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Multicontextual Teaching and Learning in Postsecondary Classrooms

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Abstract

Multicontext theory offers an approach to designing learning experiences and environments that take into account varied ways of thinking and knowing, are relevant inside and outside of the classroom, and can both enrich and encompass the lives of students on and off campus (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016; Ibarra, 2001, 2005). Educators can leverage multicontext theory by integrating high context features like community wisdom, storytelling as knowledge, and inclusiveness into a traditionally low context system of experts sharing knowledge in a linear fashion to benefit from both approaches (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016; Weissmann et al., 2019). Examples of possible multicontext approaches are discussed, prompting readers to consider ways they can implement or may already be using multicontext teaching and learning. The classroom as a site of exposure to diversity is one of its fundamental gifts, and to make this more explicit through utilizing multicontext teaching and learning models is to enrich the learning environment, giving students more opportunities to communicate, collaborate, and learn.

La théorie multicontexte offre une approche de conception d'expériences et d'environnements d'apprentissage qui tiennent compte de diverses façons de penser et de savoir, qui sont pertinentes à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la classe, et qui peuvent à la fois enrichir et englober la vie des étudiants sur et hors campus (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016 ; Ibarra, 2001, 2005). Les éducateurs peuvent tirer parti de la théorie multicontexte en intégrant des caractéristiques contextuelles élevées telles que la sagesse communautaire, la narration en tant que connaissance et l'inclusivité dans un système traditionnellement à faible contexte d'experts partageant les connaissances de manière linéaire pour bénéficier des deux approches (Chavez et Longerbeam, 2016 ; Weissmann et al. , 2019). Cette étude discute des exemples d'approches multicontextes possibles, incitant les lecteurs à envisager des moyens de mettre en œuvre ou d'utiliser déjà l'enseignement et l'apprentissage multicontextes. La salle de classe en tant que site d'exposition à la diversité est l'un de ses dons fondamentaux. Utilisant des modèles d'enseignement et d'apprentissage multicontextes dans cette étude enriche l'environnement d'apprentissage, en donnant aux étudiants plus d'occasions de communiquer, de collaborer et d'apprendre.

Keywords: multicontext theory; multiple ways of thinking; diverse perspectives.

Introduction

Multicontext theory offers an approach to designing learning experiences and environments that take into account varied ways of thinking and knowing, are relevant inside and outside of the classroom, and can both enrich and encompass the lives of students on and off campus (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016; Ibarra, 2001, 2005). In the following article, the evolution of multicontext theory is first described, followed by examples of possible multicontext approaches, prompting readers to consider ways they can implement or may already be using multicontext teaching and learning. Educators can leverage multicontext theory by integrating high context features like community wisdom, storytelling as knowledge, and inclusiveness into a traditionally low context system of experts sharing knowledge in a linear fashion to benefit from both approaches (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016; Weissmann et al., 2019).

Multicontext Theory: Precursors and Parallels

Communication, Competition, and Relationships

Multicontext theory was developed by Sociology professor (now emeritus) Roberto Ibarra in response to a study of seventy-seven students and faculty at postsecondary institutions from various minority ethnic groups (Ibarra, 2001). Ibarra (2001) observed that difficulties for students often arose at places of conflict between a students' "ethnic/cultural values and the dominant values of academic subcultures: departmental, disciplinary, institutional, and so on" (p. 46). Students cited moments of misunderstandings with their professors centring around "communication, competition, and relationships between people" (Ibarra, 2001, p. 48).

These observations regarding differences in cultural values had previously been described by Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist who wrote extensively on intercultural communication in the mid 1960s. According to Hall, culture shapes what people say and when (i.e., what is appropriate to say and when it is appropriate to say it), how they say it (i.e., proximity, tone of voice, emotion), and the meaning of what is said (i.e., 'no' actually means 'maybe,' for instance). As such, there is great potential to be misunderstood when communicating across cultural groups (Hall & Whyte, 1960).

