1

What Is Cultural Proficiency?

> If identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique—and if we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.
>
> —Parker Palmer[1]

Getting Centered

Have you ever wondered why a learner comes into your classroom with an attitude? Have you ever wished that you did not have to deal with the parents of your learners because they are so hard to get along with? Recall and describe one difficult incident that you had recently.

_____

_____

_____

_____

---

1. Sennett, p. 26.

Four Tools

Cultural proficiency is a way of being that allows individuals and organizations to interact effectively with people who differ from them. It is a developmental approach for addressing the issues that emerge in diverse environments. In 1989, with colleagues, Terry Cross, executive director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association, in Portland, Oregon, published a monograph that changed many lives. *Toward a Culturally Competent System of Care* (1989, 1993) provides several tools for addressing the responses to diversity that we have encountered in our work. Although Dr. Cross addressed the issues of difference in mental health care, his seminal work has been the basis of a major shift in organizations across the country in responding to difference. We are deeply indebted to Dr. Cross for his continuing work in the field of social services and his generosity in endorsing our work as we have applied his concepts to education and industry. Cultural proficiency offers a model—a framework—for developing oneself and one's organization while seeking to address issues of diversity.

We like this approach for several reasons: it is proactive; it provides tools that can be used in any setting, rather than techniques that are applicable in only one environment; the focus is behavioral, not emotional; and it can be applied to both organizational practices and individual behavior. Most diversity programs are used to explain the nature of diversity or the process of learning about or acquiring new cultures. This is an approach for responding to the environment shaped by its diversity. It is not an off-the-shelf program that an organization implements through training. It is not a series of mechanistic steps that everyone must follow. It is a model for shifting the culture of the organization; it is a model for individual transformation and organizational change. There are four tools for developing one's cultural proficiency.

1. The Continuum
   Language for describing both healthy and unproductive policies, practices, and individual behaviors

2. The Essential Elements
   Five behavioral standards for measuring, and planning for, growth toward cultural proficiency

3. The Guiding Principles
   Underlying values of the approach

4. The Barriers
   Caveats that assist in responding effectively to resistance to change

The Continuum

Six points along the cultural proficiency continuum indicate unique ways of seeing and responding to difference:

- **Cultural destructiveness:** *See the difference, stomp it out*
  The elimination of other people's cultures

- **Cultural incapacity:** *See the difference, make it wrong*
  Belief in the superiority of one's culture and behavior that disempowers another's culture

- **Cultural blindness:** *See the difference, act like you don't*
  Acting as if the cultural differences you see do not matter or not recognizing that there are differences among and between cultures

- **Cultural precompetence:** *See the difference, respond inadequately*
  Awareness of the limitations of one's skills or an organization's practices when interacting with other cultural groups

- **Cultural competence:** *See the difference, understand the difference that difference makes*
  Interacting with other cultural groups using the five essential elements of cultural proficiency as the standard for individual behavior and organizational practices

- **Cultural proficiency:** *See the difference and respond effectively in a variety of environments*
  Holding esteem for culture; knowing how to learn about individual and organizational culture; interacting effectively in a variety of cultural environments

The Essential Elements

The essential elements of cultural proficiency provide the standards for individual behavior and organizational practices.

- Name the differences: **Assess Culture**
- Claim the differences: **Value Diversity**
- Reframe the differences: **Manage the Dynamics of Difference**
- Train about differences: **Adapt to Diversity**
- Change for differences: **Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge**

The Guiding Principles

These are the core values, the foundation on which the approach is built.

- Culture is a predominant force; you cannot NOT be influenced by culture.
- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
- People have group identities that they want to have acknowledged.
- Cultures are not homogeneous; there is diversity within groups.
- The unique needs of every culture must be respected.

The Barriers

- The presumption of entitlement
  Believing that all of the personal achievements and societal benefits that you have were accrued solely on your merit and through the quality of your character.

- Systems of oppression
  Throughout most organizations are systems of institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. Moreover, these systems are often supported and sustained without the permission of, and at times without the knowledge of, the people whom they benefit. These systems perpetuate domination and victimization of individuals and groups.

- Unawareness of the need to adapt
  Not recognizing the need to make personal and organizational changes in response to the diversity of the people with whom you and your organization interact. Believing instead that only the others need to change and adapt to you.

