



TEACHING ETHNICITY THROUGH EXPRESSIVE STYLE

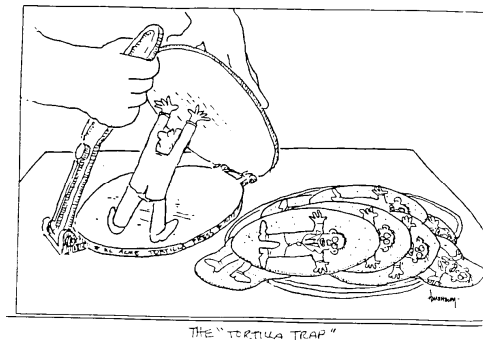
Teaching about American ethnicity is a great challenge. On the one hand, students need an introduction to the tremendous cultural diversity flourishing in the United States; on the other, teachers must beware of the "tortilla trap"—the danger of highlighting aspects of an ethnic subculture that may not be at all what insiders consider significant.

This teaching activity, in two parts, describes an approach to teaching ethnicity by applying the anthropological concept of enculturation to the understanding of expressive style. By analyzing people's way of expressing themselves, students understand the "style" giving coherence to behavior and come to realize that style reflects both cultural and ethnic membership.

Part One: Music, Art, Literature, And Film

By exposing students to a carefully selected range of ethnic-specific expressions in music, art and literature, teachers can help students recognize the common humanity that all cultural/ethnic groups share. By calling attention to the way various forms of personal and aesthetic expression from clothes to music, from cuisine to painting fit together into a coherent pattern, teachers can stimulate student interest in knowing more about how such patterns develop and why they vary. This takes students far beyond the view of diversity as bits and pieces of exotica, to be examined as if culture were something strange and peculiar.

This approach motivates students to find out how behavioral style in another culture affects areas of life they are particularly interested in such as making friends, falling in love, or choosing a career which in turn, leads them to dig deeper into the meaning such choices have. If nothing else, such study triggers an interest in analyzing their own expressive style, initiating a process of cultural self-reflection that can lessen ethnocentrism.



How does all this translate into classroom practice? This approach first requires analysis and discussion of three fundamental concepts: culture, subculture, and ethnic group. Next, students learn how cultural, subcultural, and ethnic-group membership affect expressive patterns. Only after students are familiar with the anthropological perspective on cultural variation and have been exposed to how this variation affects behavior, do they study the expressive style of selected American ethnic groups. The number of groups covered and the depth of analysis vary, but the range of expressive forms presented to my classes remains constant.

Music

Generally, each ethnic-specific style is introduced to the students first through music. This is partly because young adults react strongly to sound, but mainly because the musical art form is the most content-free and stylistically specific. Students "get" the stylistic message of the music they hear quickly and easily. They can start free-associating images to the sounds they are exposed to and this gives them a context in which to assess the integration of ethnic expressive style. After playing select music from various ethnic groups, discussion follows from questions such as "what's the stylistic difference between jazz and rap?" "where exactly does the hypnotic character of Native-American music come from?" "why does Latin-American music make you want to move?" Such discussion also leads to better understanding of the process by which stereotypes can emerge from cross-cultural encounters.

Visual Expression

After musical encounters, students come face to face with visual expressions. These may be presented through slides or reproductions of illustrative paintings or sculptures. Frequently I use examples of less "artistic" but no less relevant forms, such as fashion, personal ornamentation, food presentation, home decorations, and body language. Through discussion of these materials, students sort through the distinction between form and content, the influence of style on personal taste, the individuality-commonality of artistic idiom, and the various levels at which symbolic meaning can be "read."

Literature

Once students understand that various levels of "reading" apply to all expressive forms, we move to literature through the analysis of short stories, poetry, and novel excerpts. These readings reinforce student appreciation of the linkage between content and form, and highlight the role of language as a powerful instrument for simultaneously expressing the universal and the particular, the culture-specific and the ethnic-specific, the general and the personal. In this respect, I found the use of fictionalized autobiographical narratives particularly effective. The works of Louise Erdrich, John Okada, Carlos Bulosan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Oscar Hijuelos, Paula Marshall, Jo Pagano, and Maya Angelou are excellent examples of this type of writing and can be easily excerpted. Less conventional but no less powerful materials come from the poetry of Sandra Cisneros and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and even unorthodox choices such as Garrison Keillor's humorous prose can be put to very good use.

Stories can be an excellent vehicle for intercultural understanding; indeed, one of the aims of teaching literature is to stir what Robert Coles calls the "moral imagination" (*The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, 1989). Novelist Barbara Kingsolver has observed that:

Fiction creates empathy, and empathy is the antidote to meanness of spirit. Nonfiction can tell you about the plight of working people, of single mothers, but in a novel you become the character; touch what she touches, struggle with her self-doubt. Then when you go back to your own life, something inside you has maybe shifted a little (*Newsweek* July 12, 1993:61).

This subtle shifting in the axis of a self-centered universe is precisely one of cultural anthropology's chief contributions and the capacity for sustained empathy one of the skills the discipline fosters.

Film

Without detracting from the value of literature, however, the expressive medium I consider most effective in heightening sensitivity to cultural and ethnic diversity is the feature film. Film combines the impact of a storyline—triggering catharsis—with enormous richness of documentation at the visual, auditory, and symbolic levels. Film simultaneously engages the senses, the emotions and the intellect. Film stays with you as image-specific memory and as content-based message. Film is a multifaceted cultural document open to a variety of analyses, and, when chosen carefully, it can be a powerful vehicle for immersing students into a completely alien world.

