

Teaching Across Cultural Strengths
A Guide to Balancing Integrated and Individuated Cultural Frameworks in College Teaching

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Foreword by Joseph L. White

“Why aren’t student success rates in college even across cultural groups? Chavez and Longerbeam unpack this mystery with an insightful and very usable set of ideas for faculty who want to teach to student strengths and support success across cultures. They provide a comprehensive framework for understanding culture and pedagogy. This is an outstanding book that should be read by all faculty members who are puzzled by differences in their ability to relate to students from different backgrounds and by differential rates of success. A huge contribution.”
- Jane Fried, Professor, Central Connecticut State University

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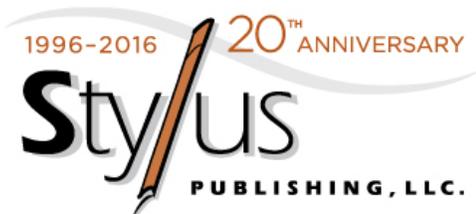
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The key premise of the book is that deepening student learning and increasing retention and graduation rates requires teaching from a strengths-based perspective that recognizes the cultural assets that students bring to higher education, and to their own learning.

Derived through research and practice, the authors present their Model of Cultural Frameworks in College Teaching and Learning that highlights eight continua towards achieving the transformation of teaching, and developing more culturally balanced and inclusive practices over time. They present techniques – illustrated by numerous examples and narratives – for building on cultural strengths in teaching; offer tips and strategies for teaching through cultural dilemmas; and provide culturally reflective exercises.

This guide is intended for all faculty, faculty developers or administrators in higher education concerned with equitable outcomes in higher education and with ensuring that all student cultural groups learn and graduate at the same rates.



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I

Balancing Cultural Strengths in Teaching



I feel like I have to leave my culture at the door to be taken seriously, to not startle people, to have a chance at being seen as intelligent. Trying to learn through someone else's cultural traditions makes getting my education even tougher. I grew up discussing things and comparing my ideas to others, but classrooms are mostly just hours of listening. I want to apply what I'm learning at least hypothetically to serve my own communities, but mostly we just regurgitate facts, ideas, and theory in the abstract. I've learned over time how to negotiate this reality, yet I wonder sometimes what it would have been like to learn within my own cultural epistemologies. My hope is that when I am a professor, I can teach in ways that embody many cultures, not just my own or the ones that are so prevalent in college and university classrooms.

—African American doctoral student in education¹

Culture is interwoven through teaching and learning (Banks & Banks, 1997; Gay, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). Similar to the student quoted above, each college student brings with them into collegiate learning environments culturally influenced ways of learning, communicating, and behaving as well as expectations about teaching (Chávez, Ke, & Herrera, 2012; Ibarra, 2001; Rendón, 2009). Likewise, faculty bring cultural influences into teaching practices and into the interpretation and evaluation of students (Chávez, 2007; Ibarra, 2001). Teaching-learning relationships between faculty and students are embedded in culture. We propose that faculty apply a cultural lens to teach more inclusively across cultural frameworks. By doing so, we make possible teaching across a diversity of cultural strengths to enhance learning for everyone.



This book is designed as a guide for teaching faculty to apply a cultural lens to college teaching and learning for the purpose of understanding how culture manifests in our own teaching and to enhance student learning. We crafted it to help faculty design and facilitate learning by drawing from a wide variety of cultural strengths across student populations. Our belief and our assumption guiding the book are that we as faculty can learn how to balance our own cultural norms alongside a full spectrum of cultural norms in teaching and learning practices. Because culture is embedded so foundationally and often unconsciously in how individuals interpret and behave in the world, this text is designed to assist faculty in systematically reflecting on, observing, analyzing, uncovering, and considering ways to develop teaching using a range of cultural approaches, while balancing those approaches. Applying a cultural or anthropological lens to college teaching and learning unleashes a powerful tool to develop our teaching over time and to understand the great diversity in students as learners. We encourage everyone to try. Some would say that you need to understand every culture before you can move to application. We encourage you to try, not to feel like you need to know every culture thoroughly in order to be completely sensitive. It is important to start and to just try. We understand that this takes a kind of academic courage, to face who we are and to reimagine our teaching in fundamental ways. Insights, sensitivity, awareness, and cultural responsiveness develop through our efforts over time. And through this process we learn about different cultures and different ways that students learn.

We encourage everyone to try, not to feel like you need to know every culture thoroughly in order to be completely sensitive. . . .

Just try. . . . Insights, sensitivity, awareness, and cultural responsiveness develop through our efforts over time.

Within the field of anthropology, culture is characterized as a learned foundation of individual and collective assumptions, values, beliefs, priorities, and behaviors developed by a population over time (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Kuh, 1993; Mead, 1971). Peoples around the world and within the United States live within distinctive frameworks of culture. This book is designed to assist us in developing greater cultural responsiveness to students as learners by balancing across cultural frameworks in our teaching. Applying an anthropological or cultural lens to teaching practice is helpful in developing our acuity in cultural responsiveness to learners. (For a deeper discussion of culture, see Chapter 2.) Purposefully applying a balance of cultural frameworks in teaching will help faculty foster more complex learning processes among students.

