Culture in the Classroom: Recommendations for the Writing Teacher

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**Note — Please see MLK for related materials, such as tables, that are not included in the web version of this paper.*

> "Culture determines how people interpret and mentally organize the world, functioning like a software program for a computer to shape the way input is manipulated, and to control what is received and processed" (Field and Aebersold 407).

As a Peace Corps English teacher in Kenya, I was introduced to the issue of cultural differences between teacher and student in a rather unique way. My initial placement in Northern Kenya brought me to an all-boys high school to teach English to students from a variety of different tribes in Kenya, Somalia and Sudan. It was then that I began recognizing the impact of cultural differences on education. I began questioning my "western" methods as a teacher and how these methods influence students of a different cultural background. I began wondering if there was a better way to teach students of a variety of cultural backgrounds. I resisted teaching by memorization and using "incentives" such as the usual caning and taught using group work and creative writing practices. I felt good about my efforts, but I always wondered if I left my students with the skills they needed to pass the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination. I left my students with an increased ability to rely on their own ideas and creative energies regarding writing and an ability to generate new ideas without the spoon-fed guidance of the teacher. Unfortunately, the kinds of knowledge they would be tested on in the KCSE exam were primarily memorization skills. Researching the topic of cultural influences in the writing classroom has given me the opportunity to look again at my own teaching practices and re-evaluate my future methods as a writing teacher.

In this paper, I propose to examine effects different cultures have on education and the individual's response to learning in the English classroom. I will first look at culture itself and then discuss how culture influences the education of children. I will then focus on the impact students' cultural differences has in the English classroom. Finally, I will suggest teaching methods that may alleviate cultural misunderstandings and create a learning environment that can inspire students of different cultural backgrounds. I suggest that by acknowledging the culture of our students and "weaving students' culture into the tapestry of the classroom" (Krater & Zeni 35), writing teachers can create an environment of success for students of all sociocultural backgrounds.

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I. CULTURE

In order to understand why a person's culture is so vital to the learning experience, we need to define what culture is. Theodore Brameld in Cultural Foundations of Education (1957), defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (7). In studying culture and the effects it has on the individual, Brameld discovered and then defined culture as those outside influences that are "acquired by man [sic] as a member of society." The beliefs, morals, laws, customs, etc., of any society greatly impact all individuals and who they are. Education and schools are also affected by these outside influences, and societies, when striving to educate their young, naturally educate them about the particular beliefs, morals and customs which will assist that child in contributing to and socializing in the society in which he or she was born. This small word, "culture," affects everything around us as well as the ways we react to different situations. The definition is critical in determining how culture influences the ways our students behave and interpret events and ideas presented to them in the classroom.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) claims that the mind is an intertwining of biological development as well as cultural, ideal and material heritage and that mental functions are culturally meditated. His view is that all actions in one's life are socioculturally stimulated and it is psychologically impossible to separate the person from his or her culture. John Dewey, in Experience and Education (1938), also asserts that

cultural implications are impossible to separate from:

> ...We live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which is in large measure what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from the previous human activities. When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind. It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience (39).

Although Dewey's focus is on the cultural-historical implications of the human psychological development, the importance and impact of culture on people can be seen. Dewey holds that many external forces, societal as well as historical, influence everyone's psychological development. By historical, Dewey is referring to the past and how the past affects the present and the future. He stresses that each experience an individual has is filtered through the individual's culture as well as the individual's view of the past. Thus, each individual may react differently to the same experience, since most of us have different pasts and many of us, different cultures.

Dewey's definition of culture and its impact on the psychological development of the individual is also reflected in the theories of social constructionists. Social constructionists argue, "We view the world through a social filter: prevailing ideologies, social and cultural constructs such as community beliefs and assumptions-or, less broadly, for a body of scientists, shared paradigms-all direct our interpretation of reality" (Dias 285). While constructivists affirm that everyone develops psychologically due to his or her " internal models of reality or accommodations, alone or while working with others" (287), social constructionists affirm that knowledge is "socially negotiated" (287). Thus, social constructionists focus learning and psychological development on the society in which the individual is a member. "Social Constructionists assign knowledge making to communities and subcommunities, focusing on how human knowledge in general is constructed as a product of social interaction and regarding discourse and discourse production as the proper sites for understanding human action and mental processes" (287). If we use this social constructionist view, we can ascertain that our students enter the classroom with a set of ideas and beliefs already in place, built by their community. If we have students from communities of varying cultural make-ups, it would benefit the teacher to have an understanding of what that particular community believes and how that community functions.

III. CULTURE AND EDUCATION

We are all affected both positively and negatively by culture. It is a normal human function to process internally information about a person upon the first meeting. Why else would the saying "You never get a second chance to make a first impression," become so popular? Kottler (1997), expresses that, "people are...constantly thinking in terms of culture, trying to make some decisions related to values that matter to them most: Are you like me or different from me? Will you be on my side or against me? If you give me trouble, how might I protect myself most successfully? Although such prejudgements, based on such limited information, do lead to misperceptions, prejudices, and other mistakes, such cognitive activity is also quite useful in making predictions about future behavior, especially if perceptions are altered in light of new, updated information"(5). One example of this is the Hispanic view of time. In Latin culture, being on time means being within 10-20 minutes of the targeted hour. Hispanics generally place more emphasis on the now rather than the future. "To the North American, 'I will be there at 2:00 precisely, or perhaps a few minutes before'; that same pronouncement by a Latin American means 'I will be there some time mid-afternoon, depending on what else comes up'" (71). It could be beneficial for an individual of a non-Latin heritage to acknowledge this difference in culture and then address the situation accordingly as it comes up. For example, in working with students of a Latin cultural background, I emphasize the importance of time when registering students for ESOL classes at a social service agency in Fort Myers, Florida. Many of our volunteers are American born and have the western attitudes toward time, yet the students do not. It is not unusual for students to show up 20 minutes late for class on a daily basis and it does not benefit the student-teacher relationship to get angry with the students for coming late. One method the teachers use with the students to combat tardiness is discussing the American Versus Latin cultural attitudes toward time. This assists students in learning more about American culture as well as presents an issue important to the class dynamic in a non-threatening way. The job of the teacher is to determine how best to educate the children in the class and this kind of cultural diagnostic is vital in reading, understanding and assisting children in their educational growth. As long as the teacher understands and recognizes the first impression pre-judgements as merely pre-judgements and not wide generalizations about all students of a particular culture, then the teacher can use these impressions as a "starting point" in better understanding the students in the class. These "cultural diagnostics" or "first impressions" can prove to be

