Learning styles across cultures

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Today I'd like to take you on a journey across the world. We'll be going to such different places as Manitoba, India, Japan, Minnesota and China … - looking for different ways that people learn. We'll be looking at how different cultures shape different learning styles.

Let's start from Canada and meet the Inuit people. The Inuits live in the northern part of North America and Siberia. They're often called Eskimos, but they dislike this name and actually regard it as offensive. Anyway, this is something that actually happened some time ago during a report-card meeting between teachers and parents at a local school. There was this Inuit parent talking to her child's Canadian teacher. At a certain point, the teacher said: "Your son is talking well in class. He is speaking up a lot.". And, much to her surprise, the Inuit parent replied: "I am sorry" (quoted in Atkinson 1997).

Clearly, there was a clash of expectations here. The teacher was praising the child's active participation in class, on the assumption that children at school should be taking part in lessons by asking questions, discussing things with the teacher and classmates, reacting to what is said and done by the teacher. But the Inuit parent had quite a different idea of what going to school and learning mean, of what teachers and students should be doing in class. For her, the role of the student was basically to listen, observe and learn. Now, we can't appreciate this position unless we know that silence is very much valued in the Inuit culture: if adults don't know each other very well, they often remain silent while they're in close contact. On the other hand, for the Inuit parent the role of the teacher was to explain, ask questions and transmit knowledge - so she was sorry that her child had broken what she took for granted as the appropriate school norms.

So what we are going to explore today are some of the ways in which cultures can influence learning styles. But first, what do we mean by "learning styles", and what do we mean by "culture"? For the purposes of this talk, we'll say that learning styles are the unique ways in which individual people perceive,

interact with and respond to a learning experience. In a way, your learning style is a reflection of your overall personality.

One interesting way of describing learning styles is to use the "onion" metaphor. If we look at the most external layer of the onion, that will refer to your environmental preferences – for example, your preferences in terms of when and where you prefer to study, if you prefer to get up early in the morning or stay up late at night, if you need to eat and drink before, during or after your study sessions, what kind of breaks you need, if you prefer to sit, lie or stand, and things like that. If you peel off this layer, you'll find your preferences in terms of sensory modalities or ways of perceiving information –whether you tend to be a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learner – or maybe a mixture of the three. Further inside the onion, you come to your cognitive styles, your personal ways of processing information – for instance, you may place yourself somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes of being analytical, systematic, reflective, at one end, and being global, intuitive, impulsive at the other end. And finally, when you get to the core of the onion, you reach your personality traits, for instance, your tendency to be an introvert rather than an extrovert, your preference for individual rather than group work, the different degrees in which you can cope with anxiety or can tolerate ambiguity, and so on. Obviously, as you peel off the various layers of the onion, you progressively reach parts of your learning style which are more and more stable and therefore less and less easy to change.

So when we talk about learning styles we are concerned with individual differences, we are asking the question: How are individuals different when they learn? On the other hand, when we turn to culture, the magic word is *shared* – here we are not concerned with individuals, but rather with what these individuals, taken collectively, share as a result of living together for a long time.

What is it that we share with all the other members of our culture? We share, first of all, many tangible things, like the way we dress, the food we eat, the way our houses and flats are built and furnished … but, deeper inside the onion, we also share the way we behave, verbally and non-verbally – for example, what we find or don't find appropriate to say in certain circumstances, or the use of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, proximity with other people. And, as you peel off other layers and approach the core of the onion, you find that we share the most invisible but probably the most important components of our culture – the meaning we attach to people, things and events, our deeply felt beliefs, attitudes and values – in a word, our way of knowing the world. This, of course, includes the way we think schools should

be run, what should be taught and how, what teachers and students should do in class.

Of course, it is only too easy and natural that we should assume that what is valued and important and "right" for us is the same for other cultures. These "cultural assumptions" are easy to make: for instance, we can assume that black is the colour of mourning everywhere in the world, but in India and Japan it's white. Or we can assume that brides traditionally wear white, but Indian women marry in red. For us, a dragon carries the idea of "danger", but in China dragons bring good fortune.

So it becomes essential to get to know how cultures actually make meaning of the world. To do this, one obvious first step could be to ask the learners themselves. Let's have a look at an example from Minnesota. But before that, a word of warning: whenever we talk about cultural differences, stereotypes are round the corner, so we should be very careful about making generalisations. This is a point we'll come back to later.

