*.)

***Territoriality***--Encompasses the use of space in all aspects life: status, work place, play, defense, and the like

***Temporality***--Incorporates the concepts of time, including speech tempos, social cycles, life rhythms, and so forth

***Learning and acquisition***--Means “learning how to learn” processes, principles, values, beliefs, assumptions, cognitive styles, and the like embedded within cultures

***Play***--Reflects values regarding time and place, relationships, learning, humor, competition, defense, and so on

***Defense***--Refers to mechanisms for survival, coping, warfare, beliefs systems; religion, laws, medicine, and other professional specialities

***Exploitation***--Refers to the material extensions of the body, such as tools, clothes, houses, technology, goods, and so forth (1959, 45---60)

## **A Multicontextual Theory and Model for Change**

**I postulate that a growing number of individuals now entering higher education bring with them a mix of characteristics that Hall would describe as their “cultural context” (high and low) and Manuel Ramírez and Alfredo Castañeda call “bicognition” (field sensitive and field independent).**

**Bicognition represents the variety of personality, culture, and learning styles generated by two distinct cognitive conditions associated with majority and minority individuals in this country.** It is a micromodel that transposes the characteristics of individuals onto the characteristics of larger groups and populations within which individual identity is validated.

**Cultural context represents the binary continuum of a range of cultural characteristics that we can use to identify and measure differences between various cultural groupings. As such, it is a macromodel.**

**The theory of multicontextuality is an amalgamation of these two basic constructs.** It is neither a process of acculturation nor one of assimilation. Those processes suggest cultural displacement, the requirement that individuals from less-dominant groups subsume their cultural behaviors to adopt the cultural patterns of the dominant group.

**Multicontextuality suggests cultural inclusion by assuming that individuals and groups of individuals learn and formulate strategies of cultural adjustment that help them adapt to their current circumstances.**

**Given that culture is the primary context for learning, the theory postulates that organizational cultures too may be imprinted with a variety of cultural patterns.**

### **Historical Assumptions**

1. **The U.S. model of higher education was created and imprinted with both high-context and low-context cultural patterns as well as field-sensitive and field-independent perspectives.** After the midnineteenth century, graduate education in the United States was established and fashioned after **the German research model** created by and for low-context, field-independent people and culture in Europe. It is successful

because it focuses on combining Western analytical thinking with hard scientific teaching and research. That graduate school structure was imposed on the liberal arts college (a British colonial import with its own mix of cultural contexts) and evolved into the vertical university infrastructure we are familiar with today. The graduate educational setting and learning mode initially contained high-context, field-sensitive principles--a teaching seminar or research lab consisting of a small group of graduate students serving a one-to-one apprenticeship. The setting and modes were transformed over time into what we have now.

**2. The first notable high-context, field-sensitive populations in graduate education were probably men from southern European ethnic groups in the Mediterranean.**

For example, high-context Italian and Jewish men entered academia and eventually the faculty with the aid of the GI Bill in the 1940s. It opened admissions to ethnic populations previously denied access to academia, and their arrival on campus began changing the Anglo-European culture associated with the professoriate and higher education. These early populations were satisfied with being able to join and become accepted into academia, but for the most part they were not intent upon changing academic culture to suit their needs.

**3. High-context field-sensitive immigrant populations have steadily increased in the United States since the mid-1940s.**

The grandchildren of these early voluntary immigrant groups, now entering higher education in greater numbers, are beginning to have a contextual influence on graduate education and beyond. The historical events that led the Mexican Americans in graduate school today to higher education began with the Bracero Program of World War II. The program, which encouraged Mexicans to immigrate to the southwestern United States, was instituted by the federal government as a means to ensure that U.S. food growers would have an adequate workforce to tend their fields. Many Mexicans stayed after the program ended, and their grandchildren and great-grandchildren account for a large percentage of the high-context, field-sensitive Latinos and Latinas in this country today.