valuable in how best to initially work with students of various cultural backgrounds (5). Coballes-Vega in "Considerations in Teaching Culturally Diverse Children" (1992) explains that an understanding of student's culture history can also guide the teacher in creating a safe and positive learning environment. By learning about and acknowledging the differences in culture, the teacher can eliminate misinterpretations due to cultural differences between the student and teacher.

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A. Culture and Cognitive Style

Teaching is the "attempt to help someone acquire skills or knowledge he or she does not have and perceives to be valuable" (Kottler 8). In order to effectively teach, one must first determine what the student already knows and then determine how the student views certain educational activities. Finding out how a student uses writing in his or her life or how the student's family uses writing is one way to determine if the student finds a skill "valuable" or how he or she find it "valuable." Effective teachers must also determine "how this person characteristically operates internally so that [they] can communicate in such a way that what we have to offer is likely to be heard, acknowledged, understood and used constructively" (8). It is the culture embedded in each of us that filters new information about cultures different from our own. Culture not only affects how the student internalizes knowledge presented to him or her, but also how the teacher internalizes the student and his or her cultural differences.

One difficulty schools are confronted with is the differences in cognitive style of varying cultures. Fillmore (as cited in Field & Aebersold) in a seminal article, discusses "cross-cultural differences in cognitive style" (407). Some cultures may value and encourage certain cognitive activities while others do not. These cognitive activities do not reflect on the student's abilities, but rather what the culture in question values and encourages, praises, practices and rewards (Field & Aebersold 407). Field and Aebersold cite six cognitive activities that vary from one culture to the next:

COGNITIVE ACTIVITY

1. Sustained and Systematic Attention
2. Verbal Memory
3. Analyticity
4. Playfulness
5. Mental Flexibility
6. Field dependence/ independence

DESCRIPTION

Both the child's willingness to remain with a given task over a period of time and the child's attitude toward that activity

•How much the child is expected to memorize, recite or repeat texts/narratives
•Recognizing patterns and generating new materials using them
•Willingness to experiment, to manipulate new materials
•Generating guesses, considering alternatives, hypothesizing
•Proclivity toward being able or unable to see relationships without reference to background(Field & Aebersold 407)

A major difference among cultures is the values placed on literacy. Field and Aebersold discuss a variety of cultures stressing memorization in schools due to their lack of reading materials and their cultural emphasis on verbal memory. In these cultures, a cognitive emphasis is placed upon the acquisition of skills supporting verbal memory rather than, for example, playfulness (407).

B. Cognitive Style and Cultural Values

Teachers are also challenged by the differences in cultural values. People of different cultures do, in fact, express different values. "A culture's values, the opportunities to which individuals are exposed, and each individual's interests, potential talents and learning style directs that person toward an area in which expertise can develop, mature and express itself" (Dunn, Beasley, & Buchanan 12). When the values of the school and the values of the student's culture do no mesh, problems can occur. While studying the difficulties African American children have in school, Shirley Brice Heath (as cited in Field & Aebersold 409) discovered that when the cultural gap between the student and the school is great, there is a lower chance of success for the student. She also discovered that if the cultural values of the home do not support those values emphasized in schools, children often exhibit decreased motivation and a lower academic performance than students raised in a home that supports the cultural values of the school

(409). An example of this can be found in a study done by Downing, Ollila and Oliver (1975) that looked at whether or not socio-cultural differences in families affected student's development of language and writing (313). The differences studied were between two cultures, Indian and non-Indian kindergartners living in the same district in British Columbia. The Indian population was of a culture with no tradition of written language, parents were less conscious of the act of speaking, and written materials were rare (313). The children and parents spoke a form of English, and their native language was rarely used except amongst the elders. The non-indian group lived in homes where writing was more common and the culture supported literacy. The children also had some concept of “correct” speech (314). After administering five subtests, (see table below) it was discovered that, indeed, children from a culture rooted in literacy and a consciousness of reading and writing performed better than children from a culture with no traditions of written language. The non-Indian population excelled because they received support from home as well as school and this support increased these students' chances for academic success.

Five Subtests of the Canadian Reading Readiness battery
1. Orientation to literacy
2. Understanding literacy behavior
3. Technical language of literacy
4. Visual letter recognition and letter-name knowledge
5. 5. Initial Phonemes

Description of the test
•Determine the child’s understanding of the communication purpose of literacy.
•Determine if the child can recognize reading and writing activities.
•Measures the child’s knowledge of technical linguistic concepts such as “letter,” “word,” etc.
•Measure child’s ability to recognize upper and lower case letters.
•The child selects a picture the name of which has the same initial phoneme as another picture specified by the tester (314).

