CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE FOR THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

J. J. Slater
Curriculum & Instruction, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA.

Keywords: knowledge, culture, dominant culture, low culture, habitus

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Cultural knowledge
3. Educating for dominant cultural knowledge
4. Community
5. Ecological solution finding
6. Conclusion
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

Cultural knowledge is selectively influenced by those who have power and control over the cultural capital and artifacts of a society. Issues of inclusion and exclusion extend to those who are afforded the opportunity to learn the cultural knowledge that is of most worth. Many find that they are barred from full participation in society by the nature of their acquired selective cultural knowledge. What is transmitted in school is purported to be acceptable cultural knowledge but much of that content is noneducative or miseducative. Worse, different groups receive different knowledge, perpetuating cultural liabilities that bar advancement in the dominant society.

In order to meliorate these problems, what is suggested is a reconceptualization of the role education plays in abetting this disparity through its promoting of a western core of knowledge that is exclusive and discriminatory. Part of this reconceptualization is an awareness of the possibilities of full democratic participation in great communities that advance the common good. These humane environments can be responsive to private needs in a social spirit of common betterment where issues of sustainability and global connection are intertwined with the role the individual plays in a redirection of purpose.

A curriculum oriented toward the future is offered as the basis of useful cultural knowledge transmission. The focus of this curriculum is on the change factors of demographic, technological, social innovations and on shifts in cultural-value, ecological, information, and cultural diffusion. In this view, education becomes about change using an organizing schema that is ecologically oriented and focused on ecological reconciliation: the invention, establishment and maintenance of new habitus that conserves species diversity. This reconciles human activity with other species and moderates the use of natural resources in complex settings. Such a curricular content
would prepare students for a future when cultural knowledge is not a fixed entity, but an open, dynamic and changing response to democratic community needs.

1. Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: A teacher, teaching gifted students in Florida, uses thematic units lasting one or more semesters. One year, the focus is on futures. Using exciting materials, like Alvin Toffler’s books *Learning for Tomorrow*, and *Future Shock*, and the writings of Elsie Boulding, the class focused on issues facing their community: growth problems, population sources, schools, energy, roads, water and utilities, and recreation. The year ended in a culminating activity with the students simulating a city organization and designing and building a city of the future. Each student was on a committee that had to negotiate their own perspective and needs with other committees. There were students working on transportation, others on recreation, waste management, housing, parks and recreation. They interviewed their counterparts in the city where the school was located to gain information about such things as zoning and land-use. They argued and fought over turf issues, advancing their view in simulated city council meetings, finally building a city of compromise, one that met all their needs, on a 4x8 sheet of plywood that they exhibited and spoke about with pride. What they learned was to be forward looking and future-oriented to meet the needs of their growing and changing community.

There is evidence this is not done now. On Sunday, August 24, 2003 the New York Times Magazine had an article titled “New kind of electricity market strains old wires beyond limits.” As so many know, the great blackout of 2003 demonstrated that those in control of the electricity across much of eastern North America were not prepared for a computer shut-down that crippled Toronto for weeks and threatened Air Canada’s existence. Those in control also were not prepared for SARS or the West-Nile virus, and most response efforts were aimed at containment of the problem, not meliorating the causes. Other such examples abound.

Turning this scenario back to education and to the future of curriculum and instruction, several questions can be raised. Are people being prepared well for the future? Is the knowledge imparted to students oriented toward the future or the past? What will it take to transform the cultural knowledge deemed most useful in present day schooling toward those questions which are not addressed, but should be addressed, in the contemporary classroom? How can concerned citizens join forces with others in the community to deliver and be responsible for education driven by local community needs?

In responding to these questions, there first must be recognition that as society changes, the knowledge that is necessary for participation in that society has to change. Conversely, as knowledge increases, there should be a like response from societal expectations and from the primary transmitter of such knowledge, the schools. It is clear that there has been a tremendous explosion of knowledge over the past 50 years. The knowledge base of most academic disciplines is expanding. Thus, a responsive school curriculum must decide what knowledge should be taught and how best to teach
it. Not such an easy task. Below, these ideas will be addressed in our exploration of cultural knowledge for the present and the future.

TO ACCESS ALL THE 17 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER, Visit: http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx

Bibliography

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press. [This is a definitive work concerning the control of culture by powerful interests that create the habitus by which people live and work.]

Dewey, J. (1927). *The Public and its Problems*. Denver: Alan Swallow. [Describes how great communities arise through the structure and practice of democracy when the social and humane ideals demand that governments be inclusive and fraternally associated. Humane environments are those that are responsive to private needs. This work ties education to humane democracy as a possibility for the creation of a social spirit of common betterment.]

Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think*. Boston: D. C. Heath. [The original problem solving model as created by Dewey, designed to liberate people to be inquirers in order to solve the dilemmas that they encounter in life.]


Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury. [This book is a rallying call for a more proactive stance in defining change through education. A critical view of the common form of education called the banking method by which people are schooled to be compliant. Freire advocates for praxis, action, to meliorate inequities in education.]

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. [Greene posits the need for individual awareness of the possibilities of their cultural assets and the need to care for its inheritance as part of the cultural knowledge that is transmitted. Particular emphasis is placed on the arts and aesthetics as an important part of a humane future.]

Legrain, P. (2003). Cultural Globalization is not Americanization. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 9, B7-B10. [Legrain describes the dangers of globalization as market driven artifacts become the indicators of progress. The dissemination and acquisition of these goods are at the expense of losing distinguishable ways of life and the cultural knowledge that they transmit.]

Martin, J. R. (2002). *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution*. New York: Teachers College. [Suggests that much taught in formal educational institutions is miseducative, passing on cultural liabilities, and that there needs to be a broadening of the responsibility and awareness that there
are other formal and informal structures in society that can and should play an important role in the transmission of cultural assets.]

Schein, E. H. (1992). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. [This is an important work on the analysis of organizations and the manner in which they operate. He posits three levels of analysis: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. Real change within organizations comes from changes in participant’s underlying assumptions. This accounts for the difficulty of making changes in the accepted canon of cultural knowledge.]


Slater, J. J. (1996). *Anatomy of a Collaboration*. New York: Garland. [This book provides an analysis of change in two different organizations highlighting the method necessary to produce real collaboration that is sustainable over time. Describes the problems that arise when culture is analyzed and knowledge is not understood and interpreted similarly.]

Stearns, P. N. (2003). Expanding the Agenda of Cultural Research. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 2, B7-B9. [This article states the position that the scientism that drives research in academia neglects the appropriate attention that needs to be paid to the role of culture. Stearns calls for applied cultural work that deals with the explicit promotion of beneficial cultural change.]


Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. [This book proposes the formation of communities that nurture and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and social capital while ensuring the overlapping of communities when necessary.]

**Biographical Sketch**

**Judith J. Slater** is a Professor of Curriculum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida where she teaches courses in curriculum theory, evaluation and organizational culture. She is author of *Anatomy of a Collaboration, Acts of Alignment*, and co-editor of *The Freirean Legacy, Pedagogy of Place*, and *Teen Life in Asia*. 

©Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)