Digging Deeper:
Examining Our Role as Teachers of Culture

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As the field of world language (WL) education continues to improve the integration of language and culture, educators must constantly question and challenge their assumptions of what culture is and how to weave it into language instruction. In fact, one of NNELL's position statements states that there is a need for a "cogent plan to provide opportunities for all students to effectively participate as U.S. citizens in the global community by gaining proficiency in world languages and a greater understanding and respect for diverse world cultures" (2005). In order to make the link between language and culture inextricable, this article challenges us to dig deeper as we rethink what is meant by "culture." Additionally, we need to reflect on the impact of this conceptualization to appropriately change our teaching practices. The first section of this article investigates what is meant by culture. The second section explores the impact of this reconceptualized understanding of culture on our roles as teachers in bridging language and culture.

Broader Implications of Culture

Culture is to language learning what water is to a fish. While a fish can be dissected and much can be learned about it, it is not alive unless it is in water. The same holds true between culture and language -- the link between culture and language is inextricable and it is one of our primary duties to weave them together in our classroom.

But what is culture? Multiple definitions abound. Some consider it to be a tangible object, one that can be studied and analyzed. Others see it as the great works of a society. Yet others feel that it includes the details of daily behavior. Perspectives are referred to as deeper cultural underpinnings. Before teachers can understand the implications for infusing their classes with "culture", it is important to acquire an integrative understanding of what culture means.

In the field of WL education, we have come a long way in understanding culture, but much is still unclear. With the National Standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999) there has been an added emphasis on understanding the perspectives of the cultural groups that speak the languages of study. Prior to this, much discussion was given to the notion of "Big C" (important events, famous people, etc.) versus "little c" (behaviors, practices, sociolinguistic competencies) culture (Brooks, 1971). As counterintuitive as it may sound, the notion of culture as everything falls short of capturing the oft forgotten notion of power. Think about how you have heard others talk about culture. Some of the following statements may come to mind: "Oh yeah, she's cultured," or perhaps "Over there in France there's a lot of culture," or maybe even "I'm gonna go eat ethnic tonight so I can get some culture."

Reading these statements as teachers may stun us, yet they echo sentiments we have heard before. All of these have deeper implications. While we may be baffled by these notions, we must recognize that these ideas of culture are still held by people. A missing link in our discussions of culture is the presence of power.

During the Victorian Era in England, it was widely accepted that others had culture, while those in power had civilization. Without verbalizing it in just this way, this scene is often played out similarly in the U.S. today. "Others have culture" is an interesting phenomenon. Cultures are often studied as exotic, static and strange things. Additionally, we have a propensity for making comparisons between U.S. culture and that of the cultural groups whose languages we teach. However, this runs not only the risk of minimizing other cultures, but it also fails to illuminate the rich diversity of cultures within our own U.S. contexts. Often when U.S. culture is compared to other societies, we focus on a culture representative of white middle-class values to the exclusion of U.S. minority cultures. That segment of our multicultural society then becomes the norm, or the standard, to which everything else is compared.

Last year, during a Holocaust commemoration in Europe, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney spoke about how shocking it was that such a tragedy could occur in the heart of the civilized world. However, to those cultures that were victims of the conquest, colonization and oppression carried out by the "civilized" world, this may not have been such a shock. Power is the missing strand from the discussion of the idea of culture, civilization, or however a society defines its idiosyncrasies, histories and perspectives.

A deeper understanding of the complexities of culture is pivotal to rethinking how we, as WL educators, make the link between culture and language come alive in the classroom. By adding the notion of power to this conceptualization, we can challenge ourselves to reflect on how this plays out in relation to "Big C" and "little c" culture, as well as the perspectives which often emerge as a result of struggles of power.

Implications for WL Educators

As our understanding of culture evolves, so must our practice. Equally important to guiding our students along the path of language proficiency, is preparing them to gain more authentic representations of the cultures represented by the languages they study. As WL educators, we are in a position to truly open our students to the world. This broader conceptualization of culture beckons the question of who defines culture and how it is defined. This section will consider these questions by challenging us as teachers to rethink who has culture and what it is.

Many of us are drawn to the profession because of the positive impact that learning a second language has had on us. Beyond learning to conjugate verbs, we have gained additional worldviews. These perspectives have enriched our lives as we begin to see and understand realities different than our own. What must we consider in order to pass this on to our students? For starters, we need to show that there are many ways of understanding the world. By doing so, we can become involved in a process that works toward validating cultures that are often marginalized (Guilherme, 2002, p. 122) as well as nonstandard language varieties (Reagan & Osborn, 2002, p. 33).