Time, too, is deeply tied to culture. Whereas time and its value have concrete meaning in Western Europe and the United States, other cultures, like American Indigenous groups, focus more on readiness rather than adhering to a specific point in time (Hall, 1960). This is not to say that all cultural groups share these traits homogenously across all contexts, but rather, tendencies can be associated with certain spatial origins.

High and Low Contextuality

Hall theorized these tendencies exist along a continuum from high to low contextuality (Ibarra, 2001). Within high context cultures, the meaning of a communication comes from the setting and situation of that communication (e.g., tone of voice, body language, etc.), as opposed to "the actual message transmitted" (Ibarra, 2005, p. 53). High context groups are associated with more intricate interpersonal networks and a people-orientation. In contrast, low context cultures remove non-verbal cues and implicit understandings and focus on words and their objective meaning. Low context cultures communicate intentions and plans through specific language, and treat time as concrete and linear. Western-centric and Anglo cultures operate predominantly within the low context (LC) end of the spectrum, while African American, Asian, Indigenous, and Latinx cultures often fall on the higher context (HC) end (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016; Ibarra, 2001, 2005). North American women and the Millennial generation have also been associated with more high context tendencies (Ibarra, 2005; Weissmann et al., 2019).

Relational vs. Analytic Conceptual Styles

Ibarra (2001) described Hall's perspective as helping to explain macro behavior, and Ramírez's (1989) work with colleagues on bicognition helped to explain micro behavior. A precursor to bicognition research in the 1960s and 70s noted differences in research subjects' dependence on external elements when solving problems. These differences have been described as *relational* versus *analytic* conceptual styles, where analytic conceptual styles see an object or stimulus as having meaning in itself, and relational conceptual styles see an object's meaning through its users and within some larger context (Cohen, 1969). Analytic conceptual styles dominated academic assessment as well as "the overall ideology and learning environment of the school," creating a disadvantage for students with relational rather than analytic tendencies (Cohen, 1969, p. 830). For instance, the expectation that a student work individually on an impersonal equation in a textbook, delimited by a somewhat arbitrary class period, fits with a more analytic conceptual understanding. Students with a more relational tendency who might ask 'why' a certain equation matters, or try to work collaboratively with a classmate, would, in this system, likely be seen as disruptive or disobedient, and perhaps even accused of cheating.

Field Dependency and Field Independency

These contrasting approaches have been described by Witkin and others as *field dependency* and *field independency*, noting that field-dependent/relational learners did better on tasks that had an element of humanity and when they felt a sense of approval from an authority figure (Ibarra, 2001). Field-independent individuals, in contrast, learn successfully from abstract and impersonal tasks, regardless of a sense of approval from an authority figure (Ibarra, 2001). Ramírez and Castañeda furthered this work that

indicated Mexican Americans tended to be more field dependent than Anglo Americans, observing that Mexican American cultural values conflicted with those predominating academic systems. They emphasized that one style is not objectively better than another, and that, although a person is typically acculturated into one style and may develop a preference for it, they can learn the other style. To do so is to exhibit *bicognition*, learning to adapt flexibly to multiple cultural contexts (Ramírez, 1989). Along these lines, Ibarra integrated these works and his own experience and insights to identify implications for higher education.

Institutional Habitus and Cultures

It follows that cultural tendencies can imprint onto institutions built by dominant cultural groups. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* describes how "embodied dispositions to see and act in certain ways based upon socialization and experience" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 29) can facilitate integration into new settings and groups that have the same habitus. Institutional habitus is shaped by the dominant group within an institution, which in Western cultures has traditionally been white and male (O'Shea et al., 2016). When students do not appear to recognize and operate within the expected institutional habitus, they can end up being perceived as somehow deficient and expected to conform (Nasir et al., 2008). Students without this type of habitus must learn new discourse, community norms, and values while also learning new disciplinary concepts and practices, giving them a double burden over students for whom the institutional habitus is familiar.