In a literacy class for Southeast Asian students, during a lesson on family values and childrearing practices, learners compared their views and values with those of Americans, and this is what they came up with (quoted in Quintero 1994):

Asians	*Americans*
Asians live in time	Americans live in space
Asians like to contemplate	Americans like to act
Asians live in peace with nature	Americans like to impose their will on nature
Religion is Asians' first love	Technology is Americans' passion
Asians believe in freedom of silence	Americans believe in freedom of

(Incidentally, this is an example of an activity which values the learners' original cultures, socializes views and values in the classroom, and also provides teachers with a lot of valuable information about the learners' worlds, their experiences and perceptions.)

To come back to our main point. If learning styles focus on individuals, cultures focus on groups; if learning styles highlight the *differences* between individuals, cultures highlight the *similarities* within a group. Our question now becomes: do particular cultures favour particular learning styles? The most accepted answer to this question today is – yes, we can talk about "cultural" learning styles. "Individuals are most likely not born with a genetic predisposition to learn analytically or relationally, visually or kinaesthetically … They learn how to learn through the socialization processes that occur in families and friendship groups. " (Nelson 1995).

In other words, you learn how to learn in a particular way through sharing culturally-based patterns of behaviour. "In every culture there are unstated assumptions about people and how they learn … that invisibly guide whatever educational processes may occur there … [these assumptions] work as an unintentional hidden curriculum" (Singleton 1991).

For example, if we turn to school learning, what happens in a classroom, the visible behaviour of teachers and students, is the result of a framework of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs that are usually taken for granted … beliefs about how to teach and learn, attitudes towards visual rather than auditory input, accepted routines to process information in a global rather than an analytical way, communication patterns, and so on. These are all things that we are not usually aware of, until … until something forces us to challenge our assumptions: for instance, the arrival of a learner from a different cultural background – it's what's happening to many teachers in Italy today – many of us are suddenly being faced with the reality of a multicultural class.

We've already mentioned the fact that the first step to meet this challenge is to try and get to know something more about our learners' different cultures. By doing this, we are also discovering *our* hidden assumptions about *our own* culture – it's as if we changed our glasses and were thus able to see the world

with different eyes - in a way, we are forced to dis-cover our perceptions and compare them with the perceptions of other cultural groups.

Let me give you another example, once again from Manitoba in Canada. In Manitoba, the Athabascans, the natives of this land, make up a substantial percentage of the population. A few years ago, a study of the Athabascan culture tried to highlight some cultural differences in communication between English speakers and the Athabascans. The interesting thing was that the study focussed on each other's perceptions (quoted in *Working with Aboriginal learners*):

What's confusing to English speakers about Athabascans	*What's confusing to Athabascans about English speakers*
They avoid situations involving talking	They talk too much and always talk first
They play down their own abilities	They brag about themselves
They deny planning and expect things to be given	They always talk about what's going to happen
They are too indirect; not explicit; they talk off the topic	They aren't careful when they talk about things or people

Just think: what would happen in an Athabascan class if we were to introduce, right from the start, a straightforward communicative approach based on role play, communication strategies and the maximum of student interaction?

Of course, we don't just have to turn to the results of research, tests and case studies – which, by the way, are rather contradictory. We can directly observe the learners as they live their classroom life before our very eyes. Those of us that happen to teach in multicultural classrooms, for instance, have already

discovered a lot about the learning styles and preferences of their learners. For instance, Chinese learners are often described by teachers as silent, quiet, well-disciplined, hard-working, respectful, very willing to learn and very good at memorising, and with an extraordinary long attention span and determination to succeed– at least if compared with Italian learners. It is not difficult to understand why Chinese learners, in a way, would be the ideal learners for many among us!

However, once again, we must be aware of possible stereotypes here. Even if we admit that a group of people shows certain features, we should always be aware that these are generalizations, and generalizations can very easily lead to make naïve inferences about individuals within that group. In other words, whenever we meet a new Chinese learner we can't assume that she or he will conform to the patterns of her or his cultural group. One consistent finding of research, for example, has been that, within a group, the differences among individuals are as great as their similarities. Therefore, cultural learning styles, as all learning styles, should not be used as just another way of classifying, categorizing, labelling or "pigeonholing" people. One important consequence of this is that empirical observations are very useful and are not the same as stereotyping, but what we observe must be interpreted properly for each student.

