

What is Cultural Competency? One Teacher's Perspective

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Education Brief #5

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Angelo was the best artist in my eighth grade English/Language Arts class. He devoted considerable time and attention to creating “lowrider art.” “Lowrider art” consists of drawings that may feature “lowrider” cars among other icons meaningful to members of U.S. Latino¹ communities. A “lowrider” is a genre of customized car associated with the Mexican American community. Lowriders are lowered to the ground, ride on small wheels and skinny tires, and are elaborately painted--often featuring symbols and icons seen in the community. Drawings using this distinctive iconography are commonly called “lowrider art” because *Lowrider Magazine* and *Lowrider Arte Magazine* publish drawings sent in by readers. (See Figure 1)



Figure #1: A Drawing by Alfredo Lopez Hernandez
Published in *Lowrider Arte*

Angelo wrote just enough of his school assignments to get by; otherwise, he drew lowrider art or practiced writing his and his friends' tags. Angelo's tag was “D.V.Us” (“devious”), and it fit. He was mischievous and hard to catch. I remember one three-day period in which he gave me no problems. He was busy doing something under his desk. At the end of the school year, when I was checking reading books, I discovered that Angelo had spent those three days erasing an entire page from “The Speckled Band,” by Arthur Conan Doyle. Then I saw Angelo's acts as defiance. Now I see Angelo's acts symbolically. He spent his time in my class making school literacy vanish while mastering drawing practices meaningful to him and to others.

Over twenty years ago, scholars adopted methods from anthropology to observe and report what people actually did with literacy – practices of reading and writing. They realized that there are many literacies, each with particular, social practices of reading and writing (now broadly defined as taking meaning from one's environment and making meaning in diverse texts). Such literacies are culturally rooted, and differ among social groups. Literacy scholars argued that what we assume to be “normal” literacy -- the practices of reading and writing taught

in school -- obscures the multitude of literacies, the diverse practices constructed in social interactions that are shaped and determined by their cultural contexts. Although diverse communities practice multiple literacies, in schools the literacy practices of the school-oriented mainstream are taught because they are considered “real” literacy.

Practices of literacy are socially learned, and texts are cultural products of accumulated social learning that transmit a particular culture’s world view: its way of perceiving, feeling, believing, evaluating, and behaving that are shared by members of the cultural group. We learn our cultural world view through enculturation. Our enculturation shapes our experiences and behavior: our experience of what is “normal” and our behavior around, for example, how we raise our children. Enculturation defines for us how things are supposed to be, and are the foundation of what we unconsciously believe to be natural and normal for ourselves and others.

So it was for me. As a middle school English/Language Arts teacher, reading a British short story was a natural, normal literacy exercise that linked our American culture to the linguistic and cultural heritage we share with Britain; it also happened to link to one, 19th century British, branch of my family tree. As a youth of Mexican descent, on the other hand, Angelo’s family tree had branches that reflected different, mostly unacknowledged, links between American culture and the linguistic and cultural heritage we share with Latin America. Angelo’s erasing a page from a 19th century British short story can be interpreted as his rejection of the mainstream, school-oriented literacy practices that he was being socialized into in my class. Angelo’s creating lowrider art can be interpreted as an affirmation of his community’s social practices of taking meaning from the icons and symbols seen in their visual environment -- icons that migrated from Mesoamerica, and symbols that are expressions of bicultural youth identities like Chicanas/osⁱⁱ, or cholas/osⁱⁱⁱ -- and of making meaning in drawings that he created and circulated among his classmates.

At the time I taught Angelo, I interpreted his behavior as refusing to engage with literacy learning. I thought, “He just doesn’t want to learn.” Now I interpret his behavior as making a choice about literacy learning. He was rejecting school-based literacy and choosing instead to master the taking and making of meaning visually that is valued by many Latino youth. These are the visual literacy practices of what I have come to call Chicano visual discourse. By this I do not mean to imply that all Latino youth, based on their group membership, share the same opinions of, experiences with, or interests in Chicano visual discourse.

Many Latino youth, like Angelo, create and circulate lowrider art outside of school and furtively inside their schools because school officials often stereotype it as gang related. When I started teaching, I too held negative stereotypes of lowrider art and of students who participated in its social practices. And some Latino youth do create lowrider art that signals gang-related aspects of their social lives. However, through inquiring into my students’ interactions with lowrider art, I have learned that many Latino youth create lowrider art that is clearly not gang-related. Indeed, I have learned that through their visual designs many of my Latino students were constructing messages that simultaneously affirm Latino youth culture and challenge these derogatory stereotypes. I offer this story of Angelo and me as an example of Latin American cultural competency: our need for it and the advantages it offers educators.

What is Cultural Competency?