Most colleges and universities, and the departments that they house, follow a Western, LC approach to teaching and administration with emphasis on the individual, and linear, compartmentalized processes that follow theory rather than real life experience (Ibarra, 2001). This LC orientation is related to the LC tendencies of Northern European and German cultures, from which most Western higher education institutional ideologies and systems historically emanate. This LC tendency was less problematic when students were more homogenous and came from the same discourse communities. This homogeneity also minimized cultural dissonance among students and their peers, as well as professors and students, regarding social norms, expectations about communication, ways of managing conflict, natural laws, and other normative beliefs (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016; Holmes, 1981).

However, as universities expanded in the post-war environment, students from a wider variety of social groups and ethnic backgrounds entered postsecondary institutions in larger numbers (Holmes & Scalon, 1972; Wingate, 2015). Some of these students did not share Western European norms of communication and interaction that still dominate higher education systems in the West (Ibarra, 2001). Instead, many current post-secondary students come from backgrounds that emphasize HC approaches, valuing community, learning by doing, and the interconnectedness of

people and place (Ibarra, 2005), creating dissonance for many students. Guiffrida et al. (2012) identify this type of dissonance as *individual* and *collectivist* orientations.

Individual and Collectivist Orientations

Western cultures have traditionally valued individualism, which fosters competition, detachment from family and personal goals. African, Pacific Islander, Asian, Latin American, and Native American cultures tend to have a more collectivist orientation, staying connected to family, favoring community goals over individual goals (Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida et al., 2012). Students raised with individualist discourse community norms and values (akin to LC) will be more conversant in the individualist (LC) norms of Western higher education, which can ease their transition into higher education discourse communities. Though collectivist and individual designations, like HC and LC, do not map on to every person from a particular cultural group, and are not meant to essentialize groups, these tendencies do speak to larger observable cultural patterns (Guiffrida, 2006; Weissmann et al., 2019).

Individuated and Integrated Orientations

Chávez & Longerbeam (2016) describe a parallel contrast in learner tendencies, which they refer to as *individuated* and *integrated*, corresponding more or less to LC and HC, respectively. In their research, Chávez and Longerbeam found that "students of color throughout our studies described feeling outside the norms of teaching and learning practices in college, while Northern European Americans in our study usually did not" (2016, p. 9). Like Ibarra (2005) and Ramírez (1989), Chávez and Longerbeam (2016) emphasize the learning gains from being conversant in both orientations.

Similar to the theory of bicognition, Ibarra (2005) proposed the idea of *multicontextuality*, which is to be open to both HC and LC ways of knowing and being. In Western higher education systems, this means activating HC processes in already predominantly LC institutions. Doing so strengthens students' versatility in dealing with intercultural differences and helps rectify the implicit positioning of LC orientations as somehow deficient in contrast to HC orientations.

As with individualist and collectivist cultural patterns, multicontext theory is not an absolute and is not meant to classify individuals as being exclusively one way or the other – rather context tendencies are a spectrum of familiarity, socialization and preference, and vary within individuals from situation to situation (Ibarra, 2005). However, this framework, like Guiffrida et al.'s (2012) and Chávez and Longerbeam's (2016), helps to identify some of the different patterns across dominant and non-dominant groups that affect how students experience higher education. Likewise, this 'cultural dissonance' created on campus and in classrooms is not necessarily intentional, as we tend to teach and interact from our own cultural context and/or the one in which

we were trained (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016). But there are things we can do to recognize these tendencies, and to try to strengthen our student's versatility through activating both HC and LC, or multicontexts.

