TEACHING and LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES

A Guide to Theory and Practice

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Preface

Anyone who has taught students of another culture, or anticipates doing so, knows the challenges they face. But they may be less aware that people from different cultures may approach teaching and learning in fundamentally different ways, which adds an unexpected layer of challenge to the task. Even seasoned teachers often find themselves bewildered by the enigmatic behavior of learners from an unfamiliar culture. This book examines those culturally related differences in teaching and learning, and offers guidance. Whether one is a formal teacher or professor, a community worker or trainer, a pastor or disciple-maker, this book seeks to provide readers with practical insight to understand and navigate those challenges. On the basis of the best cross-cultural research and illustrated with real-life experiences, it will explore ways to appreciate and engage learners from different cultures. It will not suggest cookie-cutter solutions or simplistic how-to guidelines but will point the way to deeper understanding, improved teaching effectiveness, and transformative relationships in the midst of complex intercultural encounters.

This work proceeds from a Christian conviction that the ultimate goal of all teaching is human flourishing, which has its ultimate root in biblical values and the restoration of the divine image through the redemptive power of the gospel. Although written largely from the perspective of a North American teaching abroad, I hope this volume will provide insight for readers whatever their background and whomever their students may be. Numerous excellent resources address more generally the topic of teaching and learning. Though often written from a Western perspective, they contain many valuable insights for teaching in any context. However, to keep this work focused on the cultural dynamics at play in teaching and learning, I have not drawn heavily upon that literature, and simply refer readers to it.

Writing about cultural differences is a tricky business. One is ever caught in the tension between identifying cultural commonalities that people share, and acknowledging individual differences. On the one hand, whenever an example from a particular country or culture is mentioned, unhelpful stereotypes can be created in the minds of readers. Differences may be wrongly understood as binary categories, pigeonholes into which people can be neatly placed that leave little space for diversity and change. On the other hand, excessive attention to nuance can lack clarity. Continual qualifying statements weary the reader and dull the impact. I have attempted to strike the right balance, but have at points no doubt erred to one or the other extreme. If a study cited or example given causes offense to anyone, know that it was not my intent. On the contrary: may these pages kindle an appreciation for human diversity, a curiosity to understand learners, and most importantly, the ability to see others not primarily as students, or as citizens of a nation, or as members of an ethnic group. But rather, may we see them first and foremost as persons created in the image of God with amazing potential. My hope is not only that this book will aid teachers in helping others realize that potential but also that teachers themselves reach their potential in that process.

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Understanding the Challenge

Chapter Overview

- Who Is the Cross-Cultural Teacher?
- The Challenges of Teaching across Cultures
- What Does It Mean to Teach and Learn?
- Culture and the Content of Teaching
- Meeting the Challenge
- About This Book

The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I* tells the nineteenth-century story of British schoolteacher Anna Leonowens, who becomes governess to the children of King Mongkut of Siam. One of the musical's best-known songs is "Getting to Know You," which describes not only how she has become a student of her students, but how—as the lyrics go—she is "getting to feel free and easy, . . . getting to know what to say," and ultimately feeling "bright and breezy." Though highly romanticized, this captures in many ways the ideal attitude of every cross-cultural teacher: willingness to be a learner, striving to like and understand the students, and working toward a relationship that is honest, open, and relaxed. The teacher with the right attitude will truly be personally enriched by the experience.

But such an attitude and commitment are only the starting points for cross-cultural effectiveness as a teacher. Other challenges will abound that can sour that "bright and breezy" spirit. Here's a sampling:

- "My students just want me to tell them all the answers. They don't think for themselves."
- "I arrived and there was no PowerPoint projector. But it wouldn't have mattered since there were constant power outages."
- "Students complained bitterly when I assigned them even the simplest homework."
- "As a woman teacher, the boys showed me no respect and ignored my instructions."
- "They are great at memorizing large amounts of material, but don't seem to have critical reasoning skills."
- "I tried to develop personal friendships with some of my students. They nod and smile, but remain cool and distant."

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- “Plagiarism is rampant, and I don’t know what to do about it.”
- “My contract stated that I would teach three hours per day, but when I arrived, my schedule included five hours per day.”
- “I thought I could teach by using the lecture notes I had from seminary, but quickly had to scrap that idea, because students found my material too abstract and irrelevant.”
- “When students write papers, they just seem to ramble and not come to the point. There is no clear thesis, no logical argument, and no compelling conclusion.”

Jude Carroll describes these most common sources of misunderstanding and frustration for cross-cultural teachers in higher education: “(1) relations between teachers and students; (2) teaching methods (how they work and how they support learning); (3) assessment; (4) academic writing; and (5) academic/critical reading” (2015, 32). The list could go on.

Much of this book is devoted to addressing these and other issues, especially as they relate to student preferences and expectations. This chapter will define what is meant by *cross-cultural teaching*. Then, after describing some of the most common challenges and frustrations cross-cultural teachers encounter, we consider what is necessary to face the challenge and become more effective. Because there are differing understandings of what it even means to teach and learn, we will examine these basic concepts. Even the content of our teaching, especially theological teaching, must take culture into consideration; therefore, we briefly consider the importance of contextualization. Finally, an overview of the structure of this book will be provided.

Who Is the Cross-Cultural Teacher?

Teaching is one of the wonderful ways in which people invest in the lives of others. This may occur in a school, vocational training, adult continuing education, an English as a second language (ESL) class, individual mentoring, or a spiritual formation relationship. Today, more than ever, teachers, trainers, pastors, and people who have never formally taught before are traveling abroad to teach people of another culture. The low cost of airfare, the ease of international communication via the internet, and globalization in general have opened up to thousands of people opportunities for international teaching. International migration has also brought literally millions of people from the most diverse cultures into our schools and churches at home. Thus, the challenges of cross-cultural teaching are present nearly everywhere.

Today there are worldwide an estimated 420,000 Christian missionaries, of whom a high percentage are involved in some form of teaching, be it in formal schools and seminaries, or in the context of church and development work (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020). Each year from America alone approximately 1.6 million people serve on international short-term mission assignments lasting from a few days to a few years (Wuthnow 2009, 170–71), and over 20 percent of these are explicitly in teaching roles of some kind (Priest 2010, 99). By one estimate there are some 250,000 native English speakers teaching ESL in some 40,000 schools and language institutes.[1] Annually the Fulbright Scholar Program sponsors some

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1,200 US scholars and 900 visiting scholars who lecture internationally.[2] The list could go on documenting the growing number of persons involved in some form of teaching across cultures, all facing to a greater or lesser extent the kinds of challenges described above in bridging the cultural gap between teacher and learner.

Today, schoolteachers, professors, community workers, and pastors are increasingly involved in teaching ethnically or culturally diverse learners like never before. With increasing immigration and cultural diversity, schools have wrestled with the challenges of teaching in a classroom of learners from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, varying levels of English skills, and little or no familiarity with the expectations of school or university study in the US. There is a large literature devoted to teaching in the multicultural classroom. A teacher from an affluent suburb who teaches ethnic minority students in the inner city will encounter many of the cross-cultural challenges described in this volume.

Although teachers everywhere can benefit from insights discussed here, primarily in view is the teacher who has traveled to another country or location to teach students of a single culture significantly different from her own: for example, an American[3] science teacher teaching Chinese students in Beijing, a German teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia, or a Korean missionary teaching at a theological seminary in Chile. Our term *cross-cultural teacher* is not to be confused with a *cross-cultural trainer*, whose task is to help people (usually of his own culture) develop intercultural competency in preparation for an international assignment.

Most examples in this volume will be taken from formal teaching in schools. In non-formal teaching, such as seminars or workshops, similar cultural dynamics and challenges are at play, though the teacher may have a different role or status. The cross-cultural teacher may also be an after-school tutor, a church Sunday school teacher, a community health worker, a trainer for a corporation, an athletic coach, or in any other number of contexts in which teaching, in the broadest sense, is the task. The teaching assignment may be relatively long-term—as for a professor, development worker, or missionary teacher whose assignment lasts months or years—or for a relatively short period of time, such as for a visiting lecturer or short-term missionary whose teaching assignment lasts only a week or two.

The Challenges of Teaching across Cultures

Teachers tend to teach others in the same manner by which they were taught, and if they do change their teaching methods, it will be in ways that feel most natural to them. Teaching methods, expectations about relationships between teachers and learners, the institutional parameters of teaching, and even the physical conditions of teaching are all influenced by culture. Thus, teaching that comes naturally and is effective in one's home culture can become like the proverbial square peg trying to fit in a round hole when it is attempted in another culture. Or to switch metaphors, sometimes the cultural gap can be measured in millimeters and be easily bridged, but in other cases the gap resembles the Grand Canyon. Bridging the chasm seems daunting if not impossible!

The opening paragraphs of this chapter listed typical frustrations that teachers regularly experience due to culture conflict. Later chapters of this book will explore in detail the

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various dimensions of how culture influences teaching and learning, and the reasons behind those conflicts. Strategies will be proposed for reducing frustration and increasing teaching effectiveness. But first we will describe briefly just some of the challenges that a cross-cultural teacher commonly encounters, as a heads-up regarding some of the largest stumbling stones. These illustrate why effective teaching across cultures doesn't come naturally, and why the cross-cultural teacher needs not only pedagogical preparation but also personal preparation to meet the challenge.

Conflicting Expectations

At the root of much frustration experienced by cross-cultural teachers and learners are conflicting expectations. Culture defines appropriate ways for people to interact, how learning institutions function, and what it even means to learn. Culture therefore shapes the expectations that both teacher and learner bring to the teaching-learning experience. When a teacher and learners come from different cultures, divergent expectations and ensuing frustration or conflict are preprogrammed. The disconnect can relate to course content, teaching methods, roles, scheduling—nearly every aspect of teaching. For example, the teacher may plan for students to engage in lengthy class discussions, but learners desire formal lectures. Over twenty years ago, a comparative study of teaching in various countries concluded, "To put it simply, we were amazed at how much teaching varies across cultures and how little it varied within cultures" (Stigler and Hiebert 1999, 11). Despite globalization, the challenges persist today. This means that teaching expectations that are considered normal in one culture may well be in conflict with the expectations of other cultures. "Teaching is a cultural activity. We learn how to teach indirectly through years of participation in classroom life, and we are largely unaware of some of the most widespread attributes of teaching in our own culture" (11). When such firm but subconscious expectations are in conflict with the firm and subconscious expectations of a cross-cultural teacher, conflict and frustration are preprogrammed.

Often poor advance communication is also a source of conflicting expectations. Especially for short-term assignments, cross-cultural teachers depend on receiving accurate information about their students, teaching responsibilities, and classroom conditions. However, that information may be inadequate and come late or not at all. The teacher may arrive only to find that the number of teaching hours has changed, textbooks aren't available, power outages make use of electronic media impossible, class size is not as expected, or students do not possess the academic background or skills to perform as planned. One teacher arrived at a college in Nepal having prepared to teach an intensive one-week English course. Upon arrival he was informed that he would be teaching a theology course instead!

Steven T. Simpson describes how Western ESL teachers have misinterpreted China's invitation to come teach English as a desire for them to contribute pedagogical expertise and methodology. The Chinese, however, were more interested in these teachers' linguistic and cultural expertise to enrich their English ability. "When these two expectations are in conflict, the potential results are frustration and accusations of wrongful treatment, ignorance, and

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laziness of both sides, by both sides" (2008, 382). The effective cross-cultural teacher must learn to adjust expectations and negotiate such conflicts.

False Perception of Teaching Effectiveness and Learner Response

Even when teachers feel that they have been effective, their perceptions often don't reflect reality. One experienced English teacher from Canada described his first day of teaching in China this way:

> My students smiled and laughed continually. What a relief! They must have understood and thoroughly enjoyed the story, I thought. . . . My illusion that the students had at least a rudimentary grasp of the story was shattered that evening as I read their journals. Student after student, with the best spelling and grammar they could manage, thanked me for being their teacher, declared how much they appreciated my easygoing manner, and then, as politely as possible, proceeded to inform me that they understood nothing of the entire first day. (Squire 2007, 531)

TABLE 1.1

Perceptions of American Pastors Teaching Abroad

American Pastors' Perceptions of Their Teaching	National Partners' Perceptions of the American Pastors' Teaching
"They're so hungry for the training we offer."	"You conclude that you're communicating effectively because we're paying attention when we're actually just intrigued by watching your foreign behavior."
"They listened so intently. They just hung on every word."	"It was a nice day but I don't think what they taught would ever work here. But if it makes them feel like they can help us in ways beyond supporting our ministry financially, we're willing to listen to their ideas."
"Teach biblical principles. Those are always the same."	"You describe a different Jesus than the one we know."
"Just teach the principles" without illustrations since they know that cultures differ.	Without illustrations, the national pastors complained they were given purely abstract information with no help in implementation.
"We have so much. They have so little."	"You call us backward. . . . You underestimate the effectiveness of our local church leaders."

Source: Summarized from Livermore 2004.

Enthusiastic praise from learners or organizers may politely mask underlying problems. David Livermore (2004) compared, for example, the experience of Americans teaching internationally with the experience of their students and discovered major disconnects, as illustrated in table 1.1.

Initial student enthusiasm about expatriate teachers can also be short-lived. Curiosity about meeting a foreigner or fascination with new teaching methods can fade quickly. A study of Chinese student satisfaction with expatriate English professors illustrates the point. First-year students were generally enthusiastic about their expatriate teachers. But by the fourth year

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their enthusiasm had melted away, and responses became generally negative (M. Li 2002; see table 1.2).

Teaching international students in one's own country can be just as challenging as teaching abroad. For example, in a study of 129 ethnic minority students in Montreal, the researcher found that "a majority felt that the teaching style of their teachers was not a match with their individual learning styles and a majority saw this as a reflection of cultural values" (Kandarakis 1996). This was believed to have compromised minority student performance.

TABLE 1.2

Chinese Student Satisfaction with Expatriate English Professors

	Year 1	Year 4
Chinese student views	Percent who agree	
I prefer Chinese teachers' teaching.	31%	79%
Expatriate teachers' teaching is disappointing.	2%	56%
I can learn more in Chinese teachers' classes than in expatriate teachers' classes.	48%	92%
Expatriate teachers' teaching cannot match my expectations.	14%	74%
Expatriate teachers' techniques do not match my needs.	13%	71%
Chinese teachers adopt better teaching techniques than expatriate teachers.	3.2%	44.3%
Chinese teaching methods suit me better than the methods introduced by expatriate teachers.	26.9%	62.9%
Expatriate teachers do not know what our learning needs and expectations are.	32.7%	79%
Few expatriate teachers have lived up to our expectations.	38.4%	82.2%

Source: M. Li 2002, 14. Used by permission.

Encountering Stereotypes and Prejudice

The potential for stereotyping exists across the board: the cross-cultural teacher faces the temptation to stereotype her students (discussed in the next chapter), and her students are likely to stereotype *her* according to unflattering national caricatures or on the basis of various prejudices. This has a dampening effect on teacher credibility and teacher-learner relationships, and can distort seemingly objective teaching content. Americans may be stereotyped as arrogant, materialistic, immoral, and obese (to mention just a few). For example, a study of five thousand college students in eleven nations indicated perceptions of Americans as competent, but cold and arrogant. They regarded Americans with a mix of admiration and contempt. Furthermore, the United States was perceived as seeking dominance over other nations (Glick et al. 2006). Female teachers may encounter the stereotype that American women are sexually promiscuous, and they may experience sexual harassment (Rawlins 2012).

Self-perception often diverges dramatically from the stereotypical perceptions of others. This is illustrated in a study of national stereotypes involving twelve thousand Europeans in

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ten nations. The quality that Germans most often used to describe themselves was dutiful/diligent; 23 percent of Germans mentioned it. But only 4.3 percent of non-German Europeans attributed that quality to Germans. A quality non-Germans mentioned twice as frequently to describe Germans was militaristic/warlike, at 8.8 percent, but very few Germans—a miniscule 0.2 percent—used it to describe themselves.[4] This illustrates not only how self-perceptions can diverge from the perceptions of others but also the stubborn persistence of negative national stereotypes.

In addition to racial, national, and ethnic stereotypes, the cross-cultural teacher may encounter gender and age prejudices. One study involving one hundred university students in Tehran found a bias against female teachers and a preference for male teachers (Nemati and Kaivanpanah 2013). In many male-dominant cultures, men or even boys may feel that they have nothing to learn from women. An unmarried woman may be viewed as a social misfit, or perhaps of questionable character: "What's wrong with her that she is not married?" In other cultures age is an important factor for teacher credibility. If a cultural belief is that knowledge and wisdom come only with age, older persons feel they have nothing to learn from younger persons. One veteran missionary in an East Asian country reported how she received little respect as a teacher until her hair began to turn grey, at which point student response to her changed noticeably. The cross-cultural teacher can be blindsided by any number of unanticipated prejudices or stereotypes that undermine her credibility and effectiveness.