Learning can be conceptualized as a layering or weaving in of many ways of understanding and knowing. The more richly and diversely we explore knowledge and ideas, the more complexly we learn. Balancing teaching across cultural frameworks centers student learning in natural and dissonant ways; teaching techniques sometimes feel familiar to students of a particular upbringing and sometimes feel unfamiliar, challenging them with new experiences and the resulting disequilibrium. Balancing teaching across familiar and unfamiliar cultural frameworks offers a healthy dynamic tension of challenge and support. This dynamic tension of challenge and support is essential to facilitating greater complexity in thinking and processing (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Further, teaching across cultural frameworks engages the mind as well as the heart, spirit, intuition, and body to develop greater understandings, and encourages consideration of multiple perspectives or lenses. A balance across cultural frameworks in course design and teaching practices makes it possible for each individual student to apply at least some of their own cultural strengths to learning. It makes it possible for all students regardless of their origins and experiences to find themselves in the mirror of collegiate learning.

Our intent in Chapter 1 is to expediently introduce a model of Cultural Frameworks in Teaching and Learning (A detailed discussion of the model begins on page XX), including a discussion of the empirical studies undergirding its development. The model describes integrated and individuated cultural frameworks, discussed through eight continua of teaching and learning. For readers who want background reading on the concept of culture and worldviews in pedagogy, or who desire a thorough description of and definitions for our use of *culture* and related concepts such as *race* and *ethnicity*, please read Chapter 2.

Reimagining Teaching Toward a Culturally Strengths-Based Approach

Promoting learning among college students is an elusive challenge for faculty, especially when faculty and students originate in differing cultures, an increasingly relevant actuality as campuses diversify. Though many factors come into play when facilitating learning in collegiate contexts, faculty and student cultural norms engender a significant influence. As teachers we have the opportunity to draw from and balance cultural strengths originating in highly differentiated cultural frameworks. This may take a kind of reimagining of our teaching toward a culturally strengths-based approach and balanced with pedagogies outside our own cultural framework or worldview.

We understand that reimagining teaching and learning across cultural frameworks can be uncomfortable, and faculty often believe that expertise is necessary in something before we apply it to our practice. Yet we believe that teaching across cultural frameworks is an area where the opposite is necessary. We learn as we try. In the process we become more adept at reimagining our teaching, developing new practices, and honing our abilities as teachers who work with learners from a culturally strengths-based approach.

This book offers an opportunity to consider the role of culture, especially cultural strengths, to enhance student learning through the development of faculty teaching and cultural introspection. Integrating a variety of cultural norms into teaching practices complexifies learning activities and contexts, deepening learning among students by offering to each student a balance of naturally comfortable techniques as well as naturally dissonant ways of learning. While doing so, faculty develop in cross-cultural proficiency, awareness, and understanding (Chávez, 2007). This volume offers an opportunity to consider the role of culture, especially cultural strengths, to enhance student learning through development of faculty teaching and cultural introspection.

Through accessing strengths in cultures of origin whether consciously or unconsciously, learners may favor or even assume individual or collective ways of learning; may forefront the mind, body, spirit, or heart as avenues for taking in and processing knowledge; may think and communicate in linear or circular patterns; and may process from applied to conceptual or conceptual to applied pedagogies. Similarly, faculty bring culturally influenced design, pedagogy, evaluations, assumptions, interactions, and facilitation of learning into teaching practice. Because collegiate learning benefits from a variety of modes of taking in, processing, and applying knowledge, it is beneficial for all students to experience a diversity of teaching modes. Applying a balance of techniques, interactions, and relationships to teaching practice is helpful in developing pedagogical diversity. Using a cultural lens as one means to diversify pedagogy assists in including natural ways of learning from across cultures and addressing the cultural frameworks within which students live.

A fundamental shift to a more strengths-based approach is an important one for faculty who wish to facilitate learning effectively for all students across cultures, learning processes, and personalities. Research on college student retention suggests that at colleges where faculty believe students have what it takes to learn and consider it their job to make sure students learn, students are more likely to learn and to stay in college (Woodard, Mallory, & DeLuca, 2001). Alternatively, at colleges where faculty consider it their job to “weed students out,” students learn and retain in much lower numbers, even when controlling for student intake factors such as GPA, test scores, and demographics (Woodard, Mallory, & DeLuca, 2001).

As faculty we make assumptions based in our own cultures about students as learners. For example, based on our own cultural upbringing, student silence in a learning environment may naturally be interpreted as a sign of deep thought, apathy, taking a moment to reflect, disinterest in the subject, showing respect, disengagement, gathering ideas prior to speaking, active listening, wisdom, or even rudeness. Silence in learning contexts carries different meanings within the cultural individualities and backgrounds of teachers and learners.