**4. Involuntary in-migration by new refugee groups has introduced populations that are less interested in acculturating and more interested in maintaining their ethnic identity.**

The more recent Latino immigrant populations, also from Mexico (e.g., Chiapas), as well as Guatemala, El Salvador, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, tend to favor their national culture over their adopted North American culture because they expect to return to their homeland. Maintaining their high-context, field-sensitive cultures provides continuity for these patterns. This in turn means that unless higher education finds a way to embrace these populations, the discord with low-context faculty is likely to become even more serious.

**5. Enrollment of high-context, field-sensitive populations (women and ethnic minorities) in higher education began to accelerate in the mid-1960s.**

The

Civil Rights Act of 1964 and associated affirmative action programs opened up the pipeline for women and minorities to enter higher education in greater numbers. Since the mid-1970s women have had the greatest influence in changing the academic climate by introducing more high-context values into higher education.

**6. 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 programs for “disadvantaged minorities” was 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. Many institutions perceived the conflict that arose between these populations and academic cultures as a consequence of acclimating the “educationally disadvantaged.” Others saw the conflict as resulting from racism and/or sexism. The general turbulence of the late 1960s and the 1970s exacerbated sociopolitical divisiveness among ethnic minorities on campus. Political protests fostered ethnic centers and women’s studies courses or departments. These catered to the needs of high-context, field-sensitive students by providing demarcated ethnic boundaries and enclaves, allowing members of these groups to physically and culturally recharge in the presence of others with similarly high-context, field-sensitive backgrounds (interpersonal synchronicity).

**7. By the mid-1980s a different cohort of high-context, field-sensitive populations was beginning to enroll in higher education and continues to enter graduate school today.**

These high-context, field-sensitive women and ethnic individuals are less traditional than earlier student cohorts and share concerns about the low-context insularity of academic culture, which is becoming more obvious. **These are the clusters of women, ethnic minorities, and even some majority males, all of whom tend to gravitate toward academic fields and issues where high-context, field-sensitive backgrounds are especially valuable.** This cohort includes growing numbers of recently arrived immigrant Latino groups as well as members of long-established majority populations with high-context cultures rooted in southern Europe.

## Conceptual Assumptions

1. **Although the population cohort that began higher education in the 1980s comes from a variety of national origins, these students tend to share preferences, such as high-context academic fields. They seem unified by contextual commonalities that surface as mutual conflicts with academic cultures.** For instance, these diverse populations may encounter **similar performance problems on standardized tests** or share similar preferences in other cognitive areas that have been hidden by identity systems that tend to pigeonhole and stereotype cultures, ethnicity, and gender. Outwardly, each group maintains distinct sociocultural patterns relating to gender and ethnicity (they are multicultural). Inwardly, these populations are also closely associated with more than one cultural context and cognitive orientation(they are multicontextual).

2. **No single high-context, field-sensitive group or individual has all the characteristics associated with any one cultural context or cognitive orientation.** If individual women and ethnic minorities were measured and plotted along a continuum of context preferences, we probably would find that they would select from both high-context, field-sensitive and low-context, field-independent categories. **Plotted as groups of significant size (e.g., Mexican Americans, African Americans, women), they would tend to demonstrate more high-context, field-sensitive than low-context, field-independent characteristics with varying intensity, depending on such variables as generation or immigrant experience, gender or ethnicity, intra- and interethnic variations, class, socioeconomic status, and so on. [the GRE]**

**The HERI faculty survey (H. Astin et al. 1997) offers another extensive set of questions with measurable responses that may be determined by high-context, field-sensitive or low-context, field-independent characteristics.**

A. **The degree of tension and conflict with low-context, field-independent academic culture may be related to the degree of multicontextuality found in the other cultures.** More tradition-laden high-context, field-sensitive cultural populations are likely to suffer more adverse effects than less tradition-laden groups. These dynamics could be described as degrees of absorbing (assimilating) or adopting (acculturating) other cultural ways, but such concepts must also account for how cultural context and cognition may permit or prevent these dynamics to take place. Context and cognition function the same way for multicontextual individuals when they adopt multiple identities (Chicana, professor, community leader) or compile appropriate behavioral episodes (teaching undergraduates, planning a fiesta, preparing for tenure review)--they filter our perception of the world. Note that the more tradition-laden

high-context, field-sensitive individuals, such as Native Americans, do indeed have the greatest difficulty with the culture of higher education. Tribal populations have the lowest enrollments in higher education. This may also account for the relative paucity of Latinos in higher education in proportion to the total U.S. population of Latinos.