Stereotypes and prejudice will also be encountered by the increasing number of teachers and missionaries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America who travel abroad. In ethnically diverse countries such as Nigeria or India, a teacher may encounter prejudices from students of another ethnic group without even leaving their own country. This can block student receptivity and hinder the ability to teach and develop trusting relationships. On the other hand, cross-cultural teachers are in a unique position to help learners overcome such stereotypical thinking and attitudes. This will, however, demand considerable awareness, patience, humility, and skill on the part of the teacher.

Resistance to Change

North Americans especially value creativity and welcome innovation. When entering a teaching situation where common teaching methods or curriculum appear outdated or inappropriate, the expatriate teacher may attempt to introduce new methods and ideas. This can prove frustrating when working in a culture that values tradition. In some cultures, an attempt to change the status quo is interpreted as a criticism of leadership whereby leaders stand to lose face. When new ideas are introduced they may be received with polite, affirming nods in formal meetings, only to be ignored when it comes to implementation. Sidebar 1.1 illustrates one expatriate teacher's experience in this regard.

SIDEBAR 1.1

Introducing Change

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A teacher in North Africa describes her experience in attempting to apply principles learned in a course on teaching across cultures:

> As in the past two years, the board members of our training program expressed again the wish to see the instruction better adapted to the students and make it more practical. The general observation was that instruction was not making a practical difference and was to some extent over the heads of the students. So far we hadn't succeeded in implementing change so that the students would benefit more.
>
> This summer I was able to apply what I had learned in the course on teaching across cultures. At first I encountered little understanding for my proposals and it took a considerable amount of convincing. I was rather surprised that even experienced teachers had little appreciation for the different learning preferences of the students. We finally agreed to reduce the theory by a third so as to employ more time with group projects and practical exercises. These were topics that were not very relevant for the students since they would only be important in the distant future.
>
> There will be an orientation offered for the teachers whereby they will receive a template for their lesson plans as well as specific ideas how they can make their instruction more practical. Now we are simply hoping that at least a few of the teachers will welcome the new ideas and seriously consider implementing them.

Of course, it should be kept in mind that newcomers are rarely in a position to accurately assess a situation and identify what change is really necessary. One can easily overlook the fact that methods effective in one context are not necessarily effective in another, and there may be very good reasons why seemingly inappropriate methods are employed. The ability to accurately assess a situation comes only with extended experience and insight into the culture and history of the people or institution. Expatriates must earn the right to be heard by demonstrating humility, being a team player, and demonstrating effectiveness in practice. Even when one has made an accurate assessment of needed change, the process of implementing that change can be complex and bewildering. Different cultures have different approaches to decision-making that must be learned and respected.

Language Barriers

Cross-cultural teaching often entails overcoming a linguistic barrier. The teacher may be teaching in a language that is not her mother tongue, the students may be learning in a language that is not their mother tongue, or teaching may occur through an interpreter. If the teacher is teaching in a language that is not her mother tongue, preparation will likely take longer. Finding the appropriate vocabulary, following discussions, and locating textbooks and resources can all be formidable challenges. Unless the teacher's language proficiency is exceptionally strong, her teaching of complex material may lack depth and precision.

If the students are learning in a language that is not their native tongue, their language skills and vocabulary may not be adequate for the subject matter. The teacher may need to speak slowly and spend time explaining technical vocabulary or idioms. Students may find reading assignments tedious and time-consuming. Students' verbal skills may be so poor that the teacher has difficulty understanding class discussions or presentations. Students may be reluctant to participate in class discussions because they lack confidence in their language

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ability. Unless the cross-cultural teacher is a language instructor, she will probably not have the time or expertise to help students improve their language proficiency. This presents a particular challenge in higher education because proficiency in the language of instruction is so important to classroom interaction, written assignments, and understanding academic texts.

Teaching through an interpreter presents its own set of challenges, such as having materials translated in advance, the competency of the translator, and time lost through sequential translation. Chapter 11 will include an extensive discussion of teaching and learning in a foreign language.

Physical and Emotional Stress

The international sojourner often teaches under physical conditions that add an extra layer of stress and difficulty to the teaching task. Crossing international time zones can create jet lag and sleep problems. Extreme climates, such as tropical heat and humidity, can drain energy. Strange foods can cause digestive problems. Noise, air pollution, uncomfortable beds, traffic, security concerns, and a host of other conditions can make the assignment taxing.

The long-term sojourner will face the additional challenges of culture shock and learning to live in a strange culture. Continually having to interpret others' behavior and discern appropriate conduct, all while struggling to understand why everything is so different, can create enormous emotional stress at the personal level as well as in family and other relationships. If the teacher is working in an isolated location where there is little contact with other expatriates, he may feel that he has no one with whom he can talk, share frustrations, or seek counsel. But the sojourner who perseveres will have the advantage of developing deeper relationships with people of the host culture and may gain a deeper appreciation for that culture. How to develop intercultural competency will be addressed in chapter 2.

What Does It Mean to Teach and Learn?

One of the most fundamental challenges that a cross-cultural teacher may face relates to the most basic questions she may not think to ask. Our culturally colored glasses influence the very definitions of what we mean when we speak of teaching and learning. Consider how you answer the following questions:

- Has one really learned if one can only recall information? Or must one be able to use or apply that information?
- Is learning primarily about information *at all*, or is learning more about skill or wisdom?
- Is learning more an active process of the learner discovering knowledge, or more a passive experience of the learner receiving authoritative knowledge?
- What role do intuition, the transcendent, or meditation play in learning, if any?

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- How do passing examinations and other requirements of formal education relate to being a productive and successful human being?

Answers to these questions do more than just reveal how a teacher (or learner) understands the goal of education: they will determine the teaching methods that teacher will adopt to achieve that goal. Some of these questions that relate to worldview will be discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

Western versus Non-Western Understandings

Whenever we attempt to speak of differences between social groupings of people, language becomes difficult. Should we speak of race, or ethnicity, or age, or education, or nationality? Each term has its own advantages and disadvantages, and deciding upon the appropriate terminology is the subject of much debate in academic circles. Words matter: they can shed light or foster harmful stereotypes and prejudices. There is no consensus about the best way to discuss human difference. In this volume a variety of terms and categories will be used, and a prominent one is the distinction between Western and non-Western cultures. This is admittedly imprecise and problematic. Globalization and human migration have made the term *Western* somewhat misleading. So let me clarify how I will use the term. By *Western* I do not refer primarily to geography (e.g., Europe, North America, Australia, etc.) nor only to people of European descent with light skin color. Rather, I use the term to describe cultural ideals rooted in European social and intellectual traditions. This would include, among other features, the legacy of the Enlightenment and—important to our subject—educational institutions and traditions. The Enlightenment describes the philosophical and cultural movement originating in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that defined knowledge in terms of that which is rational or demonstrable by empirical, scientific method. The autonomy of the individual in self-determination and the discernment of truth was elevated over tradition, religion, and other authorities.[5] These ideas have since evolved, and one can no longer speak of a cohesive Western worldview, but these elements are nevertheless present.

As a result of colonialism and globalization, features of Western culture have been exported, adopted, and adapted in many parts of the world, especially in higher education. Thus, we must be cautious about dichotomizing too much between Western and non-Western understandings. Influence has moved in the reverse direction, from non-Western contexts to the West. Nevertheless, Sharan B. Merriam's observation is no doubt correct: "Embedded in [the Western paradigm of learning] are the cultural values of privileging the *individual* learner over the collective, and promoting *autonomy* and *independence* of thought and action over community and interdependence" (2007, 1). In the 1970s, self-directed learning became almost educational orthodoxy (e.g., C. Rogers 1969; Knowles 1970). Self-realization also took priority over community responsibility. Although such views have since moderated, in the West it is still generally believed that the best way for students to learn is for them to discover for themselves, to ask questions, to experiment, to explore, and to process information; this is called a *constructivist view* of knowledge and learning. In most Western education, a high value is placed on learners developing critical and analytical skills, being

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willing to challenge ideas, and arriving at their own conclusions. Creative thinking is rewarded, innovation is seen as the way to progress, and tradition is regarded as quaint but unreliable. The scientific method is the path to discovery of new knowledge. Abstract conceptualization is understood as the way to solve complex problems. Even postmodern jabs have not fully dethroned the Enlightenment ideal: public truth is verifiable, objective, scientific, and rational; personal truth is private, subjective, and not verifiable. In the United States the relationship of religion and education is ambivalent at best, hostile at worst. Even private religious schools and colleges often struggle with the integration of faith and learning.

To state, perhaps, the obvious, many societies simply disagree. Knowledge in some cultures is vouchsafed in time-tested tradition or in the wisdom of elders. It would be arrogant for a young person to question authority, much less to become the creator of new knowledge. Religion may play an integral role in knowing, and is indeed hardly separable from life in general. Information, truth, and wisdom are to be received as communicated by an authoritative teacher, not discovered by the student. Authors such as Sanjay Seth in *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (2007) challenge Western epistemology and reject Western axiomatic and universal modes of learning. Colonial powers sought to replace indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies with Western approaches, which have been widely adopted and adapted. But Seth suggests they are inadequate in non-Western contexts. Christina Paschyn warns that academics working in institutions outside the US and Europe "must be careful not to impose the same cultural ignorance, misconceptions, and false sense of superiority when teaching students of non-Western backgrounds" (2014, 224). Such critiques are highly controversial but point to fundamental tensions in pedagogy and epistemology.

In Islamic societies life is ideally to be guided by the Qur'an as the authoritative revelation of God's will. The very word *Islam* means "submission"—particularly submission to the will of Allah. This sets the tone for life and learning: the teacher is to be revered as one following in the footsteps of the prophet Muhammad. The famous Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazzali named imitation, logical reasoning, contemplation, and/or intuition as methods of learning (Kamis and Muhammad 2007, 30–31).

Perhaps the most extreme contrast to the Western educational tradition is found in traditional oral societies with little formal schooling and low literacy rates. There, learning is largely a matter of observation and imitation of daily tasks or occupational skills—how to hunt, cook, build a house, tend cattle, and so on—with little verbal explanation. Asking questions is neither welcomed nor necessary. In an oral culture, information, values, and traditions are communicated through storytelling, proverbs, drama, rituals, initiation rites, and the like. Botswanan Gabo Ntseane claims that "in the African context characterized by an oral instead of book-reading culture you don't pass useful information through books because learning simply will not happen" (2007, 114). Written communication allows information to be abstracted and disseminated; it is open to critical analysis; and it is separated from the author and context of its origin. Oral communication, on the other hand, is highly personal, communal, and contextual, and it is linked to the authority of the storyteller. The introduction of literacy into oral societies has many profound implications (Ong 1982, 77–113). Western-style schooling that encourages learners, especially children and youth, to

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ask questions is liable to be viewed as a threat to established authority and tradition, not to mention an embarrassment if elders cannot answer the questions. Even when oral societies become highly educated, features of orality persist.

Much, of course, depends on the desired learning objectives. Educational traditions and philosophies internationally also have much in common, particularly where forms of Western higher education have been adopted. Every educational tradition has its limitations, whether it is the need for oral cultures to become literate and think more abstractly in order to participate in the modern world, or Western pedagogy's failure to emphasize wisdom and communal responsibility or to give place to religion. This brief discussion serves simply to highlight that one challenge a cross-cultural teacher faces may be rooted in different answers to the most fundamental questions a teacher can ask: What constitutes knowledge? What does it mean to teach and learn? We will return to these questions in chapter 7.

The first few things the long-term cross-cultural teacher will want to do are to explore local understandings of teaching and learning, identify areas of potential conflict, and in conversation with local partners discuss strategies for cooperation that honors the values and convictions of all involved. Cross-cultural teachers should consciously examine their own philosophy of education while being slow to criticize others. (See sidebar 1.2 for helpful resources.)

We shall return in later chapters to many of these concepts and explore in more detail their cultural roots and how they play out in concrete teaching situations.

SIDEBAR 1.2

Resources for Developing a Christian Philosophy of Education in Cultural Perspective

Abdi, Ali A., and Dip Kapoor, eds. *Global Perspectives on Adult Education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Anthony, Michael, and Warren S. Benson. *Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education: Principles for the Twenty-First Century.* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003.

Knight, George R. *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*. 4th ed. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2006.

Merriam, Sharan B., and Associates, eds. *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing.* Melbourne, FL: Krieger, 2007.

Spears, Paul D., and Stephen R. Loomis. *Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009.

Formal, Informal, and Non-formal Learning

When speaking of what it means to learn, the distinction between formal, informal, and non-formal approaches to learning is important to keep in mind. Each approach has its own objectives, context, and methods. Though this typology was first developed in the 1970s, all three have been around much longer, are present in most societies, and share many commonalities across cultures.

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Formal learning occurs in an institutional context such as a school or university, and usually has the goal of developing productive members of society, often with a professional qualification. Especially for children, socialization and impartation of national values are major objectives. Formal learning includes standardized curricula, learning assessed by exams or student assignments, and public recognition of successful completion by the granting of a certificate or diploma. Teachers must meet defined formal qualifications. Often the institutions themselves must meet the standards of accreditation agencies or school boards, and fulfill government regulations.

Informal learning occurs in the context of the home or community in the course of child rearing and daily social intercourse. There are no classrooms, defined curricula, exams, or formal structures. The objectives include enculturation, socialization, acquisition of life skills, character development, and often personal guidance or development. Most of what we know comes by informal means: how to talk, how to tie our shoes, table manners, cultural norms, and so on. As we have seen above, in traditional, nonindustrial societies vocational skills are often imparted informally. Play is an expression of informal learning. Personal mentoring or counseling might also be considered as types of informal learning.

Non-formal learning occurs in the context of semi-structured, more flexible settings such as workshops, professional or adult continuing education programs, religious institutions (e.g., church, synagogue, or mosque), community development projects, and the like. There are rarely any exams or formal assessment of learning. The objectives are narrowly defined and may address immediate needs (e.g., alleviation of poverty, learning a foreign language), professional advancement, personal interest, spiritual formation, or entertainment. Personal betterment or social change is often in view. Non-formal programs typically arise from grassroots needs and interests, as opposed to formal learning, which tends to be “top-down” and serve larger societal, institutional, or political concerns.

These categories are not hard and fast, though each comes with its own set of objectives, expectations, and rules (whether implicit or explicit). Again, the cross-cultural teacher must familiarize herself with these various forms as they are found in the host culture, and more particularly how they apply to the specific context of her teaching.

Institutional Standards and Procedures

Most teaching occurs in some institutional context, be it the family, a church, a school, a workshop, or a business. Each such institution forms a subculture with its own social norms, rules, standards, and expectations. In some ways the subculture conforms to the standards of the larger culture, and in some ways not. (As we shall see in the next chapter, this is one of the problematic aspects of relying upon studies that attempt to describe a national culture.) Hence, the cross-cultural teacher encounters the challenge not only of teaching students of another culture but also of working in a strange institutional environment. One might assume that as the level of formal education moves upward from elementary to secondary to tertiary, the cultural differences will gradually disappear. Internationally, there is some convergence in forms, structure, and content of higher education (Brock and Alexiadou 2013, 46–53); however, many significant differences remain. Learning assessment (e.g., testing, grading),

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expectations for student workloads, accrediting standards, teachers' or professors' interaction with students, and innumerable other differences will be encountered. A professor may also be frustrated by students who come to class unprepared, who lack motivation, or who are regularly absent from lectures.

Cross-cultural teachers encounter institutional procedures and standards that are not only unfamiliar but may seem unethical. This can especially be the case in terms of an institution's unwritten internal culture. Should students be admitted to a study program solely on the basis of academic qualifications, or do family relations, social standing, financial ability, or other factors enter into consideration? How does one deal with students found cheating or plagiarizing? Can diplomas or degrees be granted to students who have clearly not performed up to minimal passing standards? Such questions and many more can create no end of consternation for cross-cultural teachers who have strong convictions about such matters and are unable to see the issue from the perspective of the host.