After testing the students in the above categories, Downing, Ollila and Oliver found that “children’s cognitive clarity regarding the functions and task activities of the skills of literacy is influenced by socio-cultural factors” (315). They found that children least exposed to literacy “showed greater cognitive confusion about reading and writing. They were less able to recognise the acts of reading and writing. Their concepts of the communicative function of reading and writing were significantly immature. Their understanding of the technical terms word and letter was significantly less adequate. Their ability to recognise and name letters was significantly poorer. Their perception of phonemes was significantly less well developed” (315). In short, Downing, Ollila and Oliver discovered that the cultural values in the home do have a profound affect on the cognitive abilities of children.

Every day, people of varying cultural histories are immigrating to the United States and enrolling their children in American public schools. Since the litigation of Plyler v. Doe in Texas in 1982, immigrants, whether legal or illegal, have the right to educate their children in public schools (First 207). Before 1982, illegal immigrants did not enroll their children in schools in the U.S., but with this ruling came an influx of immigrants with distinct cultural differences. Take for example, an elementary school in southwest Florida, located in a rural farming area, filled with legal and illegal migrants from Mexico, Haiti, Guatemala and Honduras. All the children bring their own cultural differences to the school. These differences "account for different ways of learning and may affect classroom behavior and participation" (206). They greatly affect how the student learns as well as affects their attitude toward learning. Certain Oral Cultures such as those cultures in Morocco and Samoa highly value sustained and systematic attention as well as verbal memory (see six cognitive activities listed on page 4). Field and Aebersold discuss a study by Wagner (1986), who discovered that rote memorization is a skill utilized both in and out of schools, even in higher education such as universities (408). In Western Samoa, public schools utilize choral recitation as a learning tool, in part because of the lack of written materials in many of the smaller villages (407). Verbal memory, however, is not only valued in the schools but also in the societies of these cultures. It is not uncommon for people to ask questions about bus routes "even though they are literate and there are boards with that information posted in various spots" (408). The emphasis in these cultures is placed on the oral interactions between people rather than merely reading the directions quietly. This personal interaction may open up an opportunity to tell a story or further personal discussions. Another example of societal values placed on verbal memory is taken from Western Samoa, where children as small as four years old are expected to "memorize and carry lengthy messages to other persons" (408). On the other hand, American schools place a great emphasis on analyticity (see page 4). American schools focus curriculums on seeing patterns and relationships between ideas. We compare and contrast themes, ideas

and writing styles and we praise those children who are able to succeed doing so.

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C. Differing Cultural Values Between Teachers and Students

While teaching in the Peace Corps in Kenya from January 1996 to September 1997, I noticed definite cultural differences between my Americanized teaching and ideals of "what a good teacher is" and those of the Kenyans. My first post was at Lodwar Boys Secondary School where I was instructed by the deputy headmaster to teach Form Two and Three English (the equivalent of sophomores and juniors.) Excited to begin my teaching, I hurried back to my house to plan interesting and dynamic learning opportunities for my students. I was to teach not only English grammar but also composition; a Kenyan teacher was to teach literature. I hauled out all of the materials and books accumulated during my 3 months of Peace Corps training and set to work. I created the most beautiful lessons, filled with group activities as well as individual learning. I set an appointment schedule to meet with students individually to discuss their writing and their writing goals. I integrated the learning of grammar directly into the writing process. I maintained a notebook of their grammar errors taken from compositions and created games from these mistakes. Soon I discovered, however, that these children had skills I hadn't accounted for and lacked skills I assumed they would possess. For example, my students were extremely well adept at remaining with a task for an extended period of time (see sustained and systematic attention, p. 4). I had planned activities lasting for 10-15 minute intervals so students would not lose interest, yet I noticed other Kenyan teachers would plan one activity, such as copying notes from the board, for up to an hour or more. The students never complained and worked diligently at whatever task was required of them.

Another strength my students had was their verbal memory (see p. 4). I found this facility to be a wonderful addition to our classroom. Students could easily and without pause tell long, detailed stories. They never forgot jokes or stories I would tell in class. We used these storytelling lessons to organize our writing and to generate ideas for future writing. One weakness, however, was that students used this skill to "learn" material. Ideas were not logically linked together as I was accustomed, but memorized for short term memory and regurgitation. In other classes, such as history, students were expected to memorize notes verbatim and then regurgitate these notes on the exams. In English class, students memorize grammar yet were unable to see grammar patterns (see analyticity, p. 4). They might be able to regurgitate a sentence we discussed in class, but when asked to come up with a sentence of a similar pattern, they were stymied.

Although my students were wonderful storytellers, they had difficulty with cognitive activities such as playfulness and mental flexibility. They felt much more comfortable re-telling a story than creating their own. They enjoyed telling fables and folklore because the story was fixed and they enjoyed relying on the knowledge that the story was this way, and this way only. Rarely were changes made in the telling of folklore; experimentation was something they did not like. As a recently finished student who had a Master of Arts in Teaching, I was excited to begin teaching using group work to create a process-workshop environment in which all students could succeed. I thought I could take the writing skills and varying levels of the class and encourage students to help each other through the process of writing. I felt that by working together on developing drafts of their papers, the students would learn skills that would help them on their KCSE, and that together they could focus on grammar, spelling, sentence structure, as well as composition development. I acted as a facilitator rather than spoon-feeder, guiding my students toward a better understanding of the language usage. But once I entered the classroom with the idea of doing a group writing activity, I was met with complaints and confusion. It ended in disaster. "Writing is to be done alone, Madam," they told me. My students had the Kenya syllabus, as did I, and they had no interest in experimenting with anything that was not specifically mentioned in the syllabus, even though I would explain that it would teach them a skill they could use on their exams later on.