Cultural competency begins with understanding culture and with acknowledging that in the 21st century the “mainstream” in U.S. P-16 education is increasingly multicultural. Cultural incompetency is a lack of cultural understanding that creates miscommunication and leads to unhelpful behaviors. Such behaviors hamper relationships among educators, students, students’

families, and students' families' communities, and this ultimately affects students' social, emotional, and academic achievement. Thus, cultural competency is not a luxury. It is not a skill and disposition that only a few educators, say English as a Second Language teachers, need, but an important foundation for 21st century educators and their institutions. Cultural competency makes it possible for individuals and institutions to build bridges across differences to improve the social and emotional health and academic achievement of all children and youth.

According to "Cultural Competency: What It Is and Why It Matters" (Olsen, Bhattacharya, & Scharf, 2006), there are five important things to understand about culture:

- Everyone has a culture.
- There is diversity within cultures.
- Cultures are not static.
- Culture is not deterministic.
- Cultural "differences" are complicated by differences in status and power between cultures.

According to the National Center for Cultural Competence website, (<http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/foundations/frameworks.html>), there are five essential behaviors that contribute to the development of cultural competency:

- Valuing diversity.
- Engaging in cultural self-assessment.
- Managing the dynamics of difference between and within cultures.
- Acquiring cultural knowledge.
- Adapting to diversity and to the cultural contexts of the communities we serve.

How does cultural competency change my interpretation of my relationship with Angelo?

1. That coming from different backgrounds, Angelo and I valued different literacies, both of which link to American culture and heritage.
2. That our differences led us each to devalue and judge negatively the literacy practices of the other.
3. That we demonstrated our negative judgments: Angelo defaced his reading book; I, based on directions from school administrators, confiscated his drawings.

Cultural competency reveals that I was using my "normal" practices of literacy to judge Angelo's drawings as not literacy at all, but rather as distractions from the literacy practices I was responsible for teaching him. I *am not* arguing that Angelo, in practicing Chicano visual discourse, was already literate and did not need to learn school literacy. I *am* arguing that Angelo needed to be literate in the practices I was teaching in order to access opportunities for higher education and skilled employment; if I knew then what I know now, I would have used his existing visual literacy practices to bridge to the alphabetic literacy practices I was trying to teach him.

How have I begun developing cultural competency?

1. I *admit*, in the sense of "let in," that I have a particular American culture that was invisible to me and that I was largely unconscious of. I also recognize that many of my students had particular American cultures that were different from mine – even when we shared the same race.
2. I continue to reflect on and am often surprised by cultural attitudes and snap judgments that come unbidden to me, causing me to think/react stereotypically to things that appear "abnormal" but that are actually just different.

3. Because I am now aware that I have a culture, and that my enculturation creates what I perceive as normal, I am more inclined to pause and manage the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions more honestly and effectively.
4. I have pursued my curiosity about lowrider art, and through research and publishing I have contributed to institutional knowledge about Latino youth.
5. If I were to teach English/Language Arts to Latino youth like Angelo again, I would put my cultural competency to work by:
 - Using their drawings as prompts to write alphabetic texts to translate their ideas, expressed visually, into written form.
 - Using alphabetic texts like books on Chicano history, art, and culture as prompts to create lowrider art for possible publication in *Lowrider Magazine* and *Lowrider Arte*.
 - Engaging them in comparative and critical discussions about the differences between the two literacies and the consequences of choosing to master either one, the other, or both.

An Invitation

The Indiana Project for Latin American Cultural Competency (IPLACC) believes:

- That one of the keys to educational success is the development of cultural competency amongst teachers and administrators.
- That cultural competency emerges through conscious reflection, sustained dialogue, and a willingness to examine our own behaviors, attitudes, and policies.
- That cultural competency is *not* obtained from a “one-time” professional development activity or through simply hiring fashionable “cultural” consultants.

We seek teachers and administrators who can appreciate the significance of Latin American culture and society. Who recognize that differences between Latin American cultural knowledge and social practices and the cultural knowledge and social practices of their institutions manifest themselves as socially and emotionally problematic relationships that impede the development and academic achievement of Latino students.

IPLACC is a means for teachers and administrators to enact cultural competency, to exercise their agency through inquiry in collaboration with like-minded educators, supported by the resources of IPLACC.

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ⁱ I use “Latino” to represent a social group within the social and ethnic stratification of the U.S. population. Latinos trace their familial roots to Spanish-speaking settlers in what became the U.S., and/or to Latin American and Caribbean nations.

ⁱⁱ Chicano (-a). “In its most basic definition, a *Chicano* is a person of Mexican descent born in the United States [Since the 1960s] to call oneself a Chicano symbolizes a solidarity with the Spanish language, with a pre-Columbian indigenous past, and an understanding of American racial oppression and discrimination against Mexican Americans” (Castro, 2000, p. 46).

ⁱⁱⁱ The term “cholo” refers to Mexican American working class youth who dress distinctively, who often organize themselves into clubs or barrio-centered gangs, and are frequently associated with lowriding (Stone, 1990, p. 120). The close associations of lowriders, cholos, and gangs means that the terms “lowriders” and “cholos” (denoting males) and “cholas” (denoting females) are considered derogatory by many people.