Culture and the Content of Teaching

One final challenge must be addressed, and that is the matter of content. We tend to think that culturally adapting our teaching has primarily to do with teaching methods, or perhaps roles of teacher and student, but not the content. However, the cultural perspective of the teacher profoundly influences how subject matter is structured, taught, analyzed, and evaluated. For example, teaching history is more than mere dates and facts. (Yes, in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue—but is Columbus a hero or a villain?) Even within Western academia, debates simmer about standards for writing history and how various biases and perspectives deeply influence the telling of the story (e.g., Cheney 1994; 2015; Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn 2000). The same might be said of a host of other disciplines. The challenge is only exacerbated when moving across cultures and encountering cultural stereotypes and popular postcolonial rhetoric. Differing standards for argumentation, valid evidence, plausibility, and credibility add to the confusion.

Teaching theology presents its own unique twist. Many cross-cultural teachers are long- or short-term missionaries teaching in schools, seminaries, or church education programs. Because the content of their teaching is related to the Bible and theology, they desire to be faithful to their message. They may equate their teaching outlines, doctrinal formulations, and eschatological charts with orthodoxy, and any tinkering with them may seem tantamount to heresy. Christians rightly believe that God's truth is equally true in any culture. So far so good. However, a naive and overly rigid approach can lead to theological myopia at best, or biblical irrelevance at worst, by failing to address culturally specific challenges and provide biblically and culturally compelling answers. Ultimately this fails to help Christians live as faithful followers of Christ in the face of challenges in their given context. While creeds or catechisms may indeed be equally *true* everywhere, they may not be equally *relevant* everywhere, and they are certainly not exhaustive—they don't say all that can or needs to be said. Much of Western theology has developed in terms of abstract and analytical categories employing a strict linear logic (a matter we will return to in chap. 5). Non-Western Christians sometimes find this approach too rigid and artificial. In the words of Peter S. C. Chang

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(1984), Western theology is like “steak, potatoes, and peas” (neatly separate on the plate), while Asian theology is more like “chop suey” (mixed together). Both can be equally nutritious but not equally tasty to the consumer. Should theology be explicated in distinct analytic categories, or more holistically? However, “steak, potatoes, and peas” have dominated international theological menu. Chang argues that nonlinear theological discourse may be more accurately understood by nonlinear thinkers. (See also sidebar 6.4 on p. 130.) The story in sidebar 1.3 illustrates what can happen when a teacher naively attempts to import his favorite course material and underestimates the size of the cultural gap that is to be bridged.

SIDEBAR 1.3

A Hard-Learned Lesson

After returning to the US from teaching a course at a seminary in Southeast Asia, I was approached by a bright American student about to graduate with an advanced theological degree. He was headed to teach for several years at the very school where I had just been and was eager to hear about the students and the local situation. After a few minutes of conversation, he went on to describe with unbridled enthusiasm the textbooks he was intending to use there to teach systematic theology. I knew these texts to be of a particularly opaque philosophical nature, difficult for most American students to understand and utterly irrelevant, if not incomprehensible, to the students he would soon be teaching. When I inquired if he had taken any courses on contextual theology or intercultural communication, he confidently replied that such preparation was superfluous since his wife was a native of that very country to which he was headed. At the suggestion that he might consider leaving those texts at home and developing a more relevant approach for his future students, perhaps adopting locally written textbooks, his countenance fell and our conversation soon ended. Needless to say, it came as little surprise to later discover that his teaching assignment at that school was prematurely terminated and he, with his wife, was soon back in the US. This was a painful lesson on not underestimating the challenge of cross-cultural ministry, the dangers of overconfidence, and the need for contextualization of instruction.

We are speaking here of the need for *contextualization*. While some readers may associate this term with “compromise,” in reality appropriate contextualization leads to greater biblical faithfulness. Darrell Whiteman (1997) describes these three purposes of contextualization:

1. “To communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.” (2)
2. “To offend—but only for the right reasons, not the wrong ones.” (3)
3. “To develop contextualized expressions of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God.” (4)

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It would, of course, be foolishness to omit from theological teaching the accumulated theological insights and wisdom that the church has acquired over the centuries. But all too often, the content of theological teaching in non-Western contexts is adopted from Western curricula, textbooks, or classes with only minimal adaptations. While that may be a reasonable starting point, alone it is usually inadequate to address the most pressing questions that students face in their daily lives. Different challenges arise in different cultural settings, and the cross-cultural teacher must help students address those challenges on the basis of biblical teaching and wisdom. The teacher may not have encountered many of those questions in classes or textbooks at home, and thus those questions may not show up in the teacher's course outline or imported curriculum. Here are a few actual examples:

- Can a Christian parent curse a rebellious and disrespectful child? (asked in Taiwan)
- Are all dreams a message from God? If not, how do we know the difference? If some dreams are from God, how do we interpret them? (asked in Kenya)
- How do I honor my parents and ancestors without participating in ceremonies that seem to worship them? What is the difference between worshiping and honoring? (asked in Japan)
- If a Christian woman is kidnapped and then forcibly wed to a Muslim man, should that woman be considered married in the eyes of God? (asked in Kazakhstan)
- Of the two major Bible translations into Mongolian, one uses the name *Burhan*, which can have Buddhist connotations; the other uses the name *Yertzuntsuiin Ezen*, which has more folk religious connotations. Which is best? (asked in Mongolia)

The Bible speaks much about blessings and curses, dreams from God, honoring parents, avoiding idolatry, the character of marriage, and the nature of God. Yet one would search Western theology books in vain for answers to these culturally specific questions.

An unprepared cross-cultural teacher can be quickly overwhelmed by such questions and feel inadequate to address them. And that may be good! The cultural outsider is rarely in a position to discern the nuances of language, the meanings behind certain symbols or practices, and the social implications of changing traditions. For this reason it is important not only to adapt teaching content to address such issues but also to actively involve local leaders and learners in discovering solutions.

Even though contemporary cultures differ greatly from the world of the Bible, we can find biblical principles that help address such issues. Paul G. Hiebert's (1987) "critical contextualization" model is perhaps the most helpful and widely used methodology for carefully assessing and biblically contextualizing traditional practices. Contextualization is a complex undertaking that demands both theological expertise and cultural insight. Globalization has further complicated the task (Ott 2015). Sidebar 1.4 provides a list of some of the most helpful literature on the topic of contextualization with which every cross-cultural theological teacher should become familiar.

Meeting the Challenge

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This rather daunting list of challenges is not intended to scare readers away from a cross-cultural teaching assignment. The challenges are not insurmountable, but they must be faced with open eyes. Advance preparation can go a long way to sensitize teachers to the issues and equip them with strategies to deal with those issues proactively and constructively. That is the primary purpose of this book. In the course of these pages we'll discuss many more challenges that stretch the patience of teachers and learners. Whether these are related to pedagogical preferences and expectations, language, understandings of learning, or teaching content, cross-cultural teachers may react in a variety of ways. Jude Carroll (2015, 19–21) describes four possible responses: *denial, deficit, expecting students to adjust,* and *shared responsibility for adjustment and adaptation*. Let's look at these more closely.

Denial occurs when teachers simply recognize no real differences between cultures regarding the way a subject is to be taught. "Mathematics is mathematics wherever you teach it." "God's truth is the same everywhere." This overlooks the reality that even when the subject content is the same across cultures, many other factors—such as the way the content is communicated, the social relations between teacher and students, and work expectations—are different, and complicate the total instructional experience negatively, impacting learning.

SIDEBAR 1.4

Resources on Biblical Contextualization

Dowsett, Rose, ed. *Global Mission: Reflections and Case Studies in Contextualization for the Whole Church*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2011.

Numerous case studies illustrate how Christians have responded to various specific contextual challenges from around the world.

Flemming, Dean. *Contextualization in the New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005.

Shows how the entire New Testament engages culture and derives biblical principles for contextualization.

Hiebert, Paul G. "Critical Contextualization." In *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 75–92. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

Presents a four-step process for biblically evaluating cultural practices and formulating contextualized responses.

Moreau, A. Scott. *Contextualization in World Missions.* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012.

Provides a comprehensive overview of models and methods of contextualization.

Moreau, A. Scott. *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.

Examines contextualization in terms of its social, mythic, ethical, artistic, ritual, experiential, and doctrinal dimensions.

Ott, Craig. "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century." *Missiology* 43, no. 1 (January 2015): 43–58.

Considers the additional challenges that globalization presents.

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Tennent, Timothy C. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Examines traditional theological domains such as bibliology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and so on but engages non-Western conversation partners and employs non-Western categories.

Whiteman, Darrell L. “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 1 (January 1997): 2–7.

A concise, classic statement on the nature and task of contextualization.

The *deficit* response places the burden of learning solely upon the students. “They have poor work habits.” “Their previous education didn’t prepare them well enough.” Difficulties in student learning are not the teacher’s fault. Carroll comments, “Those who follow a ‘students as problems’ approach seem to assume that they themselves are good teachers—that it is just that they are faced with the wrong students” (2015, 19). A teacher’s stereotypes or prejudices about students can further aggravate the situation. However, especially a teacher who has sojourned to teach in the context of another culture will have to take a more pragmatic approach and deal with the realities of the situation. Sidebar 1.3 describes a good example of what can happen to the teacher unwilling to adapt.

Expecting students to adjust typically assumes several things: (1) that adjustment of the student to the teacher is the right and necessary strategy, (2) that students are able to make the adjustment, and (3) that the teacher bears little if any responsibility to help the student change. While it will be necessary for an international student to adjust to the expectations of the host institution, it is less clear to what extent students should have to adapt to a cross-cultural teacher who has entered their native culture and institutional context. The general expectation in that case is that the teacher must adapt, not the learners. However, as we shall later see, there are situations where exposing students to unfamiliar pedagogies will enhance their learning and development. To whatever extent students are expected to adapt, it is normally a slow process that will be greatly aided by a patient teacher willing to coach students along the way.

To these negative responses might be added the temptation to attribute the difficulties or ineffectiveness of one’s teaching to a problem with the local culture. “It is the culture’s fault that the students don’t, won’t, or can’t learn.” While this may be a contributing factor, the real problem may be the incompetency of the teacher, which is entirely unrelated to culture. Regardless of where or in what culture a person teaches, there are no substitutes for good communication ability, a caring disposition, and basic pedagogical skills. To these, intercultural competency must be added when teaching across cultures. But without them, the best intercultural preparation will not make for good teaching.

This brings us to Carroll’s ideal response: *shared responsibility for adjustment and adaptation*. Much of the rest of this book will address ways in which this can happen.

Pamela Gale George’s research on American professors who have taught in cross-cultural contexts describes effective teachers as those who experienced and learned

- *to observe the cultures of their classrooms* and academic workplaces;
- *to modify the teaching methods,* hewed in American university tradition, to fit the new instructional demands;
- *to structure thoughtful learning environments* to maximize student comprehension and participation; and

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- *to practice flexibility and patience* with their students and colleagues (George 1995, xi).

All of these lessons emphasize the importance of the cross-cultural teacher being aware of the need to adapt—not assuming that learners would or should adjust to her. Culture matters, and if cultural differences are not managed well, learning will be hindered and relationships strained. This demands patience and flexibility on the part of both teacher and learner.

About This Book

This book will simply dip its toe in the vast ocean of literature and research on the subject. Whole shelves in libraries are filled with books on any given topic that is discussed here in only a few pages or paragraphs. The book can only scratch the surface of the countless rich insights that practitioners have gained on the ground by teaching across cultures. I offer here a modest, but comprehensive, survey of the challenges and approaches to teaching across cultures.

Overview of the Content

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with two fundamental issues that must be clarified prior to discussion of more specific dimensions of teaching across cultures. Chapter 2, "Culture and the Teaching Context," will look at the nature of culture and culture change, the dangers of stereotyping, and steps toward developing intercultural competency. Chapter 3, "Learning Styles, Teaching Styles, and Culture," takes up the popular but complex topic of learning styles, how they relate to culture, and the extent to which adaptation to learning style is advisable.

The remaining chapters describe five dimensions of how culture influences teaching and learning, and discuss implications for effective cross-cultural teaching.

- *The Cognitive Dimension*, the way that learners process information (chaps. 4–6).
- *The Worldview Dimension*, questions regarding the nature of learning, causality, epistemology, tradition, and worldview change (chaps. 7–8).
- *The Social Dimension* of teacher roles and relationships in terms of social status, authority, collectivism and individualism, shame and guilt, and other aspects of social interactions in teaching-learning relationships (chaps. 9–10).
- *The Media Dimension*, how various instructional modes and media are received or understood in different cultures, including online learning across cultures (chaps. 11–12).
- *The Environmental Dimension*, the physical, institutional, and sociopolitical context of teaching in another culture (chap. 13).

FIGURE 1.1

Five dimensions of culture's influence on teaching and learning

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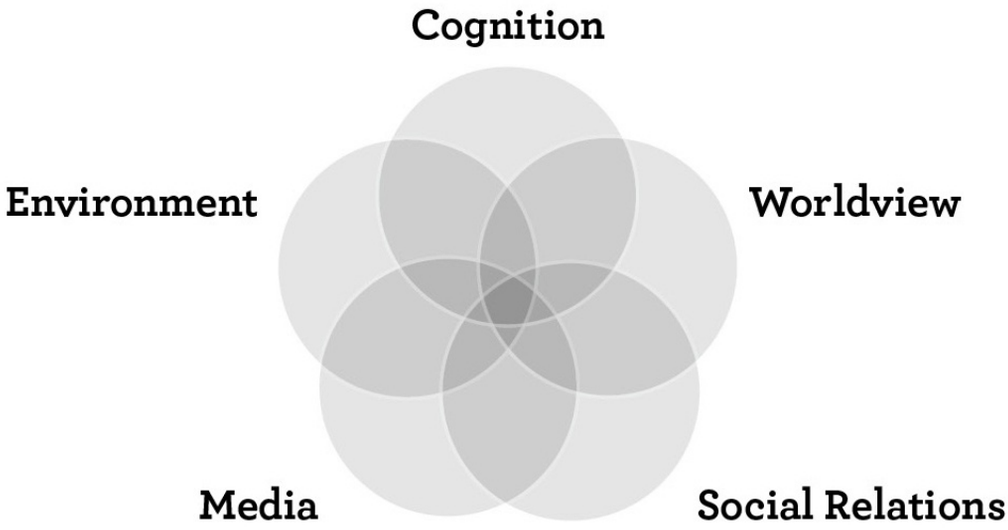

These dimensions actually overlap and influence one another. They are considered here independently only for the sake of clarity. Each chapter includes sidebars with practical examples further illustrating the concepts. I hope that readers will not only find this discussion insightful and practical, but that they will also reflect personally on their own experiences as learners and teachers in light of their own culture and the culture of others.

To Keep in Mind while Reading This Book

There are two things that readers must keep in mind when reading this book if they are to benefit from it and not be misled by it instead! First, throughout this book there are examples and case studies from specific countries or ethnic groups. Readers may be tempted to say to themselves, "So *that's* how people learn in Kenya" (as an example). Resist this temptation! This by no means is an attempt to describe how all people in Kenya (or anywhere else) learn. Indeed, the example may even be an exception to the way most people learn in Kenya. (We will discuss the danger of stereotyping in chapter 2.) Recognizing the risk of such misunderstanding, I was tempted not to mention any country or ethnic group when giving examples, but that would have made for a very bland and abstract text. Specificity helps readers better visualize the dynamics that are at play, and better understand the broader principle or concept. In other words, readers need to focus on the principles, the dynamics, and how the example illustrates a concept, not on the specific country or people in the example. That said, all the specific examples, case studies, and illustrative quotations in this volume are from real-life experiences and are not made up. Those for which no source is cited are drawn from my own personal experience or from case studies written by my students.[6]

Second, some research cited in these pages was published fifteen or twenty years ago, or is even older. In the disciplines of social science, such dated research can be misleading because cultures and societies change so rapidly. I have chosen to cite some older studies not because they accurately describe the current situation in a given country or context but because they illustrate the fundamental nature of cultural differences that, although they may or may not still exist there, do exist elsewhere. For example, a study conducted fifteen years ago that compared German and Chinese college students may no longer reflect the nature of

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German and Chinese students today—but it may serve to illustrate cultural differences in other places. Even older studies can provide empirical evidence for the categories or concepts being presented and make clear that they are not hypothetical or merely anecdotal. Therefore, again, the reader should not focus on the specifics—in this example, German versus Chinese students—but rather on the dynamics, categories, and concepts being discussed and how they might be at play in other cultural contexts.