My students in Kenya came to class with skills very definitely formed from their cultural backgrounds. Kenyans in general are one of the most patient and positive people I have ever come across. Trips to the post office or bank can take hours. I used to spend three to four hours at a time at the bank to cash a check. Bus routes are rarely on time, yet no one complains. Staff meetings scheduled to begin at noon, begin at four. I spent a great deal of my Peace Corps experience waiting. At first this was torture for me, as I am extremely impatient, but after two years, I was able to sit on an unmoving bus waiting for it to leave the station for hours on end without a heavy sigh and moaning. Spending a great deal of time on one task is something that is woven into every aspect of Kenyan culture.

During the many hours of waiting, people entertain themselves by talking to each other. Storytelling is not uncommon. People tell stories during the two-hour wait for the bus. In the teacher staff room, teachers tell

stories to pass time between classes or while waiting for the staff meeting to begin. This cultural value is reflected in the students' ability to memorize and repeat notes as well as stories in class.

Although Kenya is one of the African countries moving toward industrialization, the vast majority of Kenyans still live in small villages, earning money from farming, small local shops and transportation of goods or people. It is not unusual to find 5 shops in a row exactly alike, each shop selling the same things for the same prices. Generating new ideas is not a common practice in Kenya. What the culture dictates as the norm is what the majority of the people do. It is not unheard of, but unusual to find differences in shops or restaurants.

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D. Cross-Cultural Conflicts

In the article, "Immigrant Students in U.S. Public Schools: Challenges with Solutions," Joan First (1988) discusses the cross-cultural conflicts experienced by immigrants. She states that "one of the first experiences of children who enter the U.S. is the clash between their primary cultures and the norms of their new home" (206). Upon entering the American classroom, these children carry their own "cultural scripts" from their homeland. They cannot weave the scripts into the cultural fabric of the school and, thus, they experience a great deal of anxiety and difficulty. With this in mind, imagine a Kenyan student recently immigrated to the United States. Although Kenyan children are extremely hard workers, some of their skills are not developed as finely as those of American students. Kenyan students perform better when given very specific directives and when they know exactly what is expected of them. They would easily be confused in a creative, student-directed classroom. It would take time and special considerations from the teacher to assist them to adapt to the new learning environment. The quickest way to facilitate better learning is for the teacher to become educated about the students' home culture in order to bridge the gap between home and school.

Through personal anecdotes about his classroom cultural mishaps, Jeffrey Kottler writes about issues regarding cultural difference and stresses the importance of teacher understanding. In one anecdote, Kottler describes teaching in New Zealand and utilizing a common "western" teaching practice of classroom introductions for forming a sense of community. Kottler describes a situation with a Maori student to illustrate unforseen culture clashes in the classroom (61-63). The student, during classroom introductions, began a long, drawn-out dissertation of his home, family, mountains near his home and talked for over 20 minutes. Kottler, concerned that his lesson would not be completed if this student continued, gently broke him off. The reaction of the student and the class made Kottler see that he had spoken out of turn. Kottler writes:

> I quickly apologized. Apparently I had done something offensive by interrupting him before he was finished. I tried to explain that I had only been concerned about the time and that I wanted to make sure that everyone had a chance to present themselves...

As reasonable as this explanation sounded to my ears (and perhaps to yours as well), I now had made matters worse. I had not only censured him in from of his peers, but also humiliated him further by communicating that I was disappointed in his behavior. I could see his cheeks flush and feel his anger at being misunderstood. Even worse, I could see how this resentment toward my insensitivity was now spreading around the room.

This student was not the only person who had been misunderstood! Now I was feeling upset as well. Jeez, I was only trying to be helpful. Can't they give me a break? How am I supposed to know what the rules are? Why all this attention just because he is a Maori student? This would never have happened with anyone else.

I decided it was time for a break. Just as the student escaped from the room, I rushed to intercept him in the hallway. I reiterated my regret that I had done something to offend him. I asked his indulgence of my ignorance about his culture. I was new in his country and did not know the appropriate way of acting. As I continued on with my pleadings, he never raised his eyes once, never responded except to nod his head. He never returned to class again. (62)

This incident was of great concern for Kottler and he further consulted with other trusted New Zealand colleagues regarding the uncomfortable experience. What he discovered was that the problem was the activity itself. Kottler found that although he tried the Introduction Activity many times with students in the

United States, he should not have expected the same outcome with a different population. Also, he found there may have been more culturally sensitive ways to handle the situation, one being to let the student finish, no matter how much time it took. Kottler recognizes, "So tricky is this subject of culture that it seems that a single misstep, or even misinterpretation, can damn a spirit of trust and respect" (65). The best way teachers can avoid these cultural misunderstandings is to learn as much as they can about the cultures in their classroom.

CULTURE AFFECTING THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Cultural differences between students and teachers affect the classroom whether the teacher is of the majority culture or not. In the United States, most teachers are of the majority culture or have a keen understanding of it. Of course, when a teacher of the minority culture is living in a majority culture (such as myself, an American, living in Kenya) it is easier for the teacher to see cultural differences. It is a greater challenge for the teacher in the United States to distinguish varying cultures in the classroom. It requires a greater effort on behalf of the teacher to learn about these cultures. The teaching challenges brought on by differences in teacher/student cultures are similar, however, both in and outside of the country.

