



How Conducting Assessment is Similar to Learning About New Cultures

Guest post by Trudy Milburn

As the new academic year gets underway, I've been thinking about the intersection between learning outcomes and assessment. In several posts, I will use examples from intercultural communication to illustrate some basic assumptions about culture and learning and suggest ways to proceed.

First, consider the case of study abroad. Typically, instructors create basic goals for students engaged in this experience: to experience diverse cultures by engaging in observations, conversations and reflection. When I accompanied a group of students to Helsinki, Finland, my co-instructor and I provided a basic framework for students, suggesting how to learn about their upcoming adventure. For instance, we supplied them with Dell Hymes' SPEAKING framework, to help them become more aware of practices that might be noticeable as culturally distinct. Consider a conversational exchange that occurred during our travels:

During a visit to a Finnish elementary school, we heard a U.S. student exclaim, "they're wearing slippers to class!" Some jumped to immediate evaluations, "how lucky!" or "this must be a very lenient environment." Others remained curious, "I wonder why they are allowed to do that?"

As instructors we noticed that the Hymes framework helped students to make initial observations about a way of acting (A). Upon reflection, I now recognize that they needed another way to articulate how this one observation fit into a larger cultural context before moving to evaluate if the observed behavior was good or bad. Carbaugh (2007) provides one such framework. To abbreviate [and change the steps slightly], he advocates that learning about other cultures begins with observations that lead to descriptions: what do you notice? After detailing the observation, one can compare the observation to other cultural practices that are known (often one's own culture can serve as an initial basis for comparison). Following the comparison, one can start to inquire about the broader context within which the noticed behavior is a part. The social and cultural context that frames any one particular behavior helps us to understand how any given behavior can make sense, or be interpreted from the perspective of the people enacting that behavior. Finally, one can evaluate whether that behavior is valued or not within the given culture, as well as how it might be interpreted and valued or not within the comparative culture.

Let's apply this to the slipper example above. First, U.S. study abroad students notice that Finnish elementary students wear slippers in class. They may notice this initially due to a comparison with their own experience: when they were in elementary school in the U.S. they did not wear slippers. Rather than jumping to the evaluation from the perspective of the comparative culture (that it is better or worse to wear slippers to class), they need to learn about the larger cultural context. Of which environmental and social factors is this behavior a part? In this case, the heavy winters and the value of playing outside for recess suggest reasons associated with the place where they are living as relevant to the interpretation of this practice. Because outdoor shoes would carry snow and slush into classrooms, they provide an area to stow outdoor winter-wear and don alternate indoor footwear, such as slippers and lighter articles of clothing. Recognizing these circumstances, the students would then dismiss any initial hypothesis that the teachers are more lenient than those in the U.S.

This example of intercultural discovery can serve as an analogy for outcomes assessment. When we are constructing a course, we may have a number of outcomes we hope students will achieve by the end of the course. In order to get to those outcomes, it might be useful for a student to recognize how those outcomes are different from current practice. The practices students bring with them to the classroom are based within particular cultural contexts. In order to demonstrate a new practice that is highly valued by the instructor, a student needs to begin to recognize the larger context within which this new practice is a part and within which it makes sense to engage in this new behavior.

In the next post, I will describe more about ways to create outcomes and assessments for intercultural communication.

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References

Carbaugh, D. (2007). Cultural discourse analysis: Communication practices and intercultural encounters. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36(3), 167-182. Available from: http://works.bepress.com/donal_carbaugh/11/

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

For further reading, please see:

<http://www.cios.org/encyclopedia/ethnography/8references.htm>