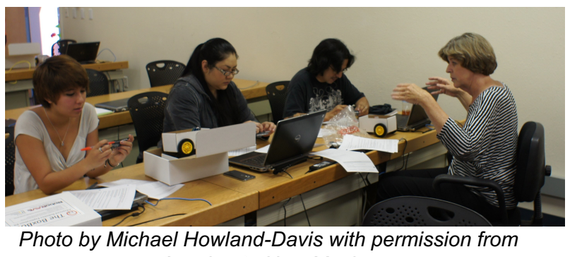
Context Diversity and Academia

Context diversity is a different dimension of diversity and may offer a new way to *attract* our diverse population of students and faculty and help them *thrive* in STEM[1].



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Background

Multicontext Theory[1] explains and predicts the inclusion or exclusion of people within an institutional culture, recognizing two end members in a Multicontext spectrum -- ***Low context (individuated)*** and ***High context (Integrated).*** **Context diversity** is achieved when the norms, values and practices of an organization are inclusive of Multicontexted ways of knowing and doing. *Currently, our academic system is imbalanced, where low context work is more valued (though both low and high context are important!).*

Interaction[1]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Low use of nonverbal signals	High use of nonverbal signals
Communication is direct	Communication is indirect.
Do not check in on emotional status of others	Constant checking on emotional status of others.
Disagreement is depersonalized (tough it out approach)	Disagreement is personalized (talk it out approach)

Association[1]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Task oriented	Process oriented
Success means being recognized (more competitive)	Success means being unobtrusive (more collaborative)
Team oriented (baton passing approach)	Group oriented (all involved in all parts of project)

Time[1]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Time is a commodity	Time is a process
Time is scheduled, compartmentalized, and promptness is valued.	Emphasize people and completion of transactions; value accuracy over speed; deadlines are achieved if possible.

Space[1]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Space has more boundaries	Space is more communal.
Privacy is important	Privacy is less important
Personal property shared less.	Personal property is shared more

Information[1]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Information does not flow freely	Information spreads rapidly and readily shared
Information can be separated from context (e.g., math without application)	Information without context is meaningless (e.g., applied math)

Learning[1,2]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Linear, logical thinking	Non-linear, mosaic thinking (e.g., systems thinking)
Things are elemental, fragmented, and compartmentalized.	Things are interconnected, synthesized, and global.
Learned best by step-by-step instructions.	Learned best by demonstration.
Learning oriented toward individuals	Learning group oriented.
Learn by mastering abstract theory first, followed by testing; may not include application or experience.[2]	Learning by doing or listening to others' experiences first, then drawing out abstract theory.[2]
Creative process externalized	Creative process internalized.

Academic Systems[1]

Low Context, Individuated	High Context, Integrated
Linear thinking is emphasized and valued	Non-linear thinking is emphasized and valued
Technical academic and teaching style – les interactive	Personal academic and teaching style – very interactive
Emphasize process of collecting specific information	Emphasize integrating information into contextual thinking.

References

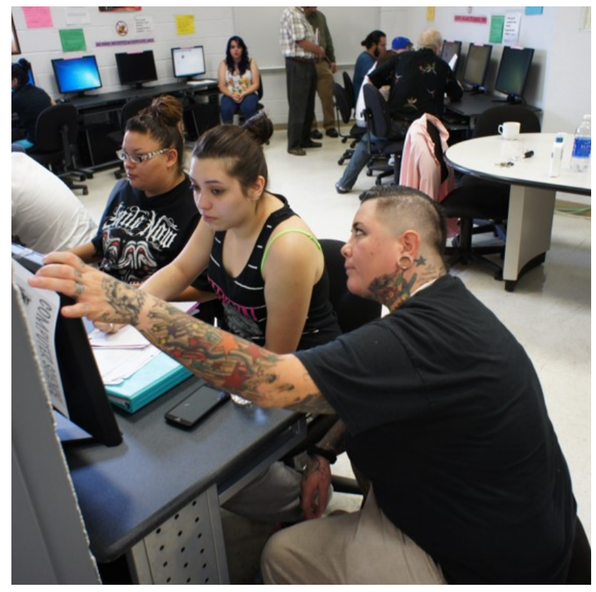
1. Ibarra, RA, 2001, Beyond Affirmative Action: Reframing the Context of Higher Education, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 323p.
2. Chávez, AF, and Longerbeam, SD, 2016, Teaching Across Cultural Strengths: A guide to balancing integrated and individuated cultural frameworks in college teaching, Stylus Press, Sterling VA, 241p.

Compiled by Gary Weissmann, Roberto Ibarra, and Michael Howland-Davis, 2017.

Context diversity in the classroom

Multicontext Spectrum Attribute Focus: *Learning* .

Goal: Teach in ways that honor the context diversity present in your classroom, values both low and high context learners, and trains students to gain flexibility in both low and high context environments.



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Advantages[1,2]

- Teaches toward the diverse population of students
- Helps students who are often excluded from academia feel like they belong.
- May help build stronger systems and analytical thinking in STEM education.

Implementation

We can only offer a few suggestions in this small space. Chavez and Longerbeam (2016)[1] offer excellent suggestions on ways to change pedagogical approaches to honor the broad context diversity of your classroom, and we highly recommend this book for further examples to help broaden access of classes for context diversity.

Vary teaching between low context and high context approaches

- This builds flexibility of students to work in both realms.
- Start some topics with applications, then move to theory (high context). Start other topics with theory, then move to applications (low context).
- Construct systems maps to emphasize links between things, then move toward the details of objects (high context).

Mix evaluation methods

- Design a mix of individual exams, assignments and class activities (low context) with paired or group exams, assignments and class activities (high context).
- Timed exams (low context) vs take home exams (high context)

Use activities that a mix of high context and low context approaches.

- Jigsaw activities are typically a low context approach, where “experts” are developed in one group, then they are split into new groups to share their expertise (baton passing).
- Concept maps may be a high context approach to emphasize systems and relationships

Mix ways of taking in knowledge

- Focus on thought and abstract processing (low context) or inclusion of reflective, philosophical, emotional, interrelation, and physical components (high context) in assignments and activities..

Use of time

- Some assignments will have strict deadlines, while others may have a more floating deadline (maybe only take off points for an assignment once you’ve started grading)
- Class time bounded by beginning and end of session vs. extending class time to discussions after class...

Responsibility of learning

- Design some activities that are competitive, while others are more collaborative.

References

1. Chávez, AF, and Longerbeam, SD, 2016, Teaching Across Cultural Strengths: A guide to balancing integrated and individuated cultural frameworks in college teaching, Stylus Press, Sterling VA, 241p.
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