Why Cultural Proficiency?

In our experience, the most effective and productive approach to addressing cultural diversity within an organization is cultural proficiency. In an organization, it is the *policies* and *practices;* in an individual, it is the *values and behavior*s that enable that organization or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment. In a culturally proficient school or organization, the culture promotes inclusiveness and institutionalizes processes for learning about differences and for responding appropriately to differences. Rather than lamenting, "Why can't *they* be like *us?*" leaders and educators welcome and create opportunities to better understand

who they are as individuals, while learning how to interact positively with people who differ from themselves.

Cultural proficiency is an inside-out approach, which focuses first on those who are insiders to the school or organization, encouraging them to reflect on their own individual understandings and values. It thereby relieves those identified as outsiders, the members of the excluded groups, from the responsibility of doing all the adapting. Cultural proficiency as an approach to diversity surprises many people, who expect a diversity program to teach them about others. This inside-out approach acknowledges and validates the current values and feelings of people, encouraging change and challenging a sense of entitlement without threatening one's feelings of worth.

Cultural proficiency prizes individual culture while focusing on the organization's culture, which has a life force beyond the individuals within the school or organization. This focus removes the needs to place blame and to induce feelings of guilt. The approach involves all members of the community in determining how to align policies, practices, and procedures to achieve cultural proficiency. Because all the stakeholders are deeply involved in the developmental process, ownership is broader based, making it easier for them to commit to change. This responds to the issues that emerge when there is diversity among leaders, educators, and learners at a systemic level.

Building cultural proficiency requires informed and dedicated educators, committed and involved leaders, and time. Instructors cannot be sent to training for two days and be expected to return with solutions to all of the diversity issues in their school or organization. This approach does *not* involve the use of simple checklists for identifying culturally significant characteristics of individuals, which may be politically appropriate, but socially meaningless. The transformation to cultural proficiency requires time to think, reflect, decide, and change.

The culturally proficient organization closes the door on tokenism and stops the revolving door through which highly competent, motivated people enter briefly and exit quickly because they have not been adequately integrated into the organization's culture. Culturally proficient leaders can confidently deliver programs and services, knowing that both instructors and learners genuinely want it and can readily receive it without having their cultural connections denied, offended, or threatened. Culturally proficient organizations can also be sure that their community perceives them as a positive, contributing force that substantively enhances the community and the organization's position in it.

Activity

The following list of seven words and descriptions shows how a person may experience a particular social setting. Read each word and its description, and then tell about a time when you experienced each particular social phenomenon. You may not have experienced them all, so you may want to complete this activity in a group. As your colleagues tell their stories, notice the emotions associated with each social phenomenon.

Alienation: Feeling out of place, not fitting in, not belonging to any group.

Example: Being the only single man at a pregnancy support group. What is a situation in which you or someone you know felt alienated?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Dissonance: Discord, disharmony, feeling out of sync, offbeat, out of tune with your surroundings.

Example: Attending a workshop announced in a professional newsletter, titled "Achieve Your Full Teaching Potential," which turns out to be a meeting to promote a multilevel marketing business that sells educational materials.
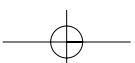
What is a situation in which you or someone you know felt dissonance?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Marginality: Identifying with two groups but not fitting in either; being rejected by both groups and relegated to the margins.

Example: Biracial persons who are rejected by one group because they look as if they belong to the other group, and by the other group because their values and language are more similar to the first group.

What is a situation in which you or someone you know felt marginalized?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

**Dualism:** Being involved in two cultures and having to hide that fact from one of the cultural groups.

Example: Being a closeted Gay person who works in a straight world.
What is a situation in which you or someone you know experienced dualism?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Negotiation for acceptance: Having to justify being in a particular role or environment when other people question whether you deserve it.

Example: Being a Latina and being told that the only reason you got a particular position was through affirmative action, and then having to prove that you can perform the responsibilities of the job.
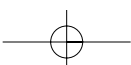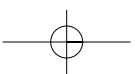
What is a situation in which you or someone you know had to negotiate for acceptance?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Bicultural affirmation: Belonging to two cultural groups, with both groups knowing and appreciating your membership in the other group.