In "Harbinger of the Possible: Choice and Diversity in Reading and Writing" (1996), Ingrid Johnston and Rebecca Luce-Kapler, describe two research studies investigating pluralistic approaches to reading and writing in the English classroom. In a study exploring the diversity of writing in a junior high language arts class, Luce-Kapler found that the classroom is not always as supportive for young writers as teachers hope. When interviewing students about writing in the classroom, Luce-Kapler found that students "revealed that writing in schools was not always safe and supportive and instead of fostering their diversity, often stifled it" (18). These students cite a variety of reasons for preferring to write at home, such as quietness, ability to leave the writing and come back, fewer distractions, etc., and many of the students stated that they wrote at home when the were bored (18-19). Many students found that their creative juices flowed more readily when they were at home rather than at school. Luce-Kapler found that at times students need opportunities to explore their own ideas from inside, rather than constantly presenting them with a "road map" (20). She found that "some of [the students] didn't want any guidance for the writing process at all while others appreciated suggestions in the way an adventuresome traveler would welcome an occasional road sign. They just did not want the route predetermined" (20). Luce-Kapler suggests that "we can perhaps approach writing pedagogy more effectively if we stop thinking about applying a formula and accepting that the writer, student and professional, work in diverse ways. A writing classroom needs to be a place where students feel free to make choices" (20). For teachers of children of a minority culture, acceptance of diversity in writing styles is important. We most definitely need to give all students the proper tools to communicate effectively, but this can be done by show-casing writing from authors of a variety of different ethnic backgrounds and then allowing our students to choose their own routes.

Since the cultural make-up of the classroom affects students' learning process, multi-cultural classrooms offer specific challenges to the writing teacher. For that reason, the Webster Groves Writing Project (Krater & Zeni 1996) in Missouri was formed in 1987 to help facilitate better writing among the African American student population. Historically in this district, African American students scored well below the mean. The teachers in Webster Groves vowed to change these statistics. After participants met and discussed the needs of the students, teachers came up with eight principles supported by documented classroom studies as well as their own action research:

1. Build on strengths of the student.
2. Individualize and personalize.
3. Encourage cooperative learning.
4. Use process approaches to writing.
5. Increase control of the language.
6. Use computers.
7. Foster involvement with writing and reading.
8. Build bridges, expand horizons. (Krater & Zeni 33-34)

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Utilizing the principals stated above, the teachers then created what they believed to be a multicultural curriculum. But as they continued moving forward toward improving the writing of their students, they began to look back at the specific reasons for the students growing success. They questioned, "What [are we now] doing that work specifically with black students or with underachievers? Weren't these principals just good teaching strategies" (34)? The 8 principles listed above did not appear to be education

strategies that would be specific to working with minority children or teaching in a multicultural classroom, but rather practices that all teachers should engage in. Upon looking at their growing success, they discovered the importance of principle number 2, “Individualize and personalize.” The teachers discovered that their efforts in individualizing and personalizing each student had become an integral part of the lessons. Upon reflection of their practices before their meetings, they discovered that they did not “individualize” the lesson and rather taught to the majority. They questioned if a student was not of the majority, how could they expect the student to succeed? Krater and Zeni state:

> When we recognize the importance of personalizing, of getting to know students as individuals, not just in academic terms, but in human terms-their interests, their concerns, their backgrounds, their styles-we had taken the first step toward answering the question of how culture shapes the teacher-student relationship. We found that we needed to know each student's interests-not just in literature or in writing, but in life; to be aware of their concerns-not just about their writing, but about their families, their peers, their future; to recognize their preferences-not just in learning style, but in social contexts; to acknowledge their culture-not just by incorporating their cultural heroes into the curriculum, but by weaving the threads of their culture into the tapestry of our classroom. We hypothesized then, and confirmed over the years, that the students who most improved in writing were those whom we had the closest personal relationship. Kids we could not reach on that level did not respond to teaching strategies that 'worked' with others. (34-35)

Discovering that interpersonal relationships between teachers and students play an integral role in education, these teachers looked at why some students seemed harder to reach than others. They discovered that quite often, the students they lost in the past were the ones "with whom we, as white female teachers, had the least shared territory, those who differed from us in race, gender and class" (35). They found that the cultural assumptions of the teacher may hinder a teacher-student relationship. In order to change this, these teachers began researching African American culture and literature. Eventually they felt more comfortable among their African American students. Jane, the University Consultant for the project, noticed specific attitude changes when she observed their newly sculpted multicultural classrooms versus some others in the district. She noted during observations in other schools that "a white female teacher might stand near her white students, chatting personally...she might interact more stiffly with black students and, especially with black males, keep her distance” (35). On the other hand, Jane noticed in the Webster Groves project classrooms, “that [they] conversed with [the] African American students in a personal way, just as [they] did with [their] white students...This had not always been true. Initially, when [they] looked at black male students in [their] classrooms, what [they] saw was a reflection of [their] own fears, assumptions, and frustrations-along with the masks the kids themselves put up for protection" (35). The teachers in the project discovered that when they began to look at their students as individuals and made a concerted effort to understand them, the students began to flourish academically. The research the teachers had done on African Americans assisted them in their transition from misunderstanding and close-mindedness to understanding and openness. As Jeffrey Kottler discovered, people see other cultures through a screen of their own culture. In understanding one's own culture, a teacher can better understand and relate to new cultures. Krater and Zeni refer to the teacher who does not understand his or her own culture as an "invisible" teacher (35). They stated, "We realized how much our own experiences, our contacts-or lack of them-with people who differed from us, must color our perceptions. An “invisible” teacher can't see her own role in a problem" (35). Krater and Zeni concluded that in order to create a multicultural classroom, teachers first need to look inside their own "cultural message" (37) by encouraging an unbiased observer to sit in on the classroom and note student-teacher interactions. From there, teachers can investigate and learn the culture of the students. Finally, Krater and Zeni discovered that by taking "ownership of the problem, we can begin to find solutions" (37).