Enacting Multicontext Theory

As the term *multi*contexts suggests, instructors can bring both LC and HC strengths to their teaching. Initially, exploring the many dimensions of HC and LC tendencies may be a helpful way to begin envisioning ways of activating multicontextuality (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of High (Individuated) and Low (Integrated) Context Tendencies

Low Context Tendencies	**High Context Tendencies**
Abstraction and compartmentalization facilitate understanding	Interconnectedness and situatedness facilitate understanding
Ideas examined in the context of theories rather than real world applications	Ideas examined through case studies or local situations
Information is processed with the mind	Information is processed with the mind, body, intuitions, emotions, and relationships
Linear thinking is emphasized	Non-linear thinking and/or storytelling is utilized
Communication is direct and factual	Communication may be indirect or story-based
Task orientation – result is valued over process	Process orientation – how the result was arrived at can be more valuable than the result
Time is a commodity	Time is flexible
Sharing of property is less frequent	Sharing of property is more frequent
Teacher oriented, less interactive classrooms are common	Student oriented, active classrooms are common
Research focuses on theoretical and philosophical	Research focuses on community and real-life problems
Learning is about individual competence and knowledge	Learning is about bettering the community
Small to big picture perspective – learn concepts and then how they fit into context	Big to small picture perspective – understand purpose first, then concepts

Note. Modified from Ibarra, 2005, Weissmann et al., 2019, Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016 & Pfeifer et al., 2021.

Table 1 demonstrates that Western education, teaching, and assessment practices have traditionally favoured LC ways of thinking and doing. Even when utilizing more HC forms of teaching and learning, these practices do not easily fit into the need to assign letter grades at the end of the semester, or in presenting a structured syllabus with precise deadlines at the beginning of the semester, or even in teaching according to prescribed outcome expectations, as is required in most academic courses. Because of

the way courses and academic resources like textbooks, schedules, and learning management systems are designed, LC teaching may be less time- consuming to set up and administer than the more flexible, open-ended HC way of teaching. Plus, many students, having been acclimated to LC teaching, are uncomfortable with and sometimes even resistant to HC teaching.

Examining context tendencies may help alleviate some of the discomfort instructors experience by better understanding one's own learning (and teaching) preferences. Weissmann & Ibarra (2021) created a context survey that can be used to identify tendencies, which they use in combination with discussions about context differences. This survey can also be used to group students with similar or dissimilar context preferences. To examine the opposite column from one's preferences may help learners to identify opportunities for growth and development. Given the way in which HC tendencies have been neglected and sometimes looked down upon, presenting them as equal and in contrast to LC tendencies may help students to see them as valid, which can foster a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Because we so often teach how we are taught, it can be refreshing to reconsider what our actual preferences are as teachers when (re)designing curriculum. Yet we must do so with care and intentionality, as school structures are not necessarily set up for HC learning. Not only can HC teaching take more preparatory and assessment time, but these techniques must often be explained in a way that makes their equivalence to LC teaching explicit. For instance, problem-based learning situates context and provides a purpose at the outset, giving it HC qualities, and is considered a valid approach to teaching and learning (Lock et al., 2018). However, problem-based learning can require significant scaffolding before implementation and gaining student buy-in may be essential to its success.

Students will also need time to research and collaborate, and to be productive, that time likely needs to be well-structured with guidance, check-ins, reflection, and opportunities for group sharing and feedback. Creating, testing, refining, and successfully sustaining these types of HC activities can be more complicated, time-consuming, and draining than LC activities (e.g., individual worksheets, teacher lectures, or multiple-choice tests). To activate multicontext teaching, aspects of both HC and LC can be integrated into teaching activities. For instance, problem-based learning may still include traditional lectures and other LC practices to support LC learners while also delivering key information for project completion and skill-building.

Multicontext Teaching in Action

One example of multicontext teaching that I and colleagues have used with success is mixing assessment types to include tests with both an individual (LC) portion and a group (HC) portion. For example, a short classroom quiz is first taken

individually and then handed in. Then, students are grouped and retake the same quiz, only now they are encouraged to talk through the problems, justifying their responses, and explaining them to each other. Both versions of the quiz are graded, and students receive an average of their individual and group quiz score. It is advisable to average the two only when the group score is higher, so as not to penalize those who scored better individually. Rich, generative conversation often takes place during the group quiz, and students reason through their thinking with each other, facilitating learning for the sake of the community, not just the individual.