**B. Clearly, socioeconomic conditions influence these dynamics, but other factors may also be in play.** In *The Shape of the River*, Bowen and Bok's study relating affirmative action to minority student success, there are few explanations for why the most academically talented African American students, with the least reasons to feel threatened intellectually, generally underperform the most, regardless of academic potential or background (1998, 262). I believe that multicontextuality is involved. If this is true for African Americans, whose culture is less tradition laden than the cultures of Native Americans, it is plausible to assume that this is why Native Americans are less attracted to higher education than any other group. There may be a correlation between cultural context, cognition, academic conflicts, and patterns of success among various high-context groups in higher education.

**C. Conflict between high-context, field-sensitive populations and the low-context, field-independent culture of academia has probably always been a hidden issue in higher education, albeit one attributed to other factors, such as racism and sexism, in the past.**

Despite cultural variations among high-context, field-sensitive populations, these groups have often been recognized by the issues they share and, for better or for worse, lumped together in generic categories. This cohort has not been clearly identified for at least two reasons: there were fewer of these populations in higher education before the 1980s, and the potential for seeing the influence of cultural context or cognition was masked by the dominant theoretical perspective that some kind of discrimination was the major source of conflict.

**D. High-context, field-sensitive populations tend to choose fields of study in the humanities or social sciences more often than in the physical or biological sciences.** This is not associated with inability or lack of interest in studying science, engineering, or mathematics. Poor elementary and secondary school preparation of certain socioeconomic groups may be one cause. But another reason may relate to the degree to which a given field attracts high-context, field-sensitive individuals. Clinical psychology is popular among high-context, field-sensitive people because, as an applied field, its practitioners interact with the community. For similar reasons some fields in engineering tend to attract people with ethnic backgrounds. Many fields in the humanities or social sciences are more people oriented, or are aimed more toward applied or community study (e.g., social work), than those that tend to be purely intellectual, such as philosophy. Consequently, the people-oriented fields tend to attract more high-context, field-sensitive individuals. Some evidence even suggests that multicontextuality may explain why some minority undergraduates leave their science, engineering, and math majors to complete a degree in the social sciences or humanities (Ibarra 1999).

E. **Studies have shown that high-context, field-sensitive populations are not leaving graduate education in large numbers. Either they are simply not attracted to it in the first place or they are only attracted to certain high-context, field-sensitive academic programs for a variety of reasons.** Low-context academic cultures, and graduate education specifically, are more resistant to change than organizations in the private sector. The private sector is moving much faster and more deliberately toward diversity. As a result, high-context, field-sensitive people are lured to the private sector not only by its higher salaries and other benefits but also by the likelihood that they will have greater opportunities to influence the corporate culture, advance in their careers, and inhabit a more culturally comfortable working environment. The issue of concern for higher education, especially its nonprofessional graduate programs, is the loss of talent, which ultimately will have a detrimental effect on academia.

**Higher education in the United States must prepare for the rapidly increasing numbers of high-context, field-sensitive people with undergraduate degrees. But it must first recognize, and then adjust to, the real world, which is becoming increasingly multicontextual. To survive this challenge institutions must seek ways to correct imbalances in their academic cultures and realign educational priorities in ways that will build a new and inclusive community of scholars based upon equal measures of comprehensive knowledge (concrete connected knowing and active practice) and analysis-based knowledge (abstract analytical knowing and reflective observation).**