By choosing films made by directors who are themselves members of the ethnic group represented, you can call your students' attention to the insider point of view in dramatic expression. By judiciously selecting "popular" films, you can facilitate comparisons of style and themes across groups. By highlighting the musical, visual, and fictional characteristics of the films presented, you can lead students toward integrating the knowledge they have already accumulated through exposure to other expressive media and facilitate their recognition of the ethnic group's overall style. On the practical side, the availability of videos for rent makes this approach easy and cost-effective, and the entertainment dimension of films manages to involve even the most disengaged student.

Because feature films are such a powerful medium, even brief excerpts make a great impact. With some careful previewing, you can select the most effective sections for consideration. As an extra bonus, I have found that the films that best illustrate ethnic style also tend to dispel the most generally-held stereotypical views of different groups, which even well-meaning films sometimes unwittingly reinforce. Thus, I use "Pow-Wow Highway" rather than "Thunderheart," "School Daze" rather than "Do the Right Thing," "Crossing Delancey" rather than "The Chosen," "True Love" rather than "Good Fellas," "A Great Wall" rather than "Dim Sum." Happily, ethnic cinema is a flourishing phenomenon and while some films such as "El Norte" or "The Wash"—are likely to remain among my regular choices, I constantly add new titles to my selection list.

Conclusion

After almost a decade of experimenting with teaching ethnicity through expressive style, I believe this approach effectively modifies students' attitudes toward diversity in the direction of increased tolerance, understanding, and respect. What's more, students seem to feel this way, too. Even in cases in which personal negative reactions to a particular group's expressive style do not become resolved through the analysis of it, students often express appreciation for at least achieving a clearer understanding of what specifically alienates them. It has long been an axiom of education that it is indispensable to know oneself in order to understand others. Cultural anthropology expands this view by teaching us that it is only by understanding others in all their many varieties that one can truly know oneself. The "expressive-style approach" facilitates this process and, at least occasionally, leads students to recognize that the "other" can really be a "brother."

Suggested Readings

On how ethnicity affects expressive style:

Kochman, T. *Black and White Styles in Conflict*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981.

Longstreet, Wilma S. *Aspects of Ethnicity: Understanding Differences in Pluralistic Classrooms*. Teachers College Press, 1978.

Multimedia documentation of ethnic expressive styles (especially musical, artistic, and literary):
Ch'maj, Betty E. M. *Multicultural America*. University Press of America, 1993.

Two excellent anthologies of "ethnic" writings are:

Brown, Wesley and Amy Ling, eds., *Imagining America: Stories from the Promised Land*. Persea Books, 1991.

Perkins, Barbara and George Perkins, eds., *Kaleidoscope: Stories of the American Experience*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1993.

On how to heighten intercultural understanding through films, and where to find useful films:

Summerfield, E. *Crossing Cultures through Film*. Intercultural Press, 1993.

Part Two: Micro-behavioral Observation Exercises

A: Non-Verbal Interaction Analysis

Ethnicity influences aspects of behavior that are clearly revealed in two-person interaction. By observing the way you express yourself in interaction with others, you can pinpoint some overall characteristics that, in turn, may reflect your identification with ethnic or subcultural groups.

1) Interactive DISTANCE (How close do you like to be to people when you interact with them? Pay attention to the range of your choices and what affects them most. Is it the relationship with the other person, the other person's sex-age-status, or the circumstances/setting of the interaction?)

2) TOUCHING (How often do you touch in standard interactions with: a stranger, an acquaintance, or a friend? Where do you touch this person? Examples of touching include: brushing, spot touching, hitting, holding. Which one do you use most often? How do you typically react to being touched by a stranger, an acquaintance, or a friend?)

3) Postural ORIENTATION (How do you position yourself in interaction? Possibilities include: face to face, at an angle, side by side, and back to back. Which do you choose most often in interacting with strangers, acquaintances, friends?)

4) Interactive GAZE (Eye contact can be direct, side-glance, peripheral, and absent. Which one characterizes your interactive gaze and which one do you find most comfortable receiving? What do you consider a comfortable gaze duration in interacting with strangers, acquaintances, friends?)

5) GESTURES (How often do you gesture during a typical episode of interaction? What parts of your body are involved? Do you combine gesturing with touching? Of self or of your partner? Do you gesture with objects or only with free hands? How aware are you of your gesturing? What is the impact of a conscious restriction of gesturing on the quality of the interaction?)

Reference Source

Hall, Edward T. *The Hidden Dimension*. Anchor Books, 1966.

B. Taste Orientation Analysis (Food)

Using information given in class on the cultural specificity of basic culinary choices, try to answer these questions:

1) Which basic flavor combinations characterize the food you find most appealing for regular eating? (You need to pinpoint the basic flavoring ingredients. This is sometimes fairly simple—many people may be able to guess at least two of the basic flavors of Mexican cuisine: tomato/chili peppers/cumin—but it can also be quite complex.)

2) What staple food do you find especially difficult to do without? (Something basic you simply "must" have quite often.)

3) Whether or not you cook, what type of food preparation do you find most appropriate for festive occasions?

4) Which "look" do you enjoy most in the way food is presented on your plate?

On the basis of your answers, try to trace the ethnic background that most closely correlates to your choices. For example, if you most enjoy soy sauce/ginger/sugar-flavored foods, often "need" to eat rice, consider the preparation and partaking of soupy stews very cheering, and like food to be presented in small pieces, arranged with an eye to color and shape, your ethnic ancestry is most likely Japanese.

Reference Source:

Farb, P. and G. Armelagos. *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating*. Pocket Books, 1980.

This teaching activity, by E. L. Cerroni-Long, Eastern Michigan University, was originally published in *AnthroNotes* 15(3), fall 1993. Illustration © by Robert L. Humphrey estate.

Updated March 2009.