I have already mentioned that research on cultural learning styles is contradictory, and tends to offer conflicting results. I would like to illustrate this with a situation which has been the subject of a lot of debate and research, and which has been called "the paradox of the Asian learner". Especially in secondary and university education in Western institutions, Chinese learners are often reported to be more passive, less interactive and dependent upon the teacher than most students. They are reported to use rote memorisation, apparently without much personal understanding of what is committed to memory; in other words, they seem to adopt what has been called a "surface" rather than a "deep" approach to study. And yet … and yet, their level of achievement in exams is relatively high; also, in spite of their tendency to learn by rote, they also show higher scores in the use of study strategies than Western students. How is this possible? What's wrong in our interpretation of the Chinese learning style?

Before we try to figure out an explanation of this paradox, let's mention some concrete facts first. As Graziella Favaro reports in one of her books (2002), at the end of the very first school semester, Chinese children have learned 160 different written characters, the Latin alphabet, the relevant pronunciation in the Chinese national language, and the meaning of every word. In the second

semester, Chinese children memorise new words through short stories and short poems, which they repeat, copy in writing and read aloud collectively. In this way, in the second semester of the first year at primary school, they learn another 220 characters, and then, through the years, they learn an average of one or two new characters every day, so that, by the end of the sixth year of primary school, they master about 2500 characters. If you think that you must memorize 9000 characters in order to be able to read what is normally published, you can appreciate the enormous amount of effort which learners must spend.

However, this is just the surface of the iceberg, or, if you like, the most external layer of the onion. Chinese learners belong to what have been called "Confucian heritage cultures", together with such different countries as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Confucianism stresses the benefits of fixed hierarchical relationships which show respect for age, seniority, rank and family background. Consequently, the teacher is often seen as an authority figure, the one who must know all, but also as an adult who, like parents, helps students develop as complete human beings – as an ancient Chinese saying goes: "If a teacher for a day, a father for life". However, the responsibility for learning is placed on students. Students are encouraged to do their best. Intellectual ability is valued but is not enough – what is also required and expected is diligence, effort and endurance to achieve academic success.

Within this tradition, students learn through cooperation, but watch out there - not as a way to promote the individual – rather the opposite, as a way to promote the common good, by supporting each other. In the learning situation, therefore, students are sensitive to the other students in the class and are concerned for the group as a whole. Standing out as a single individual is out of the question – as another proverb, this one from Japan, goes: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down".

Despite all this, as I mentioned, Asian learners are often good achievers, and a lot of research has tried to explain this "paradox of the Asian learner". Research has found out, for example, that Chinese learners seem to see the combination of memorisation with understanding as normal because they believe that "if they really understand the material, they will have a very strong impression that will help them to memorise without much effort" (Marton, Delll'Alba & Tse 1996). However, they also see "memorisation with understanding" as essential when they have to prepare for examinations; in other words, if students perceive that assessment requires only, or mainly, the reproduction of knowledge, they will tend to use some form of memorisation

(Au e Entwistle 1999) – and this, of course, is common to many students around the world.

So we see that a particular learning style is often a combination of culturally-based beliefs, attitudes and values with students' more general response to the demands of curricula and exams. I think that this helps us a lot to clarify the concept of "cultural learning styles". For a start, we are now better equipped to face the eternal dilemma between "nature and nurture": which are more important – personality traits or the influence of culture? Obviously, this question has no clear answer, and the most accurate response is probably "it depends". Researchers confirm that learning patterns are actually a function of both nature and nurture. The hypothesis is that a learning style preference is inborn, but this possible preference can be helped or hindered by the environment: we have already seen the importance of early socialization within the family, with friends and at school. In other words, "we are as much creatures of our culture as we are creatures of our brain", as Howard Gardner (1991) puts it.

So diversity exists not just between cultures, but also within a single culture. There are a lot of personal variables that influence the extent to which a member of a culture will show the learning style associated with her or his culture: for example, age, gender, religion, family structure, socioeconomic class, geographical region, native language, experience with the L2, work history, degree of identification with one's culture, degree of assimilation into the dominant culture … plus, of course, a host of situational variables like, as we've already seen, learning contexts and curriculum demands.

This makes it quite difficult sometimes to explain the origin of students' behaviour. For instance, students can come from a cultural background and previous learning experiences that predispose them for rote learning or memorisation. Now, what will happen to these students in a class will depend on several different factors, including their teachers' beliefs and expectations. If they meet a teacher who doesn't encourage critical thinking, personal understanding, problem solving and creative work, these students will probably adopt the teacher's approach. In the same way, if a teacher believes that her students prefer rote learning and memorisation as their cultural learning styles, she may, even unconsciously, decide to structure her lessons to cater for this type of learning – and this, in turn, will lead students to adopt this approach. So you see that learning styles and teaching approach can be linked in a sort of vicious circle!