This means that readers should not look for formulas or checklists for teaching learners in a specific country or culture. Rather, seek to glean principles and tools that can be used and adapted for a variety of cultures. But learners in each local setting must be understood on their own terms and in their unique context, both as individuals and as members of a larger culture. This requires the cross-cultural teacher to enter each situation as a learner—a student of their students—not jumping too quickly to conclusions, but with patience and humility *getting to know them*. The cultural differences described in these pages are not boxes into which learners can be neatly categorized. Rather, I hope that the five dimensions of culture's influence on teaching and learning will provide teachers with tools to better understand their learners, appreciate them, and become more effective teachers helping learners reach their full potential.

1. John Bentley, "How Large Is the Job Market for English Teachers Abroad?," International TEFL Academy, last updated February 24, 2020, www.internationalteflacademy.com/blog/how-large-is-the-job-market-for-english-teachers-abroad.

2. United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed November 5, 2020, https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/frequently-asked-questions.

3. Although the Americas include Central, South, and North America, for simplicity, this text uses the terms "America" and "American" to refer to the United States and its population.

4. Study conducted by GfK Marktforschung in 2006, cited at http://www.bpb.de/lernen/grafstat/projekt-integration/134668/m-03-06-was-ist-typisch-deutsch.

5. Although many aspects of these Enlightenment convictions have been questioned in academia, for example by postmodernism, at the popular level they are still for the most part tacitly assumed in Western culture.

6. Since 1997 I have regularly taught master's or doctoral-level courses on teaching and learning across cultures at the European School of Culture and Theology (Akademie für Weltmission) in Korntal, Germany, and at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois, USA. The majority of my students have lived and taught cross-culturally for many years, and they themselves come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their rich experience and insight provided many of the examples in this book. In some cases, examples are unattributed for reasons of security or confidentiality.

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This book is the fruit of forty years of living, learning, and teaching cross-culturally. Born an American, I lived for over twenty years teaching and ministering in Germany and central Europe, and since then I have worked on short assignments in over forty countries. There are many people to thank. During my doctoral studies, professors such as Jim Plueddemann, Lois McKinney, and my dissertation mentor Ted Ward introduced me to the fascinating inquiry into culture's influence on teaching and learning. For the last twenty-four years I have taught annually a graduate-level course, Teaching and Learning across Cultures, in both Germany and the US. Most of these students bring rich experience from around the globe. They have afforded me with literally hundreds of case studies on the challenges of cross-cultural teaching. I'm indebted to those students for many insights, interviews, and examples described in this book. I'm also fortunate to have qualified and devoted friends who improved this book. Jim Plueddemann, Jim Moore, Donald Guthrie, Te-Li Lau, Richard Trca, Bradley Wordell, and Keith Anderson reviewed the manuscript, in part or whole, and made helpful suggestions. I thank Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and the Evangelical Free Church of America for granting me two sabbaticals, which were largely devoted to researching and writing this volume. The editors and staff at Baker Academic have once again proven patient and professional at getting my work into the hands of readers. A special shout-out of appreciation goes to Jim Kinney, Eric Salo, and Brandy Scritchfield at Baker. Not least of all, I thank my loving wife, Alice, who has accompanied and encouraged me in the birthing process of this work.

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2

Culture and the Teaching Context

Chapter Overview

- What Is Culture?
- The Universal, Cultural, and Individual
- Culture Change and the Cross-Cultural Teacher
- The Dangers of Stereotyping and Ethnocentrism
- Developing Intercultural Competency

Culture is like the water we swim in or the air we breathe. We take it for granted; we barely know it exists. Much like the fish that doesn't realize that it is wet until it jumps out of the aquarium, we only become aware of our own culture when we enter the world of others and are exposed to other cultures. We naturally assume that our world is "normal" and others are exotic or distorted. In our day and age of cultural pluralism and globalization, we are constantly confronted with other cultures, languages, ethnicities, and ways of life, and we have increasingly become aware of human diversity in all its beauty and with all its challenges. The cross-cultural teacher enters into another aquarium, as it were, and must learn to swim in it. Or, to switch metaphors, cultures are much like games, each with its own rules and objectives. As we move into another culture, we must learn to play a new game, but without the advantage of a rule book or strategy manual. One should not underestimate the subtleties of cultural differences, even if on the surface two cultures appear very similar. To the casual observer, baseball and cricket may appear to be similar games, but the underlying rules are *very* different! In this chapter we will briefly explore the nature of culture, culture change, some pitfalls to avoid, and how to make healthy adjustments when living in another culture.

What Is Culture?

In English the word *culture* is sometimes popularly associated with an educated and usually affluent class of society who appreciate art, classical music, and literature. As in the musical

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My Fair Lady, some people (like Professor Henry Higgins) are cultured and others (like Eliza Doolittle) are not. However, this text will use the term in the social-scientific sense to describe the collective, learned characteristics of an identifiable group of people that make them distinct from other groups. As one wag put it, the simplest definition of culture is "the way we do things around here." But, of course, culture is more complex than that. There are nearly as many definitions of culture as there are anthropologists. Culture runs much deeper than observable behaviors, traditions, and customs and includes underlying values and convictions about the nature of reality. Michael Rynkiewich captures that complexity when he gives this definition:

> Culture is a more or less integrated system of knowledge, values, and feelings that people use to define their reality (worldview), interpret their experiences, and generate appropriate strategies for living; a system that people learn from other people around them and share with other people in a social setting; a system that people use to adapt to their spiritual, social, and physical environments; and a system that people use to innovate in order to change themselves as their environments change. (2011, 19)

A culture is composed of explicit or implicit norms for appropriate social behavior, how labor is organized and tasks delegated, how goods are distributed, how individuals and groups reach decisions, how power is exercised, what values have priority, how families are created and structured, and what beliefs give meaning to their collective existence. The term *worldview* is often used to describe the underlying convictions and conceptualization of reality that inform much of culture: how one understands time, causality, epistemology, and cosmology. Perhaps the most fundamental feature of culture is a common language that provides the basic tool of communication and coordination of social life. Other forms of symbolic communication such as art, music, rituals, clothing, and status symbols are important features of a culture. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz sees such symbolic systems as *the* central feature of culture; he defines *culture* as a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life" (1973, 89). Myths, legends, stories, and religious systems embody and reinforce core cultural values and meanings. In all these regards, culture is learned, not biological or instinctive.

We must remember that a culture does not exist independently from a group of people. A culture is not an entity in itself. It is usually best not to speak of national cultures, such as *French culture*. We can speak of common traits, values, or beliefs that most French citizens share, but a nation is composed of people with a wide variety of individual personalities and preferences. France, like most nations, includes groups of people who do not share the cultural traits of the dominant French society. Furthermore, the cultural values, beliefs, practices, and institutions of France, like those of any other country or people, are ever changing. They are fluid, not fixed. While people everywhere have traditions that they cherish and that give them a sense of identity, it is all too easy to idealize or romanticize the concept of culture as if it were some kind of primordial essence that defines a people's existence. The idea of cultural identity becomes even more complex when one considers that in the modern world, many people identify with more than one culture or subculture. This is

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especially the case with immigrants and international sojourners. Most people experience a process of cultural hybridization, which will be discussed below.

Let's return for a moment to the illustration comparing culture to the rules of a game, such as basketball. There are variations in the rules of basketball: for example, college rules are different from professional NBA rules. But everyone would agree that both sports are still basketball. So too, within a larger cultural context there is diversity, although it could be said that all are members of the same broad culture. Also, the rules of a sport may change over time; basketball did not always have a shot clock or allow dunking. Cultures also change and adapt. Finally, a person may play more than one sport and choose which to play depending on personal preference, the people she is with, and the available court or field. So too, an individual may identify with more than one culture—discerning, adopting, adapting, or rejecting the norms and behaviors of the social group in which she finds herself.

Therefore, when we describe a culture, we are really describing *people* and how they relate to one another, structure their lives together, and give meaning to their collective existence. This understanding acknowledges that there is change and diversity in how a culture is experienced or expressed. To speak of a people's culture is an imperfect but convenient way to summarize the general characteristics and experiences shared by most people in a given social group. This is the sense in which the term *culture* is used in this volume.

The Universal, Cultural, and Individual

One way of understanding human differences and commonalities is to differentiate between what is universal, cultural, and individual (see fig. 2.1).

It has been said that individual people are more alike than cultures are. Individuals have much in common simply because, as humans, we all share common biological, social, psychological, and spiritual needs. We all need food and shelter, love our children, desire security and companionship, experience joy and sorrow, pass through life transitions (birth, childhood, puberty, adulthood, death), and have some sense of the transcendent. All mentally healthy people have the rational capacity to reflect upon themselves and the world. These characteristics are universal, and thus we can quickly relate to individuals from the most diverse backgrounds. From a biblical perspective, all humans—irrespective of background, nationality, ethnicity, age, or gender—are bearers of the divine image (Gen. 1:26–27; 9:6), which gives every person infinite value and potential. Although marred by the fall, that image is being renewed in Christ (Col. 3:10). Teachers must acknowledge their common humanity with learners, which overshadows their differences.

FIGURE 2.1

The universal, cultural, and individual

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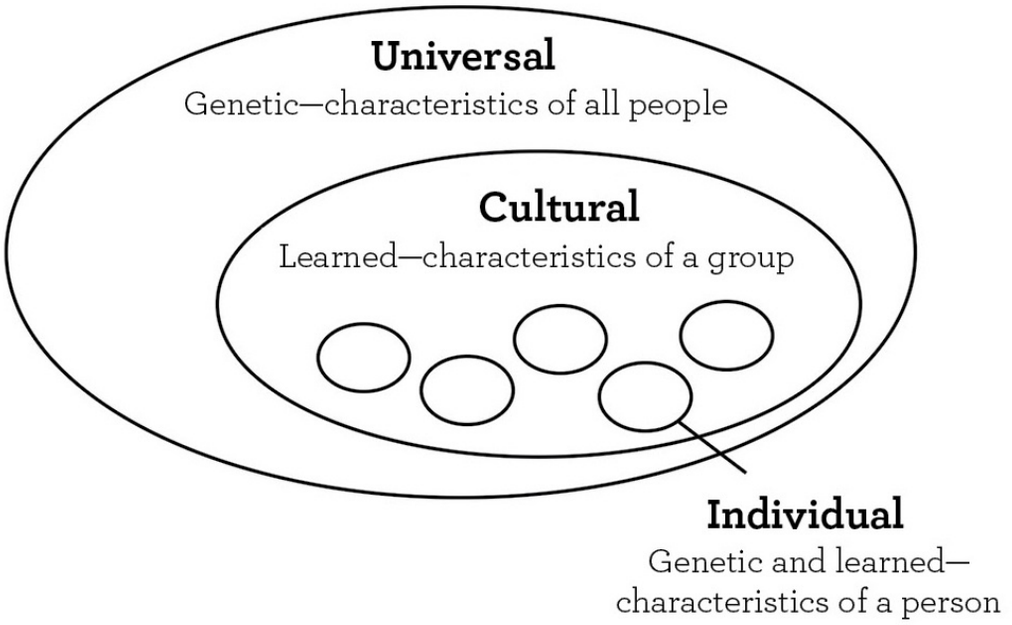

Based on ideas from Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 6.

Culture describes specific shared strategies for how a group of people meet these basic needs, organize their collective lives, and interpret the world. Genesis 10 describes the Table of Nations and growing diversity of humanity, including different clans, livelihoods, and languages. With the confusion of human language at the Tower of Babel, human diversity was amplified (Gen. 11:9). Anthropologist Lothar Käser defines culture as a strategy that gives shape and coherence to human existence (2014, 37). If we compare universal human genetic characteristics to the hardware of a computer, culture would be its operating system and software (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, 4–7). The characteristics of a culture are learned: language, appropriate behavior, social norms, beliefs and values, power structures, and so on. *Enculturation* is that process of learning or acquiring a culture. Every society has various ways of enculturating its children, including, but not limited to, child-rearing, schooling, rituals, storytelling, rewarding appropriate behavior, and correcting or punishing deviant behavior. Because culture is learned, a cultural outsider will not automatically understand the norms, symbolic systems, and living strategies of another culture. The newcomer will need to make extra effort to learn about the culture since so much of a culture is implicit and, at first, bewildering to an outsider. Cultural insiders may have few means of enculturating newcomers and will have varying degrees of patience with the ability of the newcomer to adapt.

Finally, every human being is not only a member of the human race, and is not only enculturated in a specific culture (or cultures), but is also an individual person. Each person has unique characteristics of their own such as personality, temperament, interests, aesthetic taste, talents and abilities, and physical appearance. Even identical twins are not exactly alike. Such characteristics of individuals are a mix of genetic features (e.g., appearance, natural abilities, and temperament) and learned experiences (e.g., enculturation, upbringing, education, and social standing). Some very restrictive cultures do not allow much freedom

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and individuality. For example, occupation, marriage partner, and social standing may not be matters of personal choice or merit. There may be many collective obligations. The struggle for survival may occupy most of one's existence. Other cultures, particularly more affluent societies, tend to allow much more freedom for individuality and personal choice. But individuals everywhere, even within cultures that demand a high degree of conformity, differ.

These distinctions between the universal, cultural, and individual are of importance to the cross-cultural teacher. The answer to many questions will depend on how we understand these categories. To what extent does effective cross-cultural teaching depend on adapting teaching to an individual student's learning styles or preferences, or in accommodating cultural expectations of teachers, or on simply understanding universal human characteristics of how all people learn? Are instructional methods that are effective in one culture readily transferrable to another culture because all people are basically the same, or are different methods necessary in another culture because culture so deeply shapes how people learn? A common mistake of newcomers to a culture is to mistake qualities of individual persons for characteristics of the general culture. Differences between a teacher and a student may be merely an indication of individual personality differences, not evidence of underlying cultural differences.

Culture Change and the Cross-Cultural Teacher

The cross-cultural teacher is inevitably an agent of culture change and globalization. No teacher is culturally neutral. Even when teaching a subject that seems culturally neutral, such as mathematics, the teacher brings himself into the classroom. No matter how well a teacher adopts the host culture, intentionally or unintentionally she brings learners into contact with new ideas, values, behaviors, and technologies. Is this a good thing? Many people think of a culture as a fixed, well-defined set of characteristics of a group of people that is essential to their identity. To introduce culture change is seen as compromising that identity, and thus "traditional culture" is to be preserved at all cost. European colonial powers denigrated local cultures as "primitive" and often sought to replace them with Western culture and "civilization." As the colonial empires were dismantled in the second half of the twentieth century, many formerly colonialized peoples attempted to preserve or rediscover their traditional cultures to undo the evil of cultural imperialism. The sense of having been robbed of that identity can be painful. Culture is an important feature of a person's identity and the collective identity of groups. Accordingly, people celebrate their cultural heritage through art, music, language, and traditions, and often resist culturally homogenizing pressures of globalization and pop culture. For this reason, the cross-cultural teacher may be rightly sensitive about introducing culture change through his teaching.

However, it is easy to overly romanticize, idealize, and absolutize culture. *Cultural essentialism* is the view that all people belonging to a cultural group share largely fixed and inherent characteristics. For example, an essentialist would claim not merely that French people generally share certain characteristics but that those characteristics are *inherent* to a person being truly French. The concept of *Frenchness* is essentialized. Essentialists tend to categorize people according to those qualities. Thus, cultural essentialism easily leads to

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stereotyping and prejudice. Such understandings that emphasize fixed cultural boundaries and identities can also lead to social fragmentation and conflict between peoples, and they can overlook human commonalities. A pure "traditional culture" is a somewhat mythic ideal. Essentialist concepts of ethnicity, religion, tradition, and culture have been challenged (e.g., Barth 1998; Masuzawa 2005; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Rynkiewich 2011). The boundaries between cultures and ethnic groups are not hard and impermeable but fuzzy and porous. The reality is that cultures are not static, but rather all cultures experience change—some for good, others for ill. People everywhere desire the benefits of education, medicine, and technology, which constitute culture change (Legrain 2006, 39). Furthermore, few would argue against the necessity of culture change where racism, caste discrimination, slavery, human trafficking, denigration of women, and other evils prevail.

In contrast to cultural essentialism is *cultural homogenization*—the view that through globalization all cultures are becoming more or less the same—in the words of Gwynne Dyer, putting "everybody's culture into an industrial strength blender" (cited in Stahl 2007, 335). A cross-cultural teacher who holds this view might think that because of this, there is no need to adapt or contextualize teaching to a specific culture. But this point of view is too simplistic. People around the world may eat pizza, wear jeans, and use cell phones: technology and global economic systems do shape cultural conformity in certain domains. But at a deeper, more fundamental level, people are not all becoming the same. Core cultural values, social norms, religious convictions, and patterns of social intercourse tend to stubbornly resist change. Radical nationalist and religious movements are often a reaction to the seemingly irresistible forces of globalization that some perceive as robbing people of their autonomy and culture.