I experienced the "invisible teacher" dilemma while doing my student teaching in small rural high school in 1995. I was teaching a mixed 9-10th grade English class in a rural school with an extremely small number of minority students and all white teachers. In this particular class, I had a single minority student sitting sulkily in the back. Not only was he the only minority in the class, but he was also one of about 5 in the entire school. Before I took over the class, I was reminded by several teachers that the student, Joe, was not overly fond of female teachers, nor was he overly fond of school. As the students began streaming in from the hallway on my first day, I felt my apprehension mount. Not only was I to begin my first lesson with this class, but I was also to encounter the reaction of Joe. I was about to sigh in relief when the bell rang and he had not appeared, but before the 5 second bell stopped its cry, he vaulted across the doorway and into his seat in the back. I took a deep breath and began my lesson: an introduction to

"Readers Theater," a method that gives students the opportunity to “act-out” their favorite poem or short story using no props. This exercise requires students to research short works and then work in groups to find a creative way to present the literature to the class. I had planned this activity to last about 3 weeks. During my introduction of the lesson, when I modeled the activity with an Edgar Allen Poe poem, the majority of the class sat silently waiting for further instructions on how we were to organize the future classes. Joe, however, seemed intent in making smart remarks about the ridiculousness of the activity. I didn't really know how to handle the situation, especially since I had been warned by the other teachers of his attitude. Finally, the 40-minute class ended and I was pleased to have a minute to relax and reflect on the situation. I knew very well that I could not allow that behavior to continue in the classroom in front of the other students. I also knew that I did not want to discuss the matter with other teachers or my Master Teacher. I wanted them to see me as competent, not as a struggling buffoon unable to keep class order.

The next time I met the class, Joe rocketed across the threshold of the classroom and into his seat a millisecond before the bell finished ringing. I began the lesson with the poems “Mother to Son” and “Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes. After finishing my “performance” of the poem I realized not a peep had come from the back of the room, and the expression on Joe’s face was different from the furrowed brow I had seen the day before. During the discussion of my Readers Theater performance of the poem, no heckling or insults came from the back of the room. There was only silence. After the class, Joe waited until the other students filed out of the room and then shuffled forward. I didn't quite know what to think; his behavior had changed so radically. I had heard so many unfavorable comments about this student I was wary. But instead of verbally attacking me, he asked where I found the poem. This opened up a discussion about Langston Hughes and Joe revealed that he too wrote poetry and asked if I would be interested in reading it. I jumped at the chance to see his poems and the following day, he brought in a crinkly notebook filled with little poems he had written. This small gesture gave me a picture of Joe as a person. The incident opened the door to the two of us relating through his writing, and in the process we forgot about the “stereotypes” that we both had mistakenly attached to each other. It also changed his behavior in the classroom. He became more willing to participate and never made comments aloud as he had done before. Learning about the person in the student and pushing aside stereotypes can be a difficult task, but if both are willing, it can be a very rewarding experience for both.

Lee, Stigler and Stevenson (cited in Field & Aebersold) also note cultural factors influencing the language classroom in their study of Chinese and U.S. students. They discovered that the cultural differences between the Chinese and American students account for the differences in reading scores between the two nationalities, with Chinese students scoring higher reading scores than American students. Lee, Stigler and Stevenson believed that the reason for this difference is the cultural variables. They claim that variables such as time in school, frequency and amount of homework, and the attitudes of the parents, affected the students' scores (409). Chinese students succeeded in reading due to their socio-cultural emphasis placed upon education. In Chinese culture it is strongly emphasized for students to work hard and the children are supervised while doing schoolwork both at home as well as in school (Field & Aebersold 409).

Another study of the effect of Asian cultural influences on learning is discussed in “A Reevaluation of the Uniqueness of Japanese Written Discourse" (1997) by Ryuko Kubota. Kubota uses the "contrastive rhetoric research" model which "investigates cultural characteristics of written texts in various languages" (460) in hopes of understanding problems second language learners have in writing. During the early 60's, Robert Kaplan began studying compositions from ESL students of varying cultural backgrounds and found "distinct cultural thought patterns manifested in the essays" (Kubota 461). Researchers since then have suggested that each language supports a cultural uniqueness and that writers tend to use the conventions of their first language. Contrastive rhetoric research focuses on these distinct differences within cultures and stresses that "raising awareness of cultural differences is useful for teaching and learning writing in a second language" (461). In regard to Japanese texts, contrastive rhetoric research has found in the past that these texts "exhibit culturally unique conventions such as induction and indirectness" (461). Kubota, however, emphasizes that "language and culture need to be viewed as dynamic rather than exotic and static" (462) and that modern Japanese writing is continually influenced by English and European languages (462). As Kubota explains, in the past the preferred style of writing in Japanese was called "ki-sho-ten-ketsu" (461), a classical, reader-response, "quasi-inductive" pattern (461). This classical Japanese writing style is expressed as follows:

•KI- First, begin one's argument.
•SHOO- Next, develop that.
•TEN- At the point where this development is finished, turn the idea to a subtheme where there is a connection, but not a directly connected association (to the major theme).

•KETSU- Last, bring all of this together and reach a conclusion (as cited in Kubota 462)

According to contrastive rhetoric research, each culture has rules and patterns that are evident in written communication. As seen above in the ki-sho-ten-ketsu classical style, the writing pattern reflects the preexisting Japanese cultural codes of the past. However, it is generally understood that culture and language evolve just as societies evolve. Societies and cultures have changed a great deal over the years. If we are to understand that culture is evident in written communication and that culture and society is ever changing, then we can deduct that written communication is also ever changing. Kubota stresses the need for teachers to be aware not to overgeneralize writing of Japanese students by using the framework and suggestions of contrastive rhetoric research, but to evaluate and discover the cultural differences in front of them. This idea can be useful in dealing with any student of a different culture. When teaching second language students to write English, Kubota recommends that "it is important, however, for teachers and researchers to be careful not to overgeneralize cultural differences from small isolated pieces of evidence. Comparing cultural conventions of writing involves a danger of dichotomizing us and them and constructing, instead of discovering cultural differences. In a world that is increasingly becoming one global community, research on linguistic and cultural similarities as well as differences and on the influence of the language with power on other languages would offer insightful knowledge to teachers and students in the next century" (475).