Example: Being a conservative Jew, observant of Jewish law, and keeping kosher while working in an organization that is primarily Christian with Christian cultural norms.

What is a situation in which you or someone you know experienced bicultural affirmation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Multicultural transformation: Interacting with people from several different cultures over time, with all participants being changed for the better because of the experience.

Example: Attending a Brotherhood-Sisterhood camp for several weeks during the summer; youth meet and develop relationships with other young people of different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities; they learn from one another and are changed dramatically by their experience; they leave camp with a broader understanding and appreciation of people who differ from them.

What is a situation in which you or someone you know experienced multicultural transformation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were your feelings (or your colleague's feelings) while in that situation?

_____

_____

_____

_____
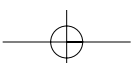
Reflection

Notice how the stories you and your colleagues have been telling stir deeply felt emotions. Think back to the problem situation you described in the "Getting Centered" activity at the beginning of this chapter. Did you notice any similar feelings? Is it possible that the person who was causing the problem for you may have felt alienated, marginalized, or another negative social phenomenon? Did you hear many stories that told of bicultural affirmation or multicultural transformation? Imagine what it would be like if, in your classroom, you and your learners were able to create experiences of multicultural transformation—every time you taught.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Our Vision of Multicultural Transformation

Throughout this book, we hope to share with you our vision of multicultural transformation. We believe that this transformation can occur if the teacher, professor, or trainer engages in culturally proficient instruction. As we mentioned previously, *cultural proficiency* is the combination of organizational policies and practices or an individual's values and behavior that enables the organization or the person to interact effectively in culturally diverse settings. Culturally proficient instructors—and organizations—do not necessarily know all there is to know about every cultural group. They do, however, acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable them to find out what they need to know, to learn that information, and to use it effectively.

What Is Culture?

In describing cultural proficiency, we are defining the term *cultural* very broadly. For us, *culture* is the set of common beliefs and practices that a person shares with a group. These beliefs and practices identify that person as part of the group, and they help other group members to

recognize that person as one of them. Most individuals identify with one or two groups very strongly—this is their dominant culture. They may also identify in a lesser way with other cultural groups. Often, when the word *culture* is used, the listener (or reader) imagines an ethnic culture.

Ethnic cultures are groups of people who are united by ancestry, language, physiology, and history, as well as by their beliefs and practices. In addition to ethnic cultures, there are *corporate cultures*—the culture associated with a particular organization. In a corporate environment, each industry has its own distinctive culture (compare the automotive industry with the film industry), as does each particular business in that industry (compare Saturn with Ford). Within a given school, each of the various departments has its own culture. Think about the culture within an accounting department and contrast that with the research-and-development department's culture. Within a school district, the overarching culture of the district distinguishes it from other, similar districts. In addition, individual schools have their own distinctive cultures, as do individual classrooms.

Clearly, all these groups and subgroups have much in common, but in many ways, these groups—and their group members—show significant distinctions. Consider the images evoked by these groups: America Online (AOL) versus EarthLink, classified personnel versus certificated teachers, administrators versus faculty, engineers versus human resource personnel, New York City versus Peoria, Illinois. These pairings reflect the cultural differences within a larger cultural group. AOL and EarthLink both provide e-mail services and access to the Internet. Classified and certificated personnel both work in school districts. Administrators and faculty members are both found on a university campus. Engineers and human resource personnel may work for the same school, but their approaches to the people and the work may be as different as New York City is from Peoria, Illinois.

Yet someone who knows the culture of any of these groupings could tell who belongs and who does not. Culture is about *groupness.* Cultural identity is what enables people to recognize where they belong. Across continents and across time, people have made fundamental distinctions between *us* and *them.* As people in the twenty-first century, we have retained this human tendency to want to distinguish us from them—our tribe from others—even when doing so hurts both us and them. (Pick your favorite contemporary or ancient archenemies to illustrate this point.) A culturally proficient approach to instruction helps us to overcome this tendency by helping instructors to see and manage the differences in their classrooms.

Common Terms Related to Cultural Proficiency

Activity

Read the definitions for these commonly used and misused terms. Reflect on each definition, comparing it with what you thought the definition was. Following each one, write about how the definition affirms, helps to clarify, or challenges your thinking.