Many behaviors among students and faculty are interpreted individually through lenses developed during our upbringing. The following vignettes from a faculty and student illustrate interpretation of similar behaviors from very different perspectives. The faculty member finds concern in the students' personal sharing, worrying that the student may ask for special considerations, while the student wants to find a sense of connection and worries that this may be interpreted negatively and that the professor will not understand that they are trying to learn while negotiating many responsibilities.

I am always on my guard when a student comes to see me and tells me about what is going on in their personal lives. It usually leads to them asking for some special consideration.

—British American communications professor

I like making appointments with my professors to get to know them a bit, and I often start by sharing some things about my own life. It still throws me off, though, when the professor looks taken aback when I share anything about my kids or my job. I always feel like they immediately start suspecting me of trying to get away with something or that they really don't want to know me. Even when I do need to ask for a bit more time or something, I am not trying to be irresponsible, just juggling many different responsibilities as best I can.

—French-Italian American law student

As faculty we bring behavioral interpretations and judgments with us into collegiate learning environments, which affects how we design learning activities, how we interpret students, and sometimes even the feelings we experience toward students while teaching. It is a natural and common tendency to interpret cultural and other norms similar to ours in a positive manner while interpreting those different from ours negatively.

By developing cultural self-awareness and learning about differing cultural frameworks, we can cultivate the ability to reinterpret others' cultural norms as strengths and redesign our teaching and courses to engage these strengths among students. Balancing our teaching practices across cultural norms natural to a diversity of student learners then creates learning

environments that are more inclusive of many ways of being. Both challenge and support are offered as a context within which a diversity of students can apply their own cultural strengths as well as experience other ways of learning and interacting. See Box 1.1 for an application exercise.

Your Turn . . .

Think of one of the behaviors you often notice among students. It may be helpful to think of one that concerns or even irritates you.

- How might this behavior be interpreted differently? Perhaps as a strength?

Consider approaching students and asking them about the meaning of this behavior in their lives and in relation to their learning.

- Try to find out the “why” behind the behavior for students.

Notice your own behaviors and how students respond to them.

- How might students interpret your specific behaviors?
- What messages might you be sending with your behavior differently to students from integrated and individuated cultural backgrounds?

Acknowledging a World With Many Oppressions

We would like to take a moment to acknowledge, honor, thank, and commend the many critical, feminist, race, Indigenous thought, womanist, and other activists in education and beyond for their deep, reflective work on the oppressions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and all other forms of oppression and discrimination in classrooms specifically—and in education and society more widely. This important work continues, and much of the discourse is eloquent and powerful. In this book we strive to build on the critical work of these powerful minds and hearts to offer further pragmatic guidance in the area of teaching and learning across cultures.

Our experience is that the hearts and minds of faculty, staff, and students in higher education often begin to open as we become more reflective about our own identities and more questioning of our assumptions about others (Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003). This often seems to happen as individuals strive to work more effectively across cultures and other identities, perhaps because then we come face-to-face in very pragmatic ways with our own humanity as well as with the humanity of others. This book is written with pragmatism in mind. With it we attempt to add to existing works on what to *do* about these oppressions specifically within our professional

practices as teachers: building a sense of agency, and instilling hope for and development toward a better world.

We acknowledge that our book, while including examples from many cultures, is primarily rooted in U.S. ethnic cultures. There are many cultures we did not include, because we made a choice to focus our examples based upon the cultures with which we primarily work and from which our empirical data primarily derives. The scope of this book is not inclusive of all culture—especially global cultures, and cultures of religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic class, among many others. We encourage others to pursue work on using cultural strengths in college teaching and learning within these identities, as work across all cultures is greatly needed.

We firmly believe and have seen it borne out repeatedly that when faculty strive to balance teaching practices across cultural frameworks, they usually grow in understanding, empathy, and awareness. We urge you to continually seek out and learn from the deep body of literature and other works about social equity and diversity.

Cultural Frameworks, Epistemologies, and Worldviews

Cultural frameworks (see Figures 1.1 and 1.1A), epistemologies, and worldviews are the underlying tenets of assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence our behavior in everyday life. Much of this is unconscious until we bump up against someone or something that is based in a very different underlying cultural framework. Many individuals experience this immediate sense of different cultural frameworks when traveling in other countries and to a lesser extent to other regions or cities in their own countries. Each of us grows up being taught both subtly and overtly about appropriate and inappropriate ways to do things, what values to live by, and what beliefs to espouse. Though we make many choices about how to live our lives as we grow older, we continue to carry with us our earliest teachings and interpret the world through these foundational underlying cultural lenses or frameworks.

Anthropological and psychological work on the relationship between culture and learning (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1981, 1984, 1993) and on cultural contextuality in higher education (Ibarra, 2001) enhance understanding of the role of culture in everyday life and in higher education. Multicultural education K–12 literature (Banks & Banks, 1997; Gay, 2000; Gilliland, 1999; Nieto, 1999) and some adult learning across cultures literature (Rendón, 2009; Tisdell, 2003) provides a theoretical base for teaching and learning. Our focus is on college teaching and adult learning. See Chapter 2 for a synopsis of some of this theory and wider literature on cultural epistemologies, worldviews, and strengths in relation to collegiate teaching and learning.