Comparing and understanding cultural differences is not only important in responding to the Japanese students' writing, but also necessary in responding to students in a classroom of varying cultural influences. In an English classroom comprised of students of different cultures, it is impossible to separate students' culture or culture in general from the class. As Terry Dean in "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers" writes:

> When we teach composition, we are teaching culture. Depending on students' backgrounds, we are teaching at least academic culture, what is acceptable evidence, what persuasive strategies work best, what is taken to be a demonstration of 'truth' in different disciplines. For students whose home culture is distant from mainstream culture, we are also teaching how, as a people, "mainstream" Americans view the world. Consciously or unconsciously, we do this, and the responsibility is frightening. (24)

Lisa Delpit stresses that all children, regardless of race or cultural background need to be taught "discourse patterns, interaction styles and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society" (571). It is not that teachers need to convert students to a new culture but it is important to give students the tools to be successful in society. In the process of giving students outside of the main culture the tools to succeed, the teacher is most definitely giving them a glimpse into mainstream culture. As one African American parent explains, "My kids know how to be Black - you teach them how to be successful in the White man's world" (Delpit 572). Of course, this cannot be done effectively if the teacher is not familiar with the students' home culture. Rather than thrusting "dialect readers" into the hands of African American students, teachers need to present materials to the students in a way that shows, this is the way you do things at home and in your community and this is the way we do things in the schools. Not that one is better than the other, but that if one wants to succeed in a particular situation, one needs to know the rules of the game.

Shirley Brice Heath agrees with the premise that teachers need to bridge the gap between school and home culture. In Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms (1983), Heath reinforces using a multicultural curriculum in order to facilitate better learning as well as assist in creating a more tolerant student body. The best way to facilitate this is for the teachers themselves to be familiar with the students' home culture. In Heath's multicultural classroom, she taught students that "by adding a fluency in a standard dialect, you are adding something to [the student's] language and not taking something away" (Heath 271). It is a delicate balance in creating an atmosphere in which students can feel comfortable with their home culture within the cultural majority. A multicultural atmosphere can easily be kept by introducing writers and heroes from the minority culture and addressing cultural issues during lessons. Heath was able to do this as well as visit the homes of the students in order to learn more about their home cultures to create this atmosphere of mutual respect. In this atmosphere of mutual respect, minority students can grow, flourish and learn as students of the majority culture.

Another promoter of teachers gaining a firm understanding of their students' culture is Paulo Freire. Freire's approach was developed in Brazil in the late 1950's as a literacy plan in order to lower the

illiteracy rate in the countryside. During phase one of the project, a literacy team spent time doing social research in the communities to learn about the culture and the social problems facing the community, and to study their language usage to determine recurring words and phrases. This information was collected and then used to construct a "curriculum" for that community. The Freirean approach to literacy education is strictly based on the students' cultural and personal experiences and is used widely in Adult Literacy Education (Spener 1). Paulo Freire terms “culture” as including "how people labor, create and make life choices. [Culture] is a dynamic process of transformation and change laden with conflicts to resolve and choices to be made both individually and as a community" (1). One method of learning literacy using the Freirean approach is: "Cultural themes in the form of open-ended problems…incorporated into materials such as pictures, comics, short stories, songs and video dramas that are then used to generate discussion" (2). Although Paulo Freire's objective was to propose "literacy for social change"(2), his philosophy of utilizing the culture of the students to educate them holds true even in the United States. His use of "culture circles" (Peyton 1-2) brings teachers and students together to form a learning team, discussing issues affecting their lives. The Freirean approach advocates for teachers to "become facilitators of class discussions and activities and learn along with the class" (2).

In this respect, Freire supports the ideas of Heath: that in order to create an environment for learning, teachers must have a "thorough knowledge of the home culture" (Dean 28).

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SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING WRITING IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM:
"It is not so much the specific techniques that matter as much as the atmosphere that is created, especially one in which children are encouraged to look at everything with an inquisitive mind..." (Gibson & Ogbu 166).

Today, classroom teachers are faced with the enormous task of finding a way to facilitate the learning of students of a variety of cultures. It is quite an intimidating job but there are ways to introduce better writing skills in the classroom. In the following selection, I will suggest a variety of ways to teach writing when teachers and students are of different cultural backgrounds.

One suggestion is to have students share their perceptions about writing. When students share their perceptions about writing (when writing is useful, what they use writing for, how they write, why they write, etc.), it gives the teacher a glimpse into their cultural attitudes about writing. This information can assist the teacher in developing lessons and presenting tasks to the students that will encourage them in their writing. Also, with the knowledge of the students' perceptions, teachers can strategize to refine or develop their students' perceptions (Field & Aebersold 410).

Another suggestion is to learn about the home environment of the students and how the culture of the home environment affects learning (Field & Aebersold 410; Dean 28; Spener 2). Teachers can do this by meeting and interviewing parents, visiting homes and/or using references such as the library or community groups. Once the teacher has an understanding about the home culture, he or she can assess advantages and disadvantages the student may encounter when learning to write. For example, if the student's dominant culture is illiterate, the student may not have cultivated the cognitive understanding that a student of a literate culture might have (Downing, Ollila & Oliver 313). It is important to "remain aware of how culture functions as a cognitive filter for all of us, shaping our values and assumptions" (Field & Aebersold 410) so that we can create lessons accessible to all students.