In an effort to enrich our students' experiences, we often make efforts to connect our language lessons to other content areas. A colleague who teaches Spanish at the elementary level, struggled with the expectation that his curriculum be tied in with *The Oregon Trail*, a popular game about westward expansion. He felt that this particular game was very Eurocentric and did not convey an authentic picture of what westward expansion really meant to indigenous cultures. Instead of sticking to the script, he sought out stories that talk about the same events, but from a different perspective. We can do the same in our classes.

World language educators need to present cultural perspectives and insight from marginalized groups within the languages being studied. In the case of French, perspectives from marginalized groups within France and in the Francophone World should be presented in contrast and in relation to dominant French culture. When teaching Spanish, the idea of what a Latino is, needs to be reflected upon. Considering the rich ethnic, cultural and racial diversity present in the Spanish-speaking world, it would be more authentic to present this rich diversity. See for example, Lori Langer de Ramírez's article ¡Viva Colombia/Colmbia Viva! to see how three of the strongest cultural influences in Latin America-the African, the Indigenous and the European-can be woven into a curriculum unit. Additionally, due to the rich diversity often present in our classrooms, consider how talking about the Day of the Dead as something done in other countries sounds to students whose families carry on these cultural traditions in the U.S.

In addition to culture, is the idea of language varieties. Respect for multiple language varieties is essential (Reagan & Osborn, 2002). This extends itself beyond the scope of the second language being studied to the language varieties that students bring to the classroom. Legitimizing language varieties means that teachers will be able to connect all of their students to the study of a second language, regardless of the language variety they may speak. In essence, students' first languages are respected. Reagan and Osborn (2002) state that such an approach "calls for us to re-examine not only the purposes of foreign language instruction, but even more, the hidden (and often not-so-hidden) biases about language, social class, power and equity that underlie language use" (p. 30). A Spanish teacher would deviate from Standard Spanish, as prescribed by the Real Academia Española (the governing body of what constitutes Standard Spanish), and present varieties representative of the vast diversity in the Spanish-speaking world. When we legitimize language varieties, we empower all students regardless of what variety they speak. In fact, through discussions about how rich Spanish is, simi-

lar connections can be made to variations within English.

Power has often been exerted through culture and language (Darder, 1991). By extending instruction beyond the dominant cultural and linguistic systems, the WL educator can validate traditionally oppressed cultures and language varieties (Guilherme, 2002). One of the most powerful aspects of language learning for us as individuals has been the ability to gain an extra lens to view the world. By seeking cultural and linguistic legitimacy, we can begin to see the world from multiple realities. We must let our teaching reflect this as we consider the deeper implications of what we do in the classroom.

Possibilities

Culture is not static. Culture is in a constant state of change. Culture is alive. Everybody has culture. Yet some forms of culture are valued more than others. So, whose culture is being marginalized? By equipping ourselves with this broader understanding of culture, we will paint a more authentic picture of the world, and equally important, we will better connect with our students' rich and diverse cultural backgrounds.

With a deeper look at what culture is, we open the door for reflection on our own cultural perspectives and on the kinds of experiences we offer our students. By understanding the complexities of culture, as teachers, we will better be able to present culture in such a way that will ultimately encourage students to develop multiple ways of viewing the world. Through the adoption of a broader understanding of what is meant by culture, we can de-center dominant perspectives to legitimize marginalized cultures and language varieties, and provide a rich and meaningful experience for our students.

This article begins to look at a deeper understanding of culture and some of its implication. However, as classroom teachers, we need to figure out what this means in our respective classrooms. Consider the cultural makeup of your students. Do they belong to a shared cultural group, or are there several cultural groups represented? How does this impact comparisons between U.S. culture and the culture(s) being studied?

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) clearly outlines the importance of linking language and culture in a diverse world, as evidenced by the following quote: "Language and communication are at the heart of human experience. The United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad" (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). As teachers, we must rise to this challenge so our students can positively function in such a culturally-rich society.

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Pablo Muirhead was born in Arequipa, Peru and raised in both Milwaukee and Arequipa. In addition to the English and Spanish he learned as a child, Pablo also speaks Indonesian and German as he has also lived in those countries. After teaching Spanish at the middle and high school levels for several years, he is now teaching Spanish at Milwaukee Area Technical College. He is also currently finishing his dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee on how world language teachers integrate culture into their teaching. Pablo was among the 28 teachers featured in the Annenberg/WGBH Foreign Language Video Library Series He also presents workshops around the country on Strengthening Spanish Language Instruction.

New Editor for Learning Langauges

The NNELL board appointed Paris Granville as the new editor of Learning Languages. She has taught students aged 2 through 72 on both coasts and in the Midwest. Early in her career she was named the Iowa FLES Educator of the Year. Ms. Granville has provided professional development sessions for over ten years at national and regional conferences and workshops for individual school districts. She was one of 28 teachers chosen to appear in the Annenberg/WGBH television series on the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. She currently develops language rich thematic units centered on authentic literature and cultural experiences that are available commercially.