Another way that I have integrated HC learning is to use soft deadlines. Soft deadlines are recommended deadlines, beyond which students can still submit work and do so without point deductions or other penalties. The means for doing so can be facilitated in most LMS systems, where assignments can be left "open" even beyond the deadline. For instance, in an online course I teach in Canvas, most assignments (labs, quizzes, etc.) are left open for one week beyond the deadline. Students are advised of this from the beginning of the course and told that they can take that extra week if they need it without penalty. This means they do not need to ask for extensions, and they can space out their work during crunch times. In my experience, most students still meet the initial deadline, but by building in flexibility, I can help ease some of the stress of juggling deadlines. This is also a way to acknowledge, even in a small way, that not everyone sees or uses time the same, and not everyone learns and works at the same pace. Soft deadlines do not suit all assignments. In online discussions, for instance, participating late negates the purpose of the activity. I also hesitate to go beyond a week or two of automatic extension, as students can sometimes get in over their heads if they push back too many deadlines for too long.

In an empirical example of multicontextual teaching and learning, Earth Scientists running a four-week summer program with non-traditional, low-income, and/or ethnic minority students redesigned their curriculum along more multicontextual lines involving student-centred constructivist teaching and learning. Opportunities for hands on investigation, reflection, "redefin[ing] and elaborat[ing]," and collaboration were built into the curriculum, which the researchers described as non-linear and facilitating shared, process-based activities (Pfeifer et al., 2021). Students who completed the multicontext version of the program expressed statistically significant positive sentiments about their self confidence in executing disciplinary tasks successfully as compared to students who completed a traditional, LC version of the curriculum. Qualitative observations also indicated more student engagement and understanding during the multicontext version of the program as compared to the LC version, which the researchers attributed to a clearer purpose for the activities in the multicontext version (Pfeifer et al., 2021).

In another example from the Earth Sciences, an understanding of ecosystems is developed by having students first observe, write about, and/or diagram ways in

which a forest along the Rio Grande River functions as a system, including human interactions (Weissmann & Ibarra, 2021). Making these connections and including the human elements, even before developing an understanding of the individual parts of the system, fits a more HC vision of nature. Students then examine flooding events by measuring sand bar deposits and tree diameters, which follows a more LC method of interpreting the landscape. The authors of this activity, which can be found in Carleton College's Science Education Research Center, combine HC and LC approaches to help students develop a more holistic perspective of this environment (Doser & Weissmann, 2023).

Benefits of Multicontext Teaching

Multicontextual teaching can make learning goals more explicit by providing context and acknowledging the big picture, which can benefit all students, not just HC learners. Regardless of context tendencies, multicontextuality supports all learners by raising awareness of and facilitating versatility with multiple contexts. Students can learn valuable ways of doing and thinking that they will encounter in settings beyond the classroom, which can lend itself to intercultural communication, problem solving, and collaborating successfully across settings.

An exciting aspect of multicontextuality is its potential to be useful not just in classrooms but in other academic settings as well. Multicontext theory can be applied in faculty-student interactions outside of the classroom to improve students' sense of belonging through supplementing typically LC learning environments with HC actions. This might include leveraging the benefits of community through participating in faculty-student activities on campus, expressing care and compassion during office hours, and building relationships during informal interactions like seeing a student in the cafeteria or chatting in the hallway (Moore, 2020). Likewise, academic services like libraries are increasingly facilitating collaboration and HC modes of interacting and service by integrating group workspaces and spaces to talk where LC norms like no talking and individual study corrals had previously dominated (Ibarra, 2005). Student services are also noticing where they can make their approach to students more welcoming and less rigid by making advising settings less impersonal and structured, which incorporates more HC preferences into what are typically LC settings (Mitchell et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Multicontext theory and its parallels, including individuated/integrated thinking and collectivist/individual approaches, present invaluable perspectives on ways of making learning environments more equitable and successful. Many aspects of teaching and learning have been shifting to more student-centred, active, and collaborative approaches as our understanding about how learning occurs has grown, and

multicontextual teaching can add an explicit and systematic way of furthering these aims.

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About the Author

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