



Principle 10: Promoting inter-cultural dialogue and understanding, and the “unlearning” of intolerance, through education

“I contain multitudes.” Thus spoke Walt Whitman, thus sang Bob Dylan, and so should we all whisper regularly to ourselves, about ourselves, and about others.

Inoculation against an internal infestation of intolerant ideation towards one’s extended brethren comes, ideally, with steady doses of novel encounters and diverse acquaintances, yet especially for those removed from environs offering and/or encouraging such efficient heterogeneity, routine rejection of the fiction that we are well-crafted, consistent cultural creatures can be a potent potion. One by one, our individual analyses will show similar-though-different cultural concoctions that run the gamut from universal commonalities to subtle clan-unique quirks; to put it more bluntly, we are all doing the same things, just in different ways. Moreover, we are, without fail, spontaneously inconsistent if not infinitely malleable in our acquiring and shedding of espoused values, beliefs, philosophies, preferences and even wholesale identities.

The Pyramid of Cultural Perspective (PCP) is a schema I have found personally handy for imparting this notion – not only in getting the general point across, but also in behaving as a visual earworm of sorts for students. I have found that in discussing matters of culture in the classroom, particularly those of comparative culture or international issues, observations and opinions tend to become “stuck” within the judgmental framework of a single static strata of culture (e.g. seeing a population – both as a whole and as individuals – exclusively in terms of their national cultural profile, overgeneralizing aims, actions and allegiances).



Of course, it is certainly not rare, and quite often forgivable in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, for us to perceive those on the “outside” as one-dimensional caricatures in contrast to the more three-dimensional personalities of those similar to ourselves on the “inside”. The PCP works to dispel this limited notion, presenting six perspectives in which to approach conversations on culture. At the top we have universal culture, where we find mutual threads that bind us as human beings (the concept of family, rites of passage, a role for music, etc.), or we can discover greater diversity via a more focused cultural perspective lower down the pyramid.

A simple schema that nonetheless facilitates cognitive calisthenics and demands mulling over multitudes; my hope is that such an intellectual workout in the classroom can train those same mental muscles to flex more faithfully in everyday situations, helping us to be more aware of, more open to, and more curious to discover the myriad multitudes both close to and far from ourselves.