This has other interesting implications, and leads us to consider the question of uniformity vs diversity, which we can exemplify through the two sayings, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do", on one hand, and "Always be yourself!", on the other hand. In other words, should different people from different cultures fuse together, so to say, into one big, global *melting pot*? Should we, as teachers, try to wipe out, or at least reduce, cultural differences so that we can promote uniform ways of working in the classroom? Or should people from different cultures retain their group identities and learn to live together in a sort of big *salad bowl*?

Of course the idea of the melting pot is no longer very fashionable today, and we tend, at least in theory, to go for the salad bowl. However, we are well aware that the question is not simple to deal with in practical terms. So I would like to move towards the end of this paper by mentioning some basic pedagogical implications of what we have said so far.

First, I think we do need to learn more about different cultures and change our perceptions of them - but we also need to become aware of our own culture, of the assumptions about learning and teaching that we take for granted. Here I would like to quote the parent of a child who used the primary school portfolio developed in Piedmont. After the experience, this parent wrote: "Credo che conoscere il diverso aiuti a sentirsi uguali" – "I believe that getting to know who's different helps us to feel the same". I think that this is a most important point, because we usually tend to highlight differences, what divides us, but we seldom point out similarities, what unites us as human beings. Just think of the use of the words "other cultures" or "foreign cultures". Other than what? Foreign with respect to what? We don't want to deny the importance of cultural differences, but at the same time I think we need to realize that most of the time we take our western values as the benchmark, as the standard, and it's against this standard that others and foreigners are often compared and judged.

So my first pedagogical implication can be summed up with the title of a very well-known English textbook of many years ago: look, listen and learn. I think that what we need most as teachers is a "suspension of disbelief", a tolerance of ambiguity – when we are faced with different cultures we need to stop, observe and listen carefully – just as our learners do. I do think that the only way to understand people is to give them time – time to un-cover and dis-cover themselves.

Having said that, I think that, as always with learning styles, we need a balanced approach. On one side, we need to accommodate individual

differences, including cultural learning styles. On the other hand, we need to empower individual students and groups by helping them to develop *their* ability to learn in different ways. Let me give you a couple of final examples.

Accommodating students means, in practice, adjusting the tasks to the students, providing enough variety in materials and activities so that different students will find, often if not always, contexts that match their particular style. For instance, if we know that for Asian learners group solidarity is important, we will try to emphasize group work in which the group, rather than the individual, is at the core of the activity. If we find that Hispanic learners profit more from concepts presented globally rather than analytically, we will try to ensure that each new topic is contextualized so that they get the whole picture first. If we become aware that Islamic students value oral repetition, we will ensure that, especially at the start, this approach is included in some way or other in what we do in the classroom. And, very generally speaking, we know that several things can be done to facilitate or accommodate instruction, especially with beginners, such as - simplifying texts to make them more readable, using images and non-verbal communication, making contexts clearer and more motivating by starting from the learners' previous knowledge, setting up concrete experiences rather than offer only visual or auditory input. You see that what all this implies is some degree of flexibility on the *teacher's* part.

However, we also need to make *our learners* flexible, to give them the chance of extending the range of *their* ways of learning – as has been said, we need to help learners "stretch beyond their stylistic comfort zone". If they are to be successful at school and at work in our society, they also need to learn *our* specific ways of learning and working, which may look unfamiliar and even puzzling to them. They need to play new roles and learn new approaches. This means that we, as teachers, need to activate the other line of action - adjust students to tasks. Obviously, they can't be left alone to do this. They will need to experience a variet of tasks, tasks which call for a wide range of styles and strategies; they will need to be gradually exposed to unfamiliar approaches and learn how to select ways of doing tasks; and they will need help in using self-assessment tools. In this way we hope that, gradually, they can become aware of *their own* styles and how these can be adapted to different tasks and contexts. All this should help them to increase *their own* flexibility as learners, and implement what we have called a balanced approach.

We know this is not easy to do. There are no simple recipes to face the challenge of diversity, and even more so when the challenge involves a meeting of cultures. All kinds of intercultural activity demands some degree of

mediation and negotiation – and classroom learning is, of course, no exception. We may see learning in intercultural classes as simply a collection of compromises – but I think there could be a much more challenging view - to see an intercultural class as an example of a new culture, a salad bowl which retains the individual flavours but also takes on a distinctively new taste. As Ruth Spack (1997) once wrote, "students who crisscross borders are not just products of culture, they are creators of culture". And I think this applies to us, teachers, too.

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