The concept of *cultural hybridization* has become the more widely accepted theory of culture change as an alternative to essentialization and homogenization theories. This view argues that globalization brings culture change by fusing the local with the global. The local retains a certain priority; people do not entirely surrender their cultural identities in the face of global influences. But they do adapt and adopt some of them, assimilating elements from other cultures and rejecting others (e.g., Nederveen Pieterse 1995; 2020). All cultures change, and they always have. Globalization has only accelerated the rate of change, not by homogenizing but by hybridizing cultures.

Education is one of the most powerful agents of culture change, and the cross-cultural teacher brings an added dimension to such change by exposing learners to new ideas and his own cultural "otherness." If we consider culture change something normal, then "traditional culture" need not be pitted against global influences, or local against universal (Robertson 1995, 33). On the one hand, the cross-cultural teacher must respect and appreciate the host culture and resist imposing her foreign culture upon the students. On the other hand, a cross-cultural teacher can be a positive influence in helping her students understand and appreciate her culture, and others. In some cases she will play the unique role of a "bicultural bridge" (Hiebert 1994, 147–58), helping people navigate culture change and process the influences of globalization. This may occur explicitly through formal instruction but will also occur implicitly through the attitudes and values that the teacher informally models.

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In this discussion one must keep in mind that culture, values, and beliefs are intertwined. To the extent that the teacher advocates concepts of human dignity, equality, justice, and a biblical worldview, these will have cultural consequences. In some cases, core features of a culture may be challenged. Christians believe that all humans are fallen and thus every culture is a mix of good and evil, and that therefore culture change is not only inevitable but often necessary. The real issues are what *kind* of culture change is occurring and how to process the influences of globalization so as to advance human betterment and curb human exploitation. When directly or indirectly addressing such matters, the teacher must be careful not to project the impression of superiority or condescension. The teacher will need great wisdom to discern the appropriate manner with which to engage the culture at this level. Such matters can only be taken up on the basis of a fair understanding of the culture and in a spirit of mutual learning and humility.

The Dangers of Stereotyping and Ethnocentrism

When relating to people of another culture, there are two particular pitfalls that can hinder effective teaching and undercut meaningful relationships: stereotyping and ethnocentrism. *Stereotyping* pigeonholes people, assuming that all people of a certain group are the same. *Ethnocentrism* assumes that one's own culture is superior to that of others, and proceeds to judge others accordingly. Western conceptions of non-Western pedagogies have historically been notoriously ethnocentric, and cross-cultural teachers will do well to familiarize themselves with those critiques before making value judgments or introducing change in other cultures (Paschyn 2014).

Stereotyping

Whenever learning about people of another culture or traveling to another country, one naturally has mental images of what the people are like. These impressions come from many sources: popular media, Hollywood depictions, anecdotal stories, news reports, and personal encounters with the people. Stereotyping is when we allow such general impressions or descriptions to cause us to suppose that all people of that group have the same basic characteristics. Even when one has studied the people's culture and history more carefully, the temptation is to form stereotypical images of the people—generalizations that rarely reflect the more complex reality and diversity of individuals within the culture. The fact is that given any set of characteristics, individual people of a culture will manifest those characteristics at diverse levels.

When thinking of various characteristics that might generally describe a culture, such as collectivism or individualism, it is best not to think in terms of categories, as if a culture (and people belonging to that culture) were *either* collectivistic *or* individualistic. Rather, we should think in terms of a continuum from one end of a spectrum to the other. All cultures and individuals will likely evidence some aspects of each end of the spectrum.

For example, consider this spectrum: *extravagant—generous—frugal—stingy*. In any given culture there will be persons who have each of these characteristics to some extent,

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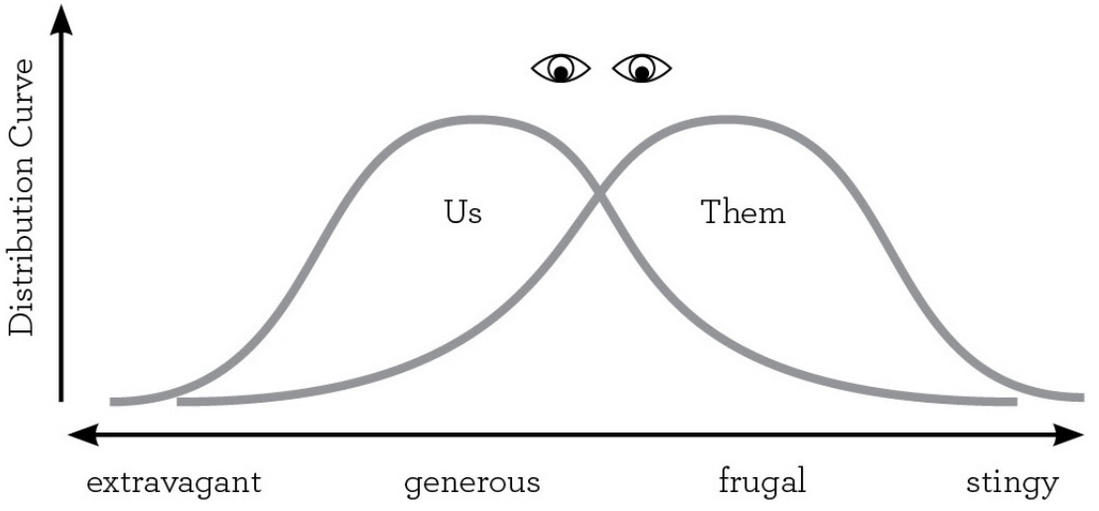
which will be evidenced differently in different situations. But it may still be true that the majority of persons in one culture tend to be more generous, while the majority of persons in another culture tend to be more frugal. This is illustrated in the bell curve distribution graph in figure 2.2.

FIGURE 2.2

Cultures may manifest general tendencies, but individuals vary within a culture



Source: Helmut Rez, Monika Kraemer, and Reiko Kobayashi-Weinszieher, "Warum Karl und Kiezon sich nerven: Eine Reise zum systematischen Verständnis interkultureller Missverständnisse," in *Interkulturelle Kommunikation: Methoden, Modelle, Beispiele*, ed. Dagmar Kumbier and Friedemann Schulz von Thun (Hamburg, Germany: Ro, Ro, Ro, 2011), 34. Used by permission.

When reading the literature that compares characteristics of different cultures or countries, we often find that only the average value for a culture is reported, which can give the wrong impression—for example, the impression that nearly all people of one culture are generous while those of another are all frugal. Stereotypes further distort the image of "culturally other" persons by portraying them in unrealistic, extreme terms. This is especially so when we compare our own culture with the culture of others, as illustrated in figure 2.3.

We view our own culture as diverse but tend to view other cultures as more extreme and less diverse. Rez, Kraemer, and Kobayashi-Weinszieher (2011, 34) call this the "Obelix distortion," recalling the tendency for the comic book figure named Obelix, a Gaul, to frequently declare, "These Romans are crazy!"

Even when certain behaviors are, in fact, commonly observed, the reasons behind those behaviors may not be culturally determined or rightly interpreted. For example, Western teachers often consider Asian students to be relatively passive and reticent to speak up in classroom discussions. However, research has demonstrated that this is both an overgeneralization and a misreading of the behavior. Most Asian students do desire to participate, and quietness is often due more to specific circumstances of the situation. They are not culturally "pre-set" (Cheng 2000). Cortazzi suggests that they "are not passive but reflective. . . . Chinese students value thoughtful questions which they ask after sound

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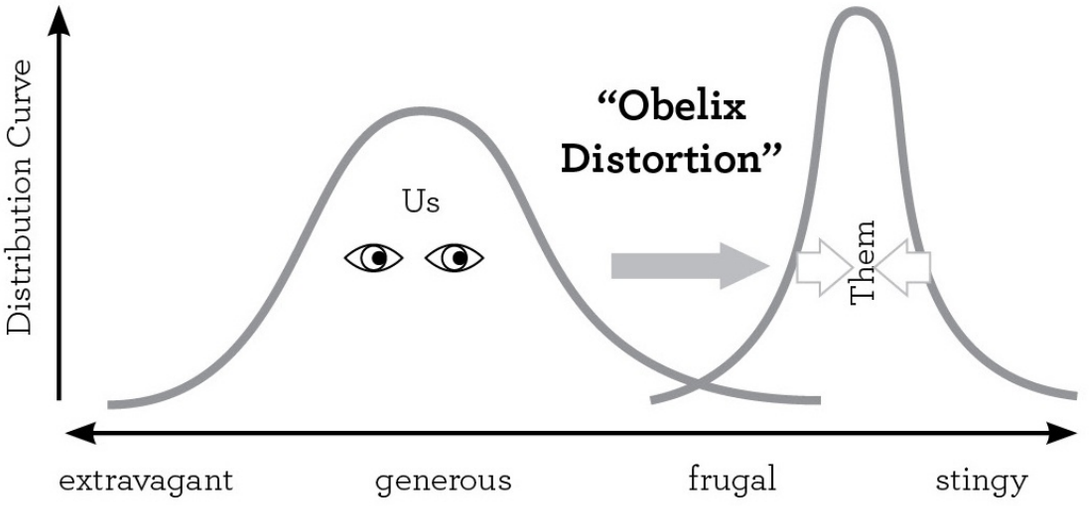
reflection. . . . Less thoughtful questions may be laughed at by other students'" (cited in Kennedy 2002, 434).

FIGURE 2.3

Stereotyping a culture by seeing all its members as having the same extreme characteristics



Source: Helmut Rez, Monika Kraemer, and Reiko Kobayashi-Weinszieher, "Warum Karl und Kiezon sich nerven: Eine Reise zum systematischen Verständnis interkultureller Missverständnisse," in *Interkulturelle Kommunikation: Methoden, Modelle, Beispiele*, ed. Dagmar Kumbier and Friedemann Schulz von Thun (Hamburg, Germany: Ro, Ro, Ro, 2011), 34. Used by permission.

Using Research on National Characteristics

Research investigating and comparing characteristics of people in different nations abounds. Much of it will be cited in this book. But how are we to avoid stereotyping when we read studies that describe characteristics of people from a given land? For example, Geert Hofstede's widely cited research describes Americans as highly individualistic with a factor value of 91, whereas Chinese have a value of only 20 and are thus considered more collectivistic.[1] But we know that not all Americans are equally individualistic, and not all Chinese are equally collectivistic. Such variability is not reflected in these absolute numbers. So, such information can reinforce the temptation to stereotype others—in this instance, to assume that *all* Chinese are highly collectivistic, irrespective of the circumstances, geographic location, or individual differences among Chinese persons.

Several dangers exist when considering comparative studies of this type, especially those that utilize bipolar measures (for example, measuring collectivism versus individualism). The first danger is either-or thinking, or one might call it black-and-white thinking, which can lead to pigeonholing and stereotyping: a person or a people is *either* this way *or* that way. The second danger is reductionism: the tendency to use one bipolar measure to attempt to explain the whole complexity of cultural difference or personality traits. A third problem is that much of the research has been done from an etic (cultural outsider's) perspective and

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fails to take into account emic (cultural insiders') perspectives (McSweeney 2002; Fougère and Moulettes 2007; Kim 2007; Signorini, Wiesemes, and Murphy 2009). However, one should not entirely dismiss such data but rather interpret it critically (Venkateswaran and Ojha 2019).

To best assess and appropriately utilize such national profiles and comparative studies, several things must be kept in mind. First, one must carefully examine how the data was collected, how the various factors are defined and measured, and whether the research was conducted in accordance with commonly accepted standards for credible social science research. One should consider the particular subjects of any given study: Are they urban or rural, well educated or poorly educated, old or young? Many if not most international comparative studies have students or managers as the subjects. Cultures can change rapidly; thus, research must be evaluated on the basis of how likely it is that conditions have changed since the study was conducted.

A second thing to keep in mind is that some studies look at how people of a culture currently experience certain factors ("as is"), while others look at what people *desire* for their culture ("should be"). This is not always immediately apparent when reading the data. The GLOBE Project, which involved "more than 200 researchers from 62 countries studying more than 17,000 mid-level managers,"[2] examined both current and desired states. Figure 2.4 illustrates how the two perspectives can vary greatly.

Third, one should not rely too heavily on a single study, a single methodology, or a single conceptualization of cultural differences. There are many ways to study cultural differences and characteristics. Sometimes different studies arrive at seemingly contradictory findings, as illustrated in figure 2.4 (which compares data from Hofstede with that of GLOBE[3]; see Venaik and Brewer 2008; 2010). This needn't cause us to be skeptical of all such research, but rather should force us to dig deeper into the methodology and exercise discernment.

Fourth, one should recognize such data such for what they are: generalizations about tendencies among particular groups of people. Generalizations can alert one to potential areas of frustration or conflict when entering another culture, which can be helpful. But one must still relate to each person as an individual who may or may not reflect broad country profiles. Furthermore, subgroups within a larger culture may not conform to national profiles. For example, one large comparative study of students in Singapore, Thailand, Austria, and Germany revealed that one cannot put much faith in generalizations about "Asian" or "European" learners: Only seven of twenty-three aspects of learning differed significantly between Asian and European students. Yet there were clear differences even within those groups: Asians compared to other Asians, and Europeans compared to other Europeans. "A number of clear Intra-Asian and Intra-European differences were identified" (Apfelthaler et al. 2007, 23).

FIGURE 2.4

Comparison of Hofstede and GLOBE values for uncertainty avoidance

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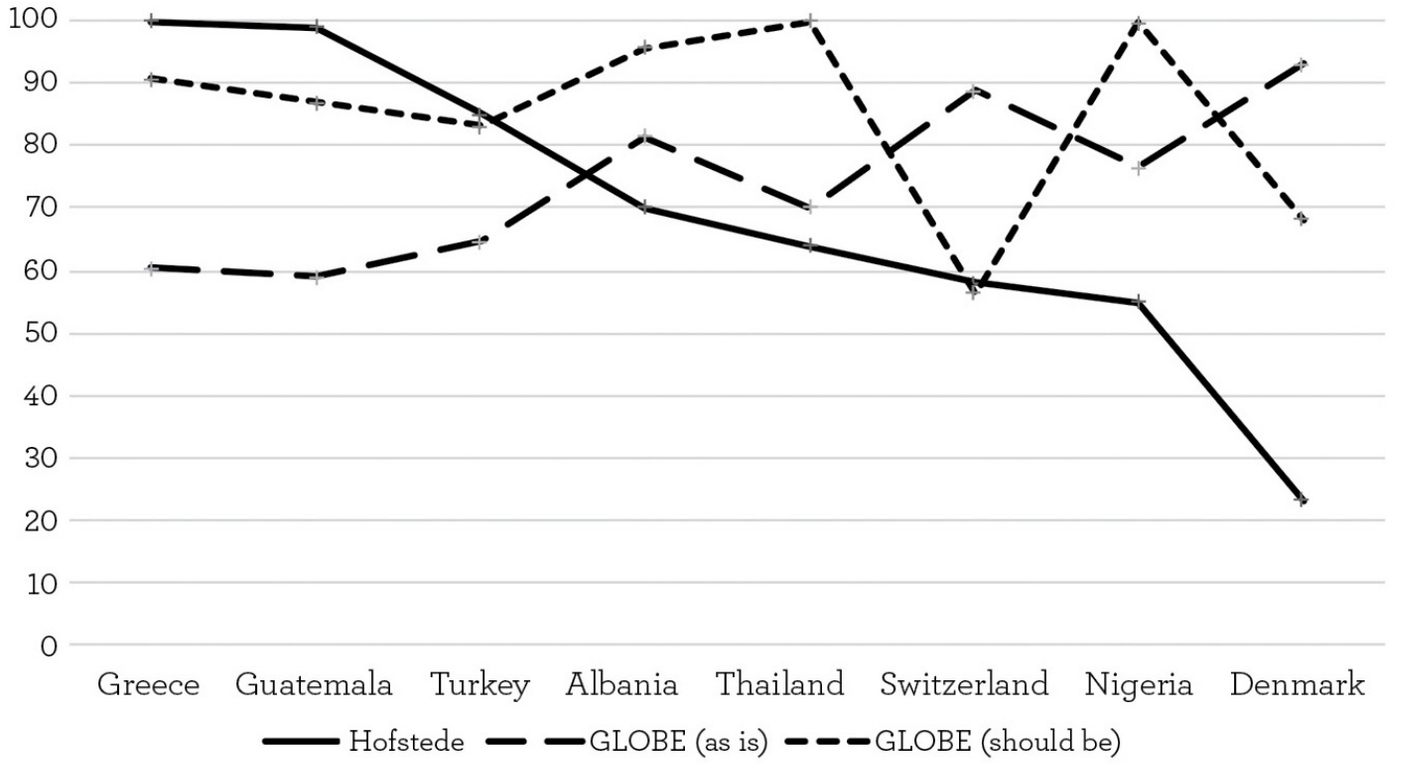

Uncertainty avoidance describes "the extent to which a society, organization, or group relies (and should rely) on social norms, rules, and procedures to alleviate unpredictability of future events. The greater the desire to avoid uncertainty, the more people seek orderliness, consistency, structure, formal procedures, and laws to cover situations in their daily lives." See "An Overview of the 2004 Study," GLOBE, https://globeproject.com/study_2004_2007.

