

***The Hall of Mirrors:  
Reflections on Cultural Belonging***

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Culture is not only a defining element of a society but also a natural attribute of a human being. Culture in fact is human nature. While it manifests itself in a kaleidoscopic array of various elements, what makes it universal and therefore accessible is that common humanity which bonds the seemingly unconnected elements. Today people routinely travel to foreign lands for tourism, study, business, research, and family visits. It provides valuable learning opportunities, as well as cultural infusions of new thoughts and new experiences from outside the borders. The world is becoming smaller and smaller and more and more accessible through various types of media. International and intercultural communication has become a commonplace activity for everyone. However, there is a big difference in consuming foreign culture through media and actually living the experience. In a way, we are all sculpting our cultural and intercultural identity as we live those experiences balancing cultural identity.

While in the past scholars saw affiliation with a cultural group as something more or less obvious and stable, today cultural identity is more often seen as an intercultural belonging, which is fluid and ever changing. Cultural identity today may be often seen as a cultural dialogue, “trialogue” or even “multilogue”. According to Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen, “Intercultural dialogue produces a contested space where cultural identity is constantly redefined and negotiated.” Does it mean that cultural identity doesn't really exist any more and has become intercultural identity all together?

According to Askegaard, cultural identity is formed by four different elements, that he calls “mirrors”. They are past, which is retrospective mirror, future – prospective mirror, interactive mirror and a coalescing one. (Askegaard 1991:12)

The retrospective “mirror” reflects the base of the culture in the past. It is a spatial and temporal anchor that holds culture in place. In contrast, prospective “mirror” reflects the future and suggests change. The interactive “mirror” includes human reflection, refers to a group of people versus another group of people, in other words, it locates culture in its environment. Language is one of those organizing systems people use to express themselves as a cultural group. The fourth coalescent “mirror” reflects internal human relations to the culture.

In my opinion, this fourth coalescent mirror is a key to fostering intercultural quality of one's character and one's life. It refers to our common humanity that makes us all human beings. Contemplative pedagogy can play an important role in intercultural education. Cultural competence can be added as the fifth language competence along with reading, writing, hearing and speaking. Today's language teacher needs to be able to bridge cultures of the target language and to also take into consideration the existence of the “mini globe” of students in the classroom. There is no GPS to navigate this practically kaleidoscopic reality. It demands new views and innovative approaches in order to deliver what a citizen of the world needs. Today's teacher has to be not only culturally sensitive but also possess a multicultural awareness.

Contemplation fosters additional ways of knowing that complement the existing methods of the traditional liberal arts education. As Tobin Hart states, “Inviting the contemplative simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness... These approaches cultivate an inner technology of knowing.”

Contemplative pedagogy uses methods designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind and to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight.

Getting students physically and emotionally involved in the learning process gives them better spatial and temporal awareness as well as awareness of each other. Sensory engagement offers students the therapeutic effects of cultural experience as well as better understanding of the subject.

Research confirms that contemplative forms of inquiry can offset the constant distractions of our multi-tasking, multi-media cultural environment. Thus, creative teaching and learning methods that integrate the ancient practice of contemplation innovatively meet the particular needs of today's students and teachers. While one can never become a "native speaker", one certainly can be a "carrier of culture" able to offer the distilled cultural information needed to succeed in the global environment. This information is often in its purest form, stripped from various cultural and social restrictions imposed by the birthplace. Therefore the learned or acquired- language teacher becomes not only a carrier of that one particular culture but also a carrier of multi-cultures. This intercultural rather than multicultural belonging, which is already a reality of our time, is a reflection of our common human experience.

I argue that cultural belonging is navigated by individually recognized common humanity. Living in a space of multiple borderlands allows one to sculpt their own cultural belonging and identity. Not simply co-existence, but also, co-presence and actually, co-experience play an important role.

The realities of today's multicultural language learning classroom in Canadian university setting demands a new approach from learners, teachers and education administrators. It needs to reflect tremendous, practically kaleidoscopic, changes in order to better prepare, guide and equip new language speakers. Today's language learners need to be able to not only be fluent in language but also be fluid in the culture associated with it, both in and outside its country. Panoramic cultural awareness will enable them to not only survive but also thrive and flourish there.

Cultural competence can be added as the fifth language competence along with reading, writing, hearing and speaking. Language teachers today must be able to bridge different cultures within their classroom. They have to be not only culturally but also multi-culturally sensitive and capable. Acquired or learned language teachers are playing an important role. They not only provide linguistic abilities so seldom attainable to the perfection (in fact, even by the native speakers) but also to empower the students with the most magic and universal tool – culture. Cultural flexibility is an important quality for the language instructor to possess. It creates a productive atmosphere in a multicultural language-learning classroom and offers another "key to the twenty-first century".

Today's classroom is a kaleidoscope of cultural borderlands. Reflecting each other, being reflections of each other, often changing and challenging each other and yet all being part of the same picture frame. Contemplative pedagogical approaches contribute to better understanding between cultures, social groups and individuals and promote a more creative and tolerant thinking.

“I think of myself not as a unified cultural being but as a communion of different cultural beings. Due to the fact that I spent time in different cultural environments, I have developed several cultural identities that diverge and converge according to the need of the moment.” (Sparrow, 2000, p. 190)

While “othering” denies a shared sense of common humanity, contemplative cultural practices provide the setting, environment and narrative for a shared experience, where distrust of the “Other” is dissolved as interaction takes place. By de-centering the subject they offer a new and viable alternative to binary representation and overcomes the traditional dichotomy between self and others while re-thinking the whole idea of difference. They allow us to fully develop our “human-beingness”, which is the development of mind, body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality.

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