Another suggestion is to integrate cultural topics into writing assignments as often as possible. Terry Dean in "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers" (1989) states that this is one way that students can use their own cultural experiences as writing topics. Dean recommends that "reading these papers to peer response groups gives students additional insights into rituals in their own culture as well as making them aware of similarities and differences with other groups" (28). These peer response groups are found also to be motivating for students for a variety of reasons. Dean discusses the Puente Project, a successful writing project that "turned what used to be a 50-60% first-year dropout rate into a 70-80% retention rate in 15 California colleges" (31). The peer response group gave students a sense of belonging as well as enabled instructors to integrate cultural differences into the classroom. These groups utilize what Joan Wauters (cited in Dean 32) calls "the non-confrontational approach" (32). The structure of the peer response group is that students work in pairs but the author of the writing is not present. The author is able to later clarify points with the group if the author wishes. This format allows students to be more honest about strengths and weaknesses and is "especially valuable for instructors who work with students from cultures where direct verbal criticism implies 'loss of face'" (32). Also, small groups

consisting of students from different cultures allow students to raise cultural issues in a smaller group setting, which can be less intimidating and more frank for the students. These peer response groups are also wonderful for encouraging participation from all students, even the usual quiet ones (33).

Another method used to bring the world to the classroom, is to develop class newsletters to broaden students' understanding of multicultural issues. A class newsletter can do this in a variety of ways. First, a newsletter gives students an opportunity to write for an audience different from the usual teacher audience (Dean 33). Second, it naturally encourages students to discuss issues important to them, thus giving the teacher and fellow students an opportunity to catch a glimpse of cultural issues affecting the student. Writing articles for the newsletter itself isn't the only thing that cultivates classroom awareness of cultural issues. The class discussions that the articles generate help to facilitate multicultural issues as well as give students an opportunity to examine their own home cultures under a different light.

Another method found to be successful in multicultural classrooms is the use of dialogue journals. A dialogue journal is "a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly (daily, weekly, etc., depending on the educational setting) over a semester, school year or course. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing" (Peyton 1). Peyton, in "Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy," cites a variety of benefits from using journals in the classroom. One reason is that this ongoing "written conversation" between teacher and student gives the teacher an opportunity to ask questions about the student's home culture and get to know the student as an individual. It also enables teacher and student to share information. If the teacher and student are of different cultures, the dialogue journal gives students an opportunity to learn about the teacher's culture as well. Journals also give the teacher and student more contact time. In the usual classroom setting, teachers and students rarely enjoy one-on-one interaction. By using the dialogue journal, teachers and students can build strong personal ties, which was also discovered as a motivation for student success in Krater and Zeni in "Seeing Students, Seeing Culture, Seeing Ourselves." In the Webster Groves Writing Project, participants in the project found that "the students who most improved in writing were those with whom [they] had the best rapport, the closest personal relationship" (35). Using dialogue journals in the classroom would assist teachers in building these ties with students.

Another benefit of using journals is that all students, regardless of the level of English, can fully participate in the activity. The dialogue between teacher and student gives students individualized feedback and gives the teacher the opportunity to individualize writing instruction. Students of both a high level of written English and low level can benefit from this individualized instruction. Journals also give teachers an opportunity to model language form and structure and also "provide [the student with] continual exposure to the thought, style and manner of expression of a proficient writer" (Peyton 2). Tannenbaum, in "Practical Ideas on Alternative Assessment For ESL Students" (1996), also advocates for the use of dialogue journals, stating that the journals are not only useful for students of all levels, but they are also a wonderful assessment tool for the teacher (3).

Another way to "internationalize" the English classroom is to introduce proverbs to the students (Gibson & Ogbu 162). Proverbs can be used in the writing class to convey both culture and language. "Proverbs share a number of characteristics. They are current: people, in general, use and understand them. They are pithy: short and snappy thoughts expressed in a minimum of words. They often, although not always, contain elements of rhyme, and figures of speech. A proverb may take the form of a declarative sentence, an exhortation, an invocation, a curse, an oath, or a riddle followed by its answer" (162). There are a variety of ways to integrate proverbs into the classroom. One way it to research proverbs of another language and culture such as Arabic (162). The Quran is a wonderful source of proverbs that, when translated into English, can give students a better picture of the culture and life in that region, as well as teach students various fundamentals of the English language.

Another technique used to encourage students in a multicultural writing classroom is to have students research and teach their "worldview" (Gibson & Ogbu 129). Every topic and subject brought to light in the classroom is affected by culture in a variety of ways. Students can research topics and then "personalize" the material by investigating their "familial and cultural perspectives" on the subject (129). This activity helps students to practice a variety of writing skills. First, they are required to research the topic in the library or in the classroom. Second, they need to evaluate the topic in regard to their culture or familial perspective. Third, they need to conduct an interview with a family member or someone of the culture in question, and fourth, they need to bring together all the information in a paper. This activity can also be

used to inspire wonderful class discussions to compare and contrast the cultural and familial perspectives on the given topic.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have addressed some issues affecting students of a minority culture as well as issues affecting teacher/student cultural differences. Essentially, the suggestions I have provided can be used in mono-cultural classrooms, as well as many of the ideas can easily be adapted to teach students about different cultures surrounding the globe. Differences in culture are all around us, whether we choose to see them or not, and how we choose to react toward these differences is up to us. As writing teachers, we should become aware of issues affecting different cultures and find a way to educate our students so that they may all have the ability to clearly communicate their ideas. Most importantly, teachers should listen and observe students and their needs and try to weave this knowledge into the classroom fiber. Gibson and Ogbu put it all quite simply: the atmosphere is more important than the specific technique. Looking back on my experience in Kenya, I know that I did create an environment of mutual respect of cultures. My students felt comfortable sharing their culture with me and I felt comfortable sharing my culture with them. The more I learned about my students, their culture and their lives, the better teacher I became. I may not have used the same methods as other Kenyan teachers, but upon looking back, I believe that the openness between us allowed my students to learn in a way they were initially unaccustomed. Maybe even in the long run they will remember what I taught them with my “unorthodox” teaching practices and go on to teach someone else what they learned.

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