The first time I taught a graduate-level course in the Philippines, I prepared by reading various studies about Filipino culture and learning preferences. I arrived expecting, among other things, that students would be largely passive in the classroom and deferential to my views as the professor. My experience proved the very opposite. These students engaged readily in class discussions and were not shy about challenging my views. When I asked another experienced professor about this disconnect, he explained that if I had been teaching younger students at a lower level, my expectations would have been largely fulfilled. However, nearly all these students were older, experienced pastors who had already become acquainted with more participative classroom teaching methods. The lesson learned was not that preparation is unimportant, but rather that stereotypes—even those based on academic studies—can be misleading (see also sidebar 2.1).

Familiarity with national profiles may alert us to potential differences. But each teaching situation must be understood on its own merits, and the teacher must remain flexible. Signorini and colleagues warn against using homogenous country profiles, and recommend focusing on micro-cultures that reflect more specific subcultures or institutions.

SIDEBAR 2.1

Experience in India

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Many Western teachers are under the impression that all Indian students are passive learners who transcribe lectures, expect answers to exam questions to be dictated verbatim by the professor, and are reluctant to express their own opinions. Although that may be the case in many situations, the stereotype can be misleading. Jude Carroll observed a diversity of pedagogical approaches and learning experiences in Indian higher education:

> I visited one programme with a zero lecture policy, where students only learned and were assessed through projects, by giving presentations and through going on placements. No spoon-feeding here. In one postgraduate school [masters level in India], I sat in lectures where students used response software to interact with the lecturer, and students looked to be on the edge of their seats as they followed him through the complex, theoretical material in English in order to answer questions on the lecture itself, none of which were right/wrong questions. Once, when asked to lecture myself, I was hard pressed to get through the material because students wished to challenge, question and extend what I was hoping to cover, jumping in to make their views known. The conclusion? That Indian students (and surely all national groups) will have had a range of experiences and that differences are more about assessment regimes, about expectations and the way in which teaching sessions are structured than they are about nationality or "heritage" (whatever that might be). (Carroll 2015, 120–21)

> We argue that culture cannot be reduced to immutable concepts such as nationality or other regional geopolitical constructs. Instead, we advocate the opposite approach by starting with examining micro-cultures, for example, one particular learning setting in [higher education] in combination with an individual's relevant experiences. This would allow us to develop "small" models, which can gradually be expanded into larger models of "culture" and intercultural learning. We suggest that culture is to be considered as fundamentally flexible and dynamic. (Signorini, Wiesemes, and Murphy 2009, 262)

A final concern when utilizing cross-cultural studies is that much, if not most, of the research is conducted from a decidedly Western perspective by Westerners, who may impose biased categories (Fougère and Moulettes 2007; Kim 2007). Studies in psychology and the behavioral sciences typically make universal claims about human nature and derive categories of analysis by conducting research on what Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan call WEIRD people—Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic—who they consider "particularly unusual compared with the rest of the species" (2010). In other words, categories of human behavior derived from studying Westerners are not necessarily valid when studying people in other cultures.

Throughout this book, numerous examples will be described in which a specific ethnic group or nationality is mentioned by name. As noted in chapter 1, these examples only serve to illustrate the point at hand and are not intended to describe what is typical of an entire ethnic or national group. Hence, readers should give attention more to the principles illustrated, and less to the specific nationalities or locations.

Ethnocentrism

As was mentioned earlier, ethnocentrism is the tendency to see one's own culture or ethnicity as superior or right and to see others as inferior or wrong. People nearly everywhere naturally believe that their way of life is the best way of life, and there is certainly nothing

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wrong with being proud of one's culture or heritage. Some authors thus view ethnocentrism as a positive force to resist cultural imperialism (see examples in Schleicher and Kozma 1992). However, most observers view ethnocentrism as the dark side of cultural pride because it judges others on the basis of how they measure up to one's own cultural norms and values. It fosters human divisions, as opposed to human unity and commonality.[4]

The temptations of stereotyping and ethnocentrism are natural, and they are difficult to resist, but they bring on many negative effects, especially for the cross-cultural teacher. No one likes to be pigeonholed. Stereotyping fails to see individuals for who they are but rather sees and judges them as caricatures. This is both unfair and inaccurate. Ethnocentrism not only can blind one to the beauty of other cultures but can also lead to condescending attitudes that block meaningful relationships with others and the ability to learn from them. Learners will quickly pick up on a teacher's negative attitudes and close themselves off from closer relationships and new ideas the teacher brings. Ethnocentrism also blocks the teacher's ability to appreciate positive aspects of the culture. In the worst case, it can foster racism and prejudice. In later chapters we will see how stereotypes and ethnocentrism can play out in teaching situations.

Developing Intercultural Competency

The cross-cultural teacher must not only be ready to adapt teaching style and pedagogy to the learners of the host culture but will need to develop more general skills of intercultural competency. Any international sojourner who for the first time enters a new culture experiences what Joseph Shaules (2015) calls an "Oz moment." In the Hollywood film *The Wizard of Oz*, a tornado transports Dorothy from dreary Kansas to the colorful land of Oz, and she declares to her dog, "Toto, I've the feeling that we're not in Kansas anymore." When entering a strange culture, one may experience a host of responses, from fascination to fear. But to survive and thrive in Oz, one must go beyond marveling and musing to develop intercultural competency.

Navigating life in our native home culture comes naturally, intuitively, and for the most part unconsciously. Appropriate responses to countless daily situations come like a reflex. We take our culture for granted as the fish takes water for granted and knows instinctively how to swim. But in many ways, learning to navigate life in another culture means resisting our intuitions and retraining our natural reflexes of how we respond to everyday situations. Indeed, we may feel like the fish that doesn't know how to walk on dry ground! In the words of Shaules, "it's the intuitive mind—the autopilot of everyday life—that bears the brunt of intercultural adjustment" (2015, 69). Or, to return to the computer analogy, it involves adopting a new software for our minds. Because we enter the culture as adults, and not as children born and raised in the culture, that challenging process is disorientating and has a steep learning curve.

Intercultural competency has been defined as "a set of abilities, knowledge, attitudes and skills, that allow one to appropriately and effectively manage relations with persons of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Portera 2014, 159). It is key to effective teaching and to a sense of personal well-being while living with and relating to persons of

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another culture. This is especially the case when the teacher lives in a foreign cultural context for a long time.

> In its simplest expression, intercultural competence development is about the capacity of individuals to respectfully engage and communicate with another so that they have the benefit of another person's cultural perspectives. Such capacity results in the ability to communicate and form relationships more effectively with persons who are different from us, and to see, interpret, understand, appreciate, and utilize what we have learned in new ways. (AHSE 2012, 43)

Resources are available for developing intercultural competency for teachers and international education administrators (e.g., Cushner and Mahon 2009; Paige and Goode 2009). Long-term international sojourners face adjustments beyond the classroom, such as dealing with culture shock, learning a foreign language, managing daily life, and navigating personal relationships that often operate according to different norms and expectations. Living in a foreign country, exploring a new culture, and making new international friends are among the joys of being a cross-cultural sojourner. But after the honeymoon is over, culture shock can create frustration and conflict, kill motivation, and even lead to depression. Adventure morphs into adversity. The new and exotic becomes the familiar and "stupid." If a cross-cultural teacher does not come to feel at home in the host culture, does not develop satisfying relationships with the hosts, or does not develop an appreciation for the culture, he can become discouraged, ineffective, and resentful.

Steven T. Simpson describes three phases of acculturation that Western teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) experience in China: "baggage brought," "hand dealt," and "fertile soil."

> First, "Baggage Brought" refers to the prior "experience and expectations" of the Westerner; second, "Hand Dealt" refers to the awakening stage in which EFL teachers start to understand "the reality and constraints of the local context" in China; and third, "Fertile Soil" refers to the "emerging, personal, and professional issues" in which the Western teacher begins to negotiate decisions in a more culturally sensitive and professionally productive way. (Simpson 2008, 385, citing Wong 2000)

Developing intercultural competency and moving through these phases of acculturation requires adjustment in a variety of areas. Agostino Portera (2014, 160) discusses three areas —knowledge, attitudes, and skills—that are necessary for developing intercultural competency.

- *Knowledge* includes factors such as cultural awareness, self-awareness, and aspects of intercultural communication.
- *Attitude* includes flexibility, ability to listen, interpersonal intelligence, patience, acceptance, managing uncertainty, and the like.
- *Skills* include language and communication skills, observational and analytical ability, and interpersonal skills such as relationship building and conflict management.

We examine now more closely cultural self-awareness, knowledge, attitude, and experience as key dimensions of developing intercultural competency.

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Self-Awareness

Experts agree that the first step in developing intercultural competency is to become more aware of one's own cultural identity, experience, values, prejudices, and attitudes. What is the "baggage" that we bring with us to a new cultural context? "Cultural self-awareness is a person's conscious ability to critically view and understand the objective and subjective cultures to which the individual belongs" (Madden 2015, 177).

One can improve intercultural competence by exploring one's own cultural identity, monitoring one's own attitudes, and identifying the related emotions (Weigl 2009). We can discover as much about ourselves as we do of others when we enter a new culture. Such self-understanding can help us maintain a sense of identity in the midst of cultural disorientation. It also helps us better identify why we are responding as we do to change and unfamiliarity, and how to process that experience in constructive ways. Journaling, sharing experiences with other sojourners, and soliciting honest feedback from persons from the host culture are ways to gain greater self-awareness and process the cross-cultural experience.

Some of these dynamics will be explored later as they relate more specifically to teaching. Sidebar 2.2 lists some of the excellent resources on that subject for further study.

Knowledge

General knowledge of a people—their history, traditions, customs, values, religion, and so on—not only illuminates the context of the teaching-learning experience but is also important to one's personal navigation of daily life in the new culture. Especially important are understandings of communication norms, social skills, and appropriate conflict resolution strategies. Gestures we use subconsciously, such as the degree of eye contact or bodily distance between conversation partners that we find natural, may be uncomfortable or offensive to others. Sometimes neither party can readily identify what it is that makes the relationship feel uncomfortable. Such basic rules of respectful communication need to be learned. The host may be patient with the sojourner's lack of social skill for a time, but the longer the sojourner lives in the country, the less patience and understanding he will receive from the hosts. Even more befuddling than basic communication challenges are the cultural differences in values, perceptions of time and causality, role expectations, status differentiation, and a long list of other factors that are not easily observed or identified. The more intentional one is about identifying and understanding such differences, the more likely one will be able to adapt behavior, minimize conflict, reduce personal frustration, and have a satisfying sojourn experience.

SIDEBAR 2.2

Resources for Developing Intercultural Competence

Brislin, Richard. *Working with Cultural Differences: Dealing Effectively with Diversity in the Workplace*. Westport, CT: Prager, 2008.

Deardorf, Darla K., ed. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009.

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Elmer, Duane. *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.

Kohls, Robert L. *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. 4th ed. Boston: Nicholas Brealy, 2001.

Moreau, A. Scott, Evvy Hay Campbell, and Susan Greener. *Effective Intercultural Communication: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014.

International sojourners today are often concerned about personal security, be it due to fear of crime, prejudice, health hazards, or other dangers. In many locations, gaining local knowledge of how to maintain personal security will be a high priority. Such knowledge improves one's safety and sense of well-being; it also can reduce or eliminate anxiety and suspicion, allowing the sojourner to relax and enjoy the positive aspects of the culture.

However, knowledge alone will not be adequate to insure the development of intercultural competency. David Livermore, director of the Cultural Intelligence Center, goes so far as to claim that "a mounting body of research suggests it would actually be better to not teach cultural differences at all if that's the only thing you're going to do. Dozens of studies find that cultural knowledge leads to stereotyping and perpetuating bias rather than building cultural intelligence" (2018). He argues that curiosity, humility, intersectionality,[5] and skills are critical to developing intercultural competency and avoiding stereotyping. In other words, approaching people of another culture as a humble and inquisitive learner is more important than acquiring general knowledge that might create prejudice and block learning.

Attitude

Having the attitude of a humble learner is also essential to effective cross-cultural learning and living. In fact, studies have demonstrated that humility is a predictor of intercultural competence (Paine, Jankowski, and Sandage 2016). Respect (valuing other cultures and individuals), openness (withholding judgment), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity) have also been identified as essential attitudes that characterize intercultural competency (AHSE 2012, 29–34). One must be open to new ideas and lifestyles that are not necessarily bad, just different. Resisting ethnocentrism does not entail surrendering my own culture or values, but does mean that I must be slow to judge and quick to learn. I attempt to appreciate cultural differences through the eyes of the culturally other. Questions that should be often asked and that are nearly always welcomed include:

- "I am new to your country and want to know more about you. Can you help me understand why . . . ?"
- "As a newcomer to your land, I realize that I may be ignorant of the appropriate behavior when. . . . Can you tell me what the appropriate response might be?"
- "I'm still learning how to respect and adopt local ways of getting things done. Can you give me advice on the best way to . . . ?"

The answers may not always make sense, and you may not always follow your hosts' guidance, but they can provide insight and help avoid unnecessary frustration or conflict.

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Experience

There is no substitute for direct experience. To learn to swim, one must enter the water, and to learn to live and effectively interact in a new culture, one must venture out of the comfort of the familiar. Participating in social events and building new friendships with local people are indispensable. If culture defines the rules of society's game, to develop intercultural competence, one must not only learn the rules but actually *play* the game. Only then does one acquire a real feel for the game and learn winning strategies (Carroll 2015, 28). In totally foreign circumstances, it can be crippling to know one may be misunderstood and may behave inappropriately. The temptation can be great to socialize exclusively with other expatriates. However, such fears and behavior only rob the sojourner of the very kind of practical learning experiences that are essential to developing relational skills and unveiling new insights into the host culture. Receiving and extending hospitality, spending time in public social spaces (such as markets, restaurants, parks, museums, or festivals), and seeking out other shared experiences with local people will not only provide opportunity to develop communication skills; they can also lead to deeper, more satisfying relationships.

1. Hofstede Insights, "Compare Countries," accessed November 5, 2020, https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries.

2. See https://globeproject.com/studies and House et al. 2004. GLOBE stands for Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness.

3. GLOBE values were converted to percentage by setting the maximum value 5.61 = 100%.

4. Tamás Kozma (1992) concludes, based on both the political and psychological ramifications of ethnocentrism, that "although it has a function, ethnocentrism is a negative social epidemic, which may threaten both the individual and the society in the long run" (283), and that although it may solidify personal and group identity, ultimately "it is dysfunctional in promoting the survival of the social group" (284). He argues: "An education that concentrates on the common future of mankind can be an alternative to ethnocentrism and other kinds of social separation" (286).

5. *Intersectionality* here describes the awareness that a person's identity is a composite of overlapping and interrelated forms such as race, ethnicity, social class, and gender.

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3

Learning Styles, Teaching Styles, and Culture

Chapter Overview

- Learning Styles: A Constructed and Contested Concept
- Culture's Influence on Learner Preferences and Expectations
- Teaching Styles in International Comparison
- Implications for Teaching across Cultures

Before beginning our discussion of the five dimensions of culture's influence on learning, we must address the topic of learning styles more generally. Not only are individuals different in personality, ability, and taste, but it is claimed that individuals also learn differently. Thus it seems a matter of common sense that adapting teaching to a student's individual learning style will improve learning. Popular books and websites abound that describe how your child's success depends on identifying her learning style and appropriately accommodating it. Questionnaires and resources are marketed to determine that style. Teenagers famously claim that their learning style requires that, in order to learn effectively, they must listen to music while they study (their favorite music, of course, loudly)! Such simplistic approaches are rarely helpful. But what are we to make of the many theories, claims, and resources related to learning style? Furthermore, questions arise: To what extent does culture influence the predominant learning styles or preferences of whole ethnic groups? Is the concept of learning style useful to a cross-cultural teacher seeking to understand and adapt to cultural preferences in learning? How might culture influence learners' expectations? This chapter explores those issues, and then lays out the implications for cross-cultural teachers.