Culture: Everything you believe and everything you do that identifies you as a member of a group and distinguishes you from members of other groups. You may belong to more than one cultural group. Cultures reflect the belief systems and behaviors informed by ethnicity, as well as by other sociological factors, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability. Both individuals and organizations are defined by their cultures.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Equality: Equal treatment in the name of fairness. Treating all people alike without acknowledging differences in age, gender, language, or ability is considered by some to be fair. It is in fact culturally blind and often results in very unfair outcomes.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Equity: Recognizing that people are not the same but deserve access to the same outcomes. Equitable programs may make accommodations for

differences so that the outcomes are the same for all individuals. Women and men receive equitable, not equal treatment in regard to parental benefits at work.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Affirmative action: A legally mandated approach to increasing the diversity of an organization that focuses on having a proportional representation of all people in the community within the organization. The intention is to ensure the inclusion of qualified people, but the implementation often results in a focus on counting numbers rather than assessing qualifications.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Multiculturalism: The preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a society or nation, holding each as equally valuable to and influential on the members of the society. The educational term *multicultural* refers to teaching about different cultures. Multiculturalism differs from cultural proficiency in that it reflects a state of being, whereas cultural proficiency is a process.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Tolerance: Enduring the presence of people who differ from you or ideas that conflict with yours. Tolerance is the first in a progression of
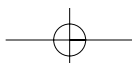
steps that may lead to valuing diversity. Teaching tolerance is a more positive approach to diversity than is genocide or cultural destructiveness, but it is only the beginning of a process that moves toward valuing differences.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Diversity: Diversity is a general term indicating that people who differ from one another are present in an organization or group. It refers to ethnicity, language, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, and all other aspects of culture.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Politically correct: A term used to describe language or behavior that reflects sensitivity to the diversity of a group. People can *act as if* they are culturally proficient by using politically correct language. A culturally proficient person may be perceived as politically correct, but in reality, that person is *culturally correct.*

_____

_____

_____

_____

Cultural proficiency: The policies and practices of an organization or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable the organization or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment; reflected in the way an organization treats its instructors, its learners, and

its community; an inside-out approach to issues arising from diversity; a focus on learning about oneself and recognizing how one's culture and one's identity may affect others, not on learning about others.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Culturally proficient instruction: Being a culturally proficient instructor means learning about oneself in a cultural context and creating an environment in which the learners are invited to explore the cultural contexts for who they are and how they respond and relate to one another.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Standards: Clearly defined skills and knowledge base that establishes levels of quality and excellence that are measurable and attainable by all participants.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Achievement gap: The discrepancy of opportunity and measured academic success that exists between certain economic classes and ethnic castes in U.S. public schools. These discrepant scores are often described by educators and researchers as evidence of lack of resources for students
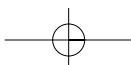
in poverty, absence of rigorous instruction and curriculum for students of color, and lack of highly qualified teachers in low-performing schools.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Praxis: The integration of one's theory about a particular field with one's practice in that field. Critical reflection about why one does what one does. Conscious application of what one believes to what one does.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Practice: The day to day engagement in one's vocational activities from the perspective of a conscious, introspective professional.

_____

_____

_____

_____

The Guiding Principles

The guiding principles of cultural proficiency are fundamental to multi-cultural transformation. These guiding principles are attitudinal bench-marks. These foundational values of cultural proficiency are essential for responding to the diversity in your classroom, or in your world, with more than a superficial acknowledgment that differences exist.

Principle 1: Culture Is a Predominant Force

You cannot *not* have a culture. Therefore, as an instructor, it is important to acknowledge culture as a predominant force in shaping behaviors, values, and institutions. Culture determines how you interact with your learners and react to things that happen in the classroom. Cultural biases invite you to judge behavior that differs from yours. Cultural differences are sometimes the cause of behaviors in others that you might find offensive. The organizational norms, the school climate, and the unwritten rules of your organization are all a reflection of its culture. Remember that culture is about groupness, not just ethnicity. Culture is the set of beliefs and behaviors of any group that distinguishes the group.

Reflection

List aspects of culture—yours and your learners'—that affect how your lessons are received.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

While reflecting on organizations in which you have worked, describe an organizational policy or practice that affirms this guiding principle. Describe an instructional behavior of yours or of someone you know that illustrates this principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Principle 2: People Are Served in Varying Degrees by the Dominant Culture

If you are a member of the dominant culture, you may not even notice the many ways that the culture of your organization or group affects those who do not know the cultural norms or rules. What works for you in your classroom, your organization, and your community may work against members of other cultural groups. Often, when members of dominant cultures recognize that there are cultural differences, they suggest that the persons in nondominant cultures simply change and learn the new rules. This approach puts the burden for change on just the nondominant groups. A commitment to cultural proficiency is a commitment to a dynamic relationship in which all parties learn from one another and adapt as they adjust to their differences.

Reflection

What works for the dominant culture of your organization or school that may not work for all its instructors or students?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

While reflecting on organizations in which you have worked, describe an organizational policy or practice that affirms this guiding principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Describe an instructional behavior of yours or of someone you know that illustrates this principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Principle 3: People Have Personal Identities and Group Identities

Although it is important to treat all people as individuals, it is also important to acknowledge the group identity of individuals. You cannot guarantee the dignity of a person unless you also preserve the dignity of his or her people. Making negative comments or reinforcing a negative stereotype about the group is insulting to its members. Moreover, attempting to separate the person from her or his group by telling the person, "You're different; you're not like those other XXXs," is offensive and denies that the person may identify strongly with other XXXs.

Reflection

List some words and phrases that might insult or discount members of cultural groups in your organization.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

While reflecting on organizations in which you have worked, describe an organizational policy or practice that affirms this guiding principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Describe an instructional behavior of yours or of someone you know that illustrates this principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Principle 4: Diversity Within Cultures Is Vast and Significant

Because diversity within cultures is as important as diversity among cultures, it is important to learn about cultural groups, not as monoliths—such as women, Asians, and Gay men—but as the complex and diverse groups of individuals that they are. In the United States, each of the major ethnic and cultural groups is also divided along class lines. There are poor, working-class, middle-class, and upper-class people among all the groups. Stereotypes about particular groups give the impression that all members of a group share the socioeconomic status of some—or even most—members of the group. For example, some people believe that all African Americans are poor and undereducated. Sociological literature (Gordon, 1978; Myrdal, 1944) informs us that when examining lifestyle and values, upper-class African Americans share more in common with upper-class European Americans than they do with poor African Americans. These class similarities can be found across cultural lines

among most groups in the United States. Consequently, Principle 4 reminds us of the diversity within groups, as well as between them.

Reflection

What are some of the subgroups of the major cultures represented in your organization?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

How might the differences within groups affect the nature of the conflict you may experience or the way you deliver your instruction or other services?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

While reflecting on organizations in which you have worked, describe an organizational policy or practice that affirms this guiding principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Describe an instructional behavior of yours or of someone you know that illustrates this principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Principle 5: Each Group Has Unique Cultural Needs

Each cultural group has unique needs that cannot be met within the boundaries of the dominant culture. When others express their own group's cultural identity, they do not imply a disrespect for yours. Make room in your organization for several paths leading to the same goal. Within your classroom, you probably plan for a variety of learning styles. When you develop a lesson, you consider that some learners need concrete examples; others are more comfortable with abstract ideas. Some learners respond to visual cues, whereas others must be physically engaged before they grasp a concept. People who teach, even if their teaching style favors one mode of learning over another, usually respect differences in how people learn new ideas. Differences in cultural needs also invite acknowledgment and respect from instructors. For example, attitudes toward authority, and deference to seniority in age or tenure, greatly affect the learning climate.

Reflection

What are some of the unique cultural needs you have observed in the learners in your classroom and in your colleagues?

_____

_____

_____

_____

While reflecting on organizations in which you have worked, describe an organizational policy or practice that affirms this guiding principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Describe an instructional behavior of yours or of someone you know that illustrates this principle.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Going Deeper

For the next several days, take note of how people in your professional setting address issues of culture. Note their levels of comfort with conversation about culture and diversity. Pay attention to how people describe colleagues and learners who differ from them. Pay attention to how you describe those who differ from you. The words that you and your colleagues use will give you insight into your values in this area. After a few days, ask yourself, What am I learning about my colleagues, this organization, and myself?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____