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Learning Styles: A Constructed and Contested Concept

The term *learning style* is used in many different ways by educators and researchers, but it generally refers to natural or preferred conditions under which an individual person best learns. Sternberg and Grigorenko explain that core to the definition of an individual style is

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"its reference to habitual patterns or preferred ways of doing something (e.g., thinking, learning, teaching) that are consistent over long periods of time and across many areas of activity" (2001, 2). Two dimensions of learning often included in learning style theories are cognition and social relations. These dimensions will be discussed separately at length in later chapters.

Constructing Learning Style Theories

Most learning style theories focus primarily on individual learner preferences, personality, and inherent traits or abilities. They are often implicitly based on psychological essentialism—namely, that learning styles can be identified in distinct categories or types, are innate and fixed, and are predictive of learner performance. Thus, it is claimed that a key to effective teaching is adapting one's teaching style to the learning style of the student. Not only educators but parents and non-educators, too, are encouraged to utilize learning style theory to maximize learner potential and treat all people with fairness. It is often argued that minority communities are disadvantaged because schools fail to take into consideration the particular learning styles of such students. At least in Western cultures, most people have an intuitive sense that they learn better through some methods than through others. Accordingly, the idea of individual learning styles seems plausible, and it has been the subject of considerable theorizing and research.

The list of factors that theorists consider to constitute a learning style is varied and long. One might examine physical conditions (e.g., light, sound, temperature), social relationships, media (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic), or motivational factors. Some theories focus more on personality or affective characteristics of a learner; others examine strategies for completing learning tasks and cognitive processes. Any combination of these factors might be considered a "learning style," so it is little wonder that there are numerous competing theories and conceptualizations. Serious research on learning styles began in the 1950s, took off in the 1970s, exploded in the 1980s, and its expansion has continued to the present (Nielsen 2012). The literature on learning style has become voluminous, producing over five thousand articles in academic journals alone.[1] A Google search of "learning style" yields over two and a half million web sources, indicating the enormous popular appeal of the concept.

Contesting Learning Style Theories

Despite all the research and literature on learning styles, no scholarly consensus has yet emerged about how best to define, categorize, determine, or apply understandings of learning styles. This contributes to conceptual confusion, contradictory research findings, and conflicting recommendations. This alone should serve as a warning against simplistic approaches to understanding learning styles and their usefulness as a quick solution for navigating cross-cultural teaching.

An extensive review of learning style literature conducted by Coffield et al. (2004b, 135–36) found the following difficulties in the field, to name only a few:

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- theoretical incoherence, conceptual confusion, and lack of consistent terminology
- a proliferation of some thirty learning style dichotomies and seventy-one learning style models
- "small-scale, non-cumulative, uncritical and inward-looking" research with little dialogue among leading proponents
- a "bedlam" of contradictory research findings
- theory that can lead to labeling and stereotyping, with a variety of negative consequences for teachers and students
- disagreement about research findings' implications for pedagogy
- overstated claims (particularly by the commercial learning styles industry)

Many other fundamental questions remain unanswered. For example, are styles more learned or more part of a person's fundamental makeup? Are they stable or malleable? What do they reflect more: ability or style? Is matching teaching style to learning style a real help or a hindrance? Not a few researchers question the validity of the concept of learning styles altogether, and some even call it a harmful myth (e.g., Riener and Willingham 2010; Scott 2010; Nancekivell, Shah, and Gelman 2020). Some studies have challenged the claim that adapting teaching style to learning style results in better learning outcomes (e.g., Massa and Mayer 2006). Of course, the validity of these critiques depends largely upon how learning styles are defined.

Attempts to measure learning styles, sort learners into neat categories, and offer formulaic pedagogies may belie a Western penchant for quick fixes to complex human phenomena. Possible cultural biases in such models make them particularly questionable for international usage. As one study concludes, "there are growing concerns that the application of learning styles concepts from Western cultures and research may not be valid in non-Western education contexts, due to fundamental differences in learning processes or misinterpretation of international students' learning behaviour" (Eaves 2011, 677). The validity of learning style tests across cultures has been researched and, indeed, found wanting (e.g., Yousef 2019).

Attempts to Determine Learning Style

Whereas there is little question that learners self-report differences in how they prefer to learn, the validity of learning style typologies and of instruments designed to determine learning style *has* been questioned. There is evidence that self-report learning style questionnaires are poor predictors of study techniques, recall processes, and student performance (Price and Richardson 2003; Kappe et al. 2009). In short, students don't necessarily know how they learn best. Coffield et al. (2004a) examined thirteen major learning style models and measuring instruments and found most of them psychometrically weak and vulnerable to problems of self-reporting. Other studies have come to similar conclusions regarding the weakness of most learning-style instruments (e.g., James and Blank 1993; Ferrell 1983; An and Carr 2017). Consider, for example, one of the most widely

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discussed and employed constructs for learning styles: David A. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. His "learning style inventory" (LSI), a written self-test consisting of just twelve sets of four words to choose from, has been used extensively in numerous professional contexts as wide-ranging as education, management, medicine, counseling, and engineering. However, the LSI has been repeatedly scrutinized, and a long list of studies, including international studies, have found it to be based on weak theoretical foundations and to render poor psychometric performance (e.g., Atkinson 1991; De Ciantis and Kirton 1996; Garner 2000; Brew 2002; Henson and Hwang 2002; Metallidou and Platsidou 2008; Kappe et al. 2009).

Whether the problems lie in conceptualization or only in the measurement instruments, most of the commonly used learning style questionnaires do not consistently measure what they claim they do. Thus, the actual value of learning style questionnaires—and of learning style theory in general—may be less in determining well-defined student learning styles and more in serving as a discussion launcher about individual differences and raising self-awareness. Even if valid learning style questionnaires were available, they would be of little value for most cross-cultural teachers since they would be unavailable in the learners' language.

Matching Learning and Teaching Styles

Behind much learning style research is the underlying assumption that adapting teaching methods to an individual student's learning style will improve student learning. This would be especially important if learning styles were relatively fixed, stable attributes. But questions abound regarding the practical usefulness of that information and whether these seemingly obvious assumptions are valid. Two questions arise regarding strategies to match teaching and learning styles. First, is there empirical, experimental evidence demonstrating that pedagogical interventions based upon information gained from learning style inventories improves student learning? Second, even if such effectiveness can be demonstrated, how realistic is it for a teacher to adapt teaching style in a single classroom of students with presumably differing styles? Here again the evidence is ambiguous. One major review of the literature found, on the one hand, "ample evidence that children and adults will, if asked, express preferences about how they prefer information to be presented to them. There is also plentiful evidence arguing that people differ in the degree to which they have some fairly specific aptitudes for different kinds of thinking and for processing different types of information" (Pashler et al. 2008, 105). However, on the other hand, the same study found virtually no evidence that adapting teaching methods to student learning styles improved student learning. In fact, the authors continue, "Although the literature on learning styles is enormous, very few studies have even used an experimental methodology capable of testing the validity of learning styles applied to education. Moreover, of those that did use an appropriate method, several found results that flatly contradict the popular meshing hypothesis" (105).

Another comprehensive study and synthesis of over eight hundred meta-analyses relating to student achievement concluded, "Emphasising learning styles, coaching for tests,

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mentoring and individualised instruction are noted for their lack of impact" (Hattie 2009, 199). An and Carr go a step further in their review of the literature: "Learning styles theories clearly do a poor job of explaining the causes of individual differences in student learning. More important, the recommendation to 'teach to learning styles' does not result in improved learning. In many cases teaching to a learning style will result in stymied development and poor achievement because the approach to teaching does not address weaknesses" (2017, 412).

Often, research that seems to support the effectiveness of matching teaching and learning styles is based upon laboratory experiments in which extreme or unnatural conditions are set up that have little in common with ordinary classroom contexts. Consider also that for some learning objectives, a preferred learning style or mode may simply may not be the most effective method of learning. Can a person really learn to swim by reading a book if reading is their preferred learning style? The same logic may apply to many other learning domains. Obviously, many learning objectives will require teaching methods that may not match a preferred learning style or expectation. Furthermore, unless one is teaching one-on-one, it is practically impossible to adapt teaching to accommodate all the diverse styles of students in larger class. As Coffield et al. comment, "The benefits of individualised teaching are often greatly exaggerated, although many teachers will admit that it is extremely difficult to ensure that learners are benefiting from specially tailored approaches when there is a large class to manage" (2004b, 51).

One can, however, choose to employ a wider range of teaching methods so as to offer something for every learner. Evidence shows that exposing students to learning style theory and encouraging them to experiment with mixed learning methods can increase motivation and lead to changes in their learning style scores (Bhagat, Vyas, and Singh 2015). But that would probably be good pedagogy in most cases anyway, with or without learning style knowledge. As we shall see below, there can be advantages to exposing students to alternative learning strategies and methods beyond their preferred style or expectations if those strategies and methods are introduced thoughtfully. Thus, one of the benefits of discussing learning style may be less in determining individual learner styles and individualizing teaching, and more in exposing teachers to a general awareness of learner diversity and encouraging them to employ a wider range of teaching methods, whoever their students are (Orsak 1990).

Is a Style Innate or Learned, Static or Malleable?

Many learning style theories assume that individual learning styles are innate and static features of an individual's personality and/or psyche. In this view, it follows that to be effective, instructional strategies must accommodate the learner's style and that not making such an effort would unfairly disadvantage the learner. But is this assumption justified? Is a person really biologically or psychologically locked into one way of learning and unable to adapt and learn in other ways? Bhagat, Vyas, and Singh (2015) found that over just three months of exposure to mixed learning methods, student learning styles changed, which points to the malleability of learning styles or preferences. Static learning style constructs may in

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fact be a reflection of Western values and anthropology. As Catherine Scott observes, "Learning styles as an idea chimes well with the individualist value system of our culture and fits its dominant, entity, model of human attributes but there is no credible evidence that it is a valid basis for pedagogical decision-making" (2010, 14).

In Western cultures, student performance is often attributed to innate student ability: "He's just not good at math," or "She is a natural at spelling." Other cultures take the opposite view, attributing student performance to hard work (e.g., Stevenson and Stigler 1992; Sato, Namiki, and Hatano 2004; Miyamato 1985). The truth no doubt lies somewhere in between. A similar logic is often at work regarding learning style: it can offer an excuse for poor student performance when a student and teacher are allegedly mismatched. The wiser strategy may be to not only help teachers expand their teaching styles but also to help students expand their learning styles and acquire new learning strategies and abilities.

Identifying and accommodating the dominant learning style of ethnic minorities has been proposed as a way to reduce minority discrimination in multiethnic classrooms. Indeed, ethnic minorities may enter a classroom that confronts them with an unfamiliar social environment and related learning challenges. Teachers will need to take such differences into account, for which a large literature on teaching in multiethnic classrooms will provide guidance. Learning style theory has been proposed as one way to address the challenge of ethnic diversity. But Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) argue that theories describing learning styles as static, categorical human attributes could have the opposite effect of providing yet another handle for stereotyping and prejudice. The challenge for ethnic minority students who struggle may be more one of unfamiliarity with skills needed for classroom learning, which could be acquired. Teacher awareness of such limitations can alert them to take appropriate measures to acquaint such students with the requisite skills and help them adapt. This may require adjusting classroom activities and culture, at least initially. But attributing poor performance to innate abilities or failure to match learning and teaching style is more likely to exacerbate the problem than to solve it.

The Way Forward

This critique of much of learning style theory is not intended to suggest that all learning style research is bad research, nor that the concept should be entirely abandoned. Future research, and more collaboration among researchers, might lead to greater consensus and to more valid, reliable findings. But the field is clearly not there yet, and this suggests that educators should exercise caution and restraint in utilizing current theories and tools, especially the use of questionnaires. Many researchers, such as those in the European Learning Styles Information Network, are attempting to bring more coherence to the field and seek stronger evidence for the validity of the construct (e.g., Zhang, Sternberg, and Rayner 2012). As we shall see in the following chapters, research on some dimensions of learning style, such as cognition, reasoning, and social dynamics, is better established and can provide reliable insight into how people think and learn.

Although the jury is still out regarding many aspects of individual learning styles, there is no question that culturally conditioned differences in learning preferences, expectations, and

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educational traditions have significant impact on the learning experience. Thus, in the following discussion we will speak of learning style more in the sense of learning preferences and expectations, and less in terms of fixed, innate types. As we have seen, strict, static, essentialized typologies regarding learner characteristics are problematic. But so long as we think more in terms of preferences, expectations, and malleable qualities, we are freer to explore issues around teacher-student style mismatches, and to consider ways to expand students' learning strategies and abilities. Because these differences do exist, teachers need to take them into account in their instructional strategies, especially as they relate to culturally conditioned, collective preferences and expectations, the topic to which we now turn.

Culture's Influence on Learner Preferences and Expectations

When we add the dimension of culture to our discussion of learner preferences and expectations, a different dynamic comes into focus: ways in which the cultural context has shaped the collective preferences and expectations of whole groups of learners. While individual differences remain—that is, diversity within a culture—collective preferences and expectations are shaped by generally accepted cultural norms regarding teacher-student relations, appropriate teaching and learning methods, and other educational factors. These collective preferences and expectations might be considered culture-specific learning styles. Teachers, too, are influenced by their cultural context regarding what makes for good teaching. Therefore, while allowing for individual differences, we can meaningfully speak of culturally preferred teaching styles.

Numerous international comparative studies of learning styles and preferences consistently reveal significant national differences. Even though most learning style measurement tools are of questionable value, this consistent finding indicates that learners from different cultures have, on average, different learning preferences and experiences (as self-reported). These culturally conditioned preferences and expectations have been formed through enculturation in general and by past learning experiences in particular. Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasized how learning is socially mediated. Empirical research has corroborated the importance of the cultural framework of learning. For example, even the language spoken at home influences learner preferences (Maldonado Torres 2016). A study by Cornel Pewewardy (2002) reviewed the voluminous literature regarding learning styles of American Indian/Alaska Native students. He found an emphasis on social harmony, holistic perspectives, creativity, and nonverbal communication, and demonstrated how these preferences were linked to students' language, culture, and heritage. Such findings come as no surprise. Writers like Pewewardy argue that schools must adapt to these preferences and styles of particular ethnic groups. The questions are, of course, how much to adapt, and how such adaptation will facilitate student attainment of the desired learning outcomes. This is the challenge the cross-cultural teacher faces. Our discussion of the five dimensions of culture's influence upon learning will point practical ways forward.

Generally speaking, people are most comfortable with familiar methods and relations. Teacher methods or behaviors that depart from these expectations will—at least initially—create some dissonance and potentially impair learning effectiveness. The wise cross-cultural

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teacher will become well acquainted with such collective preferences and expectations, then judiciously determine whether and how to adapt teaching. This does not preclude the possibility of introducing unfamiliar learning experiences, but does mean that any such introduction should be done with intentionality, understanding, and awareness of possible unintended consequences. In fact, as we will see in later chapters, some studies indicate that mismatch of teaching and learning styles can lead to cognitive growth.

Carefully conducted empirical research and international comparative studies examining such collective learner styles according to nationality are of a different character than monocultural studies that are narrow in scope and individualistically conceived. As we explore the various dimensions of how culture influences learning, we will draw upon the best research related to cultural differences and their possible implications for teaching and learning. Many well-established human differences, such as cognitive styles and individualism/collectivism, do not describe a learning style per se. But such factors do influence the learning environment and process.

Broadly conceived international studies and national profiles, however, are of limited usefulness in determining the best instructional strategies. They can alert a teacher to potential challenges. But they are not context-specific: they may not differentiate between urban and rural contexts, formal and non-formal settings, whether learners are children or adults, and other nuanced factors that are hidden in a general national profile. Furthermore, although culture has a significant influence, it is not strictly determinative of learning preferences. For example, one study found that

> Contrary to the expectation that Asian learners have a propensity for rote learning, the Sri Lankan students reported the lowest score for memorising strategy and relatively high scores for concretising and analysing strategies. This could be indicative of the not so strong influence of culture on the use of learning strategies and thus powerful learning environments have a great potential in bringing about a change towards the greater use of more constructive learning strategies. (Marambe, Vermunt, and Boshuizen 2012, 314)

Due to the weaknesses of most questionnaires and measurement tools designed to determine learning style, Mina Eaves concludes that “there is a strong argument for non-psychometric studies of learning behaviour to be included in the study of culture-specific learning styles in the light of the limitations of the psychometric approach” (2011, 684). Such an approach would include more observation and qualitative research methods. The average cross-cultural teacher is unlikely to have the time or expertise to conduct careful research about her students’ learning preferences and expectations. But she can seek to better understand them with relatively simple approaches that include some or all of the following:

- classroom observation of teachers who are described as the most effective teachers in that cultural setting
- observation of student response to different instructional methods and classroom management
- interviews with students, asking questions such as: “Describe to me the best teacher you have ever had. What was she like?” “What teaching methods were used?” “What would you think about a teacher who did . . . ?”

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- interviews with native and expatriate teachers with wide experience in the culture, to learn from their experience
- experimentation with various methods and monitoring of learner response
- focus group in which students discuss their learning experiences

Of course, such inquiry demands considerable patience and commitment from the teacher. Findings are likely to be in shades of grey, not black and white. Observations must be carefully conducted since it is easy to misread students; for example, students who experience coursework as heavy, especially if in a second language, will tend to use reproductive learning methods. Eaves warns, "Therefore, generalising from the behaviour of international students or students learning in a second language to cultural patterns of learning styles may not be valid due to a possibly confounding factor of a perceived intensive workload affecting learning strategies" (2011, 683).

Teaching Styles in International Comparison

Just as learners have differing preferences or styles in how they learn, teachers have different preferences or styles in how they teach. Studies demonstrate that culture influences not only learner preferences and expectations but also instructional preferences and expectations. A few examples will illustrate the point. Cothran et al. (2005) studied the beliefs about teaching styles of 1,436 physical education teachers in seven countries. They found that teachers' use of styles was related to their beliefs about the styles. All countries were significantly different from each other in experience with teaching styles and in their beliefs about teaching styles. "For example, Korea and Portugal use reproductive methods most frequently. . . . England, Australia, and Canada used production styles more than Korea and Portugal" (198). In general, though, teachers in every country studied had a more positive view of reproductive learning methods (whereby the teacher takes more initiative in the learning process) than production learning methods (whereby the learner takes more initiative).

Other international comparisons of teacher styles consistently demonstrate clear national differences. Consider, for example, Stigler et al.'s (1999) study of mathematics teachers in Germany, Japan, and the United States. German and American teachers tend to begin with teacher-led instruction and follow it with an application phase of teaching, but Japanese teachers tend to reverse the order: "Problem solving comes first, followed by a time in which students reflect on the problem, share the solution methods they have generated, and jointly work to develop explicit understandings of the underlying mathematical concepts" (vi). Another study examined secondary teachers' attitudes about critical thinking; it found that American teachers positively endorsed critical thinking approaches, whereas Chinese teachers evidenced some resistance to them (McBride et al. 2002). Eaves surveys numerous qualitative studies comparing international learning styles "that suggest Western academic culture is associated with interactive, constructivist and student-centred values compared to a more teacher-centred type of academic culture found in many [Chinese and Confucian Heritage] cultures, influencing teaching and learning styles" (Eaves 2011, 684). The

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International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) has conducted numerous international comparative studies (www.iea.nl).

Culturally conditioned learner expectations clearly influence how students perceive and respond to teacher behaviors. For example, many Western educators claim that student autonomy facilitates learning. Chinese schoolteachers tend to be more authoritarian and have larger classes than American teachers, yet Chinese students perform well in international comparisons. Exploration of this paradox found that "the same controlling behaviors of teachers had different affective meanings for different cultural groups" (Zhou, Lam, and Chan 2002, 1162). "Students from the United States felt more controlled by their teachers and, in turn, reported that they were less motivated in their teachers' class. In contrast, students from China felt less controlled by their teachers and, in turn, reported that they were more motivated in their teachers' class" (1169). These studies indicate that not only do teachers of different cultures differ in their instructional strategies; students are conditioned to respond accordingly to those strategies. A cross-cultural teacher may therefore find students responding to his teaching in unexpected ways.

Implications for Teaching across Cultures

A teacher's awareness of differing preferences and expectations can alert her in advance to possible confusion or stress that may arise when she employs pedagogical methods that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable to her students. This does not mean that unfamiliar methods should not be employed, but they may need to be introduced gradually and with explanation of their pedagogical value. For example, in most Western schooling and higher education the expectation is that students will work individually on assignments and receive an individual grade for their performance. Requiring students to work in groups on assignments or projects for which all participants will receive the same common grade often meets with resistance. Explaining the value of group work, cooperation, and synergy as an important life skill can help overcome student resistance.

Teacher awareness of the diversity of learner preferences can provide impetus for the teacher to expand his repertoire of instructional methods. The reality is, teachers tend to teach in the manner in which they themselves prefer to learn. They often fall into a rut, always using the same instructional methods. But whatever the learning preferences and expectations of the students might be, employing a variety of methods is likely to make instruction more interesting and more memorable for everyone.

Discussing with learners their preferences and expectations can heighten their self-awareness and appreciation of diversity. The idea is not to create the expectation that the teacher will necessarily cater to their individual preferences, much less give them an excuse for failure if their expectations aren't met. On the contrary, such discussion can help students not only understand the value of exploring alternative approaches to learning but also expand their own learning strategies.

Aspects of Adaptation

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There are at least four ways that teaching can be adapted to better match learner preferences: didactic adaptation, social adaptation, structural adaptation, and content adaptation.

- *Didactic adaptation*—the teacher's choice of instructional methods that fit the expectations and preferences of the learners. This is the aspect that is most often in view in the literature on matching teaching and learning styles.
- *Social adaptation*—promotion of social relations between teacher and learners, and among learners, that will respect cultural norms and facilitate learning. This may include a teacher adopting the role or status that his students regard as culturally appropriate, along with its implications for classroom behavior and the teacher's relationships with students.
- *Structural adaptation*—adaptation of the environmental conditions of the classroom or learning institution to be more conducive to learner participation and attentiveness. This may include a wide range of variables, such as seating arrangements, classroom temperature, and scheduling of class times and breaks. It may also include methods of assessment, such as examinations and grading.
- *Content adaptation*—crafting instructional content and learning objectives to be relevant and motivational to learners. As discussed in the previous chapter, the content that is taught may need to be contextualized for greater impact and relevance.

Match Teaching Styles with Learner Styles?

Although we have noted the practical difficulty of matching teaching and learning styles in classrooms where students represent a wide range of styles, the cross-cultural teaching situation presents a different setting. If the learners are from a relatively homogenous ethnic or cultural group, one can expect that there will be commonly shared, culturally conditioned learning preferences and expectations. There are several possible strategies for engaging cultural differences between the cross-cultural teacher and his students. In some situations, however, the cross-cultural teacher will not be entirely free to choose the level of adaptation. For example, standards for testing, accreditation, and other institutional norms may place constraints on the teacher's ability to be creative.

Throughout this book we will continually return to the question of the extent to which teaching should or should not be adapted to the preferences or styles of the learners. How we answer the question will depend on a variety of factors. For example, which of the five dimensions of culture's influence upon learning are we talking about? Each dimension will need to be considered on its own terms. Also, are we speaking of a short-term or long-term cross-cultural teacher? If the teaching assignment lasts only a few weeks, significant mismatch of preferences and expectations could potentially inhibit learning. On the other hand, if one teaches over the course of months or years there is time for both student and teacher to assimilate to one another, and new teaching methods can be introduced gradually. Finally, there is the question of what is to be gained or lost by mismatching teaching style with student learning style.

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The following options exist regarding adaptation of teaching style to learner preferences and expectations: no adaptation (mismatch), full adaptation (match), partial adaptation (compromise), and adaptation with gradual introduction of alternate approaches (match to mismatch).

NO ADAPTATION

In *no adaptation* the teacher expects students to adapt to the teacher, and not vice versa. Some cross-cultural teachers may naively adopt this strategy by default. Others may adopt this strategy out of conviction that even if methods are unfamiliar, they are inherently essential to attaining the desired learning outcomes. Sometimes this will be the case; for example, when teaching practical skills such as riding a bicycle there is no substitute for experimentation and learning-by-doing. But most learning objectives can be attained by a variety of methods. Although at first learners may find the novelty of a foreign teacher with strange methods intriguing, over time the novelty can grow old and students may become frustrated, as evidenced in the study by Mingsheng Li (2002) cited in chapter 1. A teacher's stubborn insistence upon certain methods along with unwillingness to be flexible can lead to student resistance, and possibly conflict. Except for short-term teaching assignments with very limited learning objectives, this approach is, for obvious reasons, not generally recommended.

FULL ADAPTATION

With *full adaptation* the teacher decides to conform instruction as fully as possible to cultural or learner preferences and expectations. Such a stance is admirable in that it seeks to respect cultural traditions and avoid creating discomfort or confusion for students. All too often, cross-cultural teachers assume that their methods are better and prematurely disregard local methods. But although those local methods may seem backward, they may have a track record of effectiveness. For example, Western teachers typically undervalue rote learning and memorization as superficial, although in certain forms it can promote learning and understanding at a deep level (Kember 2000; Kennedy 2002). Research by Marton, Dall'Alba, and Tse (1996) found that memorization may precede or follow understanding. Mechanical memorization is different from memorization with understanding. Repetition while memorizing can contribute to understanding. In the words of one Chinese student, "Each time I would repeat I would have some new idea of understanding, that is to say I can understand better" (81). However, changing one's instructional style to conform to cultural preferences will limit instructional options and may make it difficult to attain some learning objectives. Teachers who fully accommodate local expectations are willing to pay that price because they see the negative consequences of mismatch outweighing the negatives of matching.

Making an effort to accommodate local learning preferences and traditions is particularly important in formal learning settings such as schools, universities, and seminaries. However, considerably more flexibility is possible in non-formal teaching contexts such as workshops, church-based training programs, and spiritual formation groups. It is unnecessary to limit instructional options as a matter of principle. Each situation, audience, and learning objective

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should be considered on its own merits. In many non-formal settings, creative or unfamiliar methods will be welcomed. However, it is usually a good idea to run ideas by a local leader to ensure that there is no unnecessary offense or confusion created, and to anticipate possible challenges.

Fully adapting to local expectations and preferences also may limit the potential for students' cognitive growth and expansion of their learning strategies. Unfamiliar teaching methods may promote these. For example, if students generally prefer the teacher to dictate lecture notes, answer all questions, and test for content mastery, it is unlikely that students will learn critical thinking skills. Eaves summarizes several studies indicating the value of introducing students to alternative teaching styles:

> Wong (2004) found that Asian international students in Australia expressed a preference for student-centred teaching and learning styles even though this approach differed from their previous experience in their home country. On another positive note, Bell (2007, 62) found that Thai postgraduate students in Australia reported developing self-efficacy in their studies mainly due to "a safe, non threatening study environment." Wallace and Hellmundt (2003) found that the learning behaviour of international students such as critical thinking was enhanced through the promotion of a student-centred and interpersonally interactive learning environment, which was also found to be beneficial for local students' learning processes. (Eaves 2011, 685)

Although mismatch of teaching and learning styles creates some discomfort, Bruce Joyce observes:

> Curiously, the more a given model of teaching was mismatched with the natural learning style of the student, the more it presented a challenge to the student to take an affirmative stance so as to pass through the period of discomfort and develop skills that permit a productive relationship with the learning environment. . . .
>
> . . . Hence the challenge is not to select the most comfortable models, but to develop the skills to relate to a wider variety of models, many of which appear, at least superficially, to be mismatched with their learning styles. (Joyce 1984, 29)

PARTIAL ADAPTATION

Partial adaptation is a meeting halfway. The teacher decides that for some objectives, teaching will match learner preferences and expectation, but for other objectives there will be mismatch. As noted above, this is more advantageous than the first two options. If, for example, the teacher believes that a certain method is essential to achieving a given outcome, irrespective of the learner's culture, then learners would just need to "get over it" and accept the unfamiliar or less preferred method. As previously noted, evidence suggests that exposure to new learning strategies and instructional methods can contribute to cognitive growth. But if such methods are introduced too abruptly, learners may be left behind and become frustrated or confused. Thus, a fourth approach is recommended.

ADAPTATION WITH GRADUAL INTRODUCTION OF ALTERNATE APPROACHES

To quote Joyce again, "Nearly all learners have the potential to relate to a wide variety of learning environments, provided they are not made *too* uncomfortable and that they are provided with assistance to relate productively to any given environment" (1984, 30). The need for assistance in adapting to unfamiliar learning strategies and methods may be all the greater in a cross-cultural setting. In many cultures innovation is unwelcome and viewed with suspicion. Thus, teachers not only need to be careful about how they introduce new methods;

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they also should provide a clear rationale for *why* such methods are being employed. In institutional learning contexts, permission from administrative leaders and stakeholders may be necessary, so as to avoid the impression of disrespect for institutional or cultural traditions—and to avoid "surprises" should students file complaints.

Biblical Precedent for Mismatch?

Jesus's approach to teaching and spiritually forming his disciples is instructive. In many ways he taught similarly to the rabbis of his time. For example, in first-century Judaism, learning in a classroom was not the norm; it took place more in life situations. A disciple often accompanied his rabbi on travels, and during student days he would frequently spend the Sabbath with his master (Strack and Billerbeck 1965–69, 1:528; Aberbach 1967, 20). He could observe the master's lifestyle, thinking, and interactions with those who came and asked questions (Neudecker 1999, 255–56). "The disciples accompanied their sage as he went to teach, when he sat in the law court, when he was engaged in the performance of meritorious deeds" (Safrai et al. 1974–76, 946). We observe similar features in Jesus's relationship with his disciples.

However, Jesus also differed from the rabbis in significant ways. For example, disciples served their rabbis in menial tasks, which became a mark of scholastic distinction. "Discipleship was frequently called 'service to the sages' (Av 6:6)" (Neudecker 1999, 225). The student who failed to serve was considered an *Am ha-Aretz*, a "cunning rogue" (Aberbach 1967, 3). The teacher was even bound to receive the service of his students. A disciple was not allowed to stand next to or directly behind his rabbi during prayer; this being seen as disturbing, and as motivated by the desire to be seen close to the rabbi (15). Jesus, by contrast, "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). Rabbis called their disciples "sons" (Wenthe 2006, 158), but Jesus called his disciples "friends" and "my mother and my brothers" (John 15:13–14; Matt. 12:49). Most astonishingly, he washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1–17), a gesture so shocking that Peter initially protested. Foot washing was considered a task too base for even a disciple, was rather reserved for slaves (b. Ketubbot 96; Neudecker 1999, 255), and was unthinkable for a rabbi (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 21.2.).[2] So intimate was Jesus's relationship with his disciples that he allowed John to lay his head upon his breast (John 13:23, 25).

The verbal instruction of the rabbis was characterized by repetition and memorization, with question and answer (Riesner 1984, 190–98; Neudecker 1999, 252, 254). Though Jesus's teaching was memorable, memorization was not his method (Riesner 1984, 365–71). At times he taught with longer discourses, such as the Sermon on the Mount. But he also asked the disciples questions, forcing them to reflect and process his teaching. His parables typically included some twist that challenged conventional thinking, and "disequilibrated" his listeners (Foster and Moran 1985, 100). They had to reconsider previous ways of thinking, value systems, and understandings. He, however, did not destroy old moral and theological frameworks without providing new ones presented in positive teaching. His teaching was often illustrated with object lessons. Almost any object could become an instrument of visual and conceptual illustration in his hands: seeds, birds, fields, a fig tree, a

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coin, fish. He utilized verbal, visual, and emotive impact to make his teaching memorable rather than relying on rote repetition or writing (Habermas 2008, 87–150).

In summary, Jesus's teaching included both familiar and unfamiliar methods. His break with the traditions and expectations of a rabbi was intentional and not for the sake of novelty. He was even willing to shock, if necessary, to make his point. The deciding factor was not conformity but impact. His teaching objectives were fundamentally different from those of the rabbis; thus, different teaching methods were necessary. Cross-cultural teachers today must also make pedagogical decisions based less upon tradition or learner expectations than on the basis of suitability to their teaching objectives. Whatever the subject matter, Christian teachers will also want to demonstrate an exemplary lifestyle of service and concern for the well-being of the learner. Jesus lived and taught in ways that served his objective: to not only impart knowledge but also to transform lives. Teachers today will do well to follow his example.

1. Results from a search for academic articles under "learning styles" in EBSCO Academic Search Complete.
2. https://www.sefaria.org/Mekhilta_d'Rabbi_Yishmael.21.2?lang=bi.

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