Chapter One

Understanding Relationships Between Culture and Motivation to Learn

In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.
—Thurgood Marshall

How can culturally diverse people fairly and respectfully learn well together? To answer this question requires a lifetime's worth of other questions and requires society to examine the history of its own past and present actions. As teachers, to reply honestly, we have to engage students on a deeper level than is usual in conventional educational practices. The view across our classrooms reflects significant change in the last fifteen years. Most of us are European-Americans, and many if not most of our students are people of color (American Council on Education, 1993). We have more learners than ever before who perceive and believe differently, not only from ourselves but from one another as well.

Our best experiences in teaching are those where we connect with our learners and are of genuine assistance to them. Being able to encourage diverse people to actively learn is not just a matter of pragmatism or professional survival but also a means by which we personally thrive and find precious value in our work.

That is why when we consider school graduation rates for people of color, it is both a matter of social concern and, for us, an issue of professional integrity. African-American, Latino, and American
Indian high school completion rates, college participation, and degree attainment continue to be disproportionately lower than those of European-American students (Carter and Wilson, 1991). Just 3.1 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States in 1990 went to Latinos, who make up 8.4 percent of the adult population. That compares with 5.8 percent for African Americans, who make up 11.3 percent of the adult population, and 84.3 percent for European Americans, who comprise 84.8 percent of the adult population (Celis, 1993). While the enrollment of African-American students in college has been increasing, their graduation rates have dropped to the levels of the mid 1970s (American Council on Education, 1993).

We know from experience as teachers that how learners feel about the setting they are in, the respect they receive from the people around them, and their ability to trust their own thinking and experience powerfully influence their concentration, their imagination, their effort, and their willingness to continue.

People who feel unsafe, unconnected, and disrespected are unlikely to be motivated to learn. This is as true in college as it is in elementary school. Such a conclusion does not explain all the issues and barriers related to the progress of people of color in postsecondary educational settings, but it is fundamental to what happens among learners and teachers wherever they meet. In education, perhaps more so than in work, it is the day-to-day, face-to-face feelings that make people stay or go. This book is committed to understanding how students and teachers who differ from one another in ways that are often more complex than ethnicity and race can create a reality that holds them together in the pursuit of learning. In our opinion, to do so means that those with the most power in the classroom, those often in the majority, must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process.

The task is a difficult one. As Lisa Delpit eloquently states, "We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze... we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness" (1988, p. 297).

This may mean raising questions about discrimination or scrutinizing one's own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority. Certainly what follows in this book, when taken in the light of what typically goes on in many learning settings in postsecondary education, asks for and sometimes demands that kind of questioning.

Making direct suggestions for change was a challenge for us, because we do not pretend to know what is best, but we have very strong beliefs about what might be better. We ask the reader to keep in mind at least two sensibilities while reading this book. First, acknowledge what can and should be done as soon as possible and earnestly pursue it. Second, identify the larger, long-term changes that require resources and collective action and begin to discuss these with others to create the means to make them happen.

This book is not a blueprint. What is considered motivating varies across cultures and among individual human beings. People are experts on their own lives. Using a multidisciplinary approach that includes but is not limited to philosophy, anthropology, communications, critical theory, feminist theory, adult learning theory, multicultural studies, and linguistics as well as psychology, we offer an interpretive and process-based approach, more in keeping with the metaphor of a compass than a map. There are essential directions to take because all people are intrinsically motivated to learn and share a common humanity, but the cultural terrain of each individual's life so varies that the path to understanding another person is beyond the precision of any modern-day mental cartographer.
The Influence of Culture

The cultural composition of today's postsecondary learners differs markedly from that of thirty years ago, when many of today's college teachers were beginning their careers or still in school. If we look only from the perspective of ethnicity and language, we realize that the wave of immigration absorbed by the United States during the 1980s was the largest in seventy years and that today at least one out of every seven people in this country grew up or are going to grow up speaking a first language other than English (Barringer, 1993).

It is not surprising that we as faculty may be uncomfortable with learners coming from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds at the same time as women are questioning a predominantly male perspective and older adults are returning to formal schooling from family or occupational experiences (Marchesani and Adams, 1992). Taking a closer look at the concept of culture helps us to understand why culturally diverse classrooms frequently challenge the resources of all teachers, even those who are earnest and experienced. Quite simply, what seems to have once worked for us in the classroom may now be clearly inadequate, whether in the area of encouraging motivation, initiating humor, or helping people to learn effectively.

As a society we are only one generation removed from legally sanctioned educational segregation, and many of us who now teach grew up in what appeared to be monocultural schools and communities. It is likely that we were socialized in our formative years with an unexamined set of traditions and beliefs about ourselves and a limited knowledge about others (Bowser and Hunt, 1981). Being socialized and living in the dominant culture often lessens our awareness that our beliefs and behaviors reflect a particular racial group, ethnic heritage, or gender affiliation. This is especially so if we are white, European, and male. We can easily think of these attitudes and norms as universally valued and preferred (Sandler, 1987). We may not imagine that we hold negative assumptions or stereotypes toward those with other values or beliefs (Marchesani and Adams, 1992). In fact, it may feel like heresy (Butler, 1993) to acknowledge that Anglo-Americans and ultimately Western norms enjoy a position of privilege and power in this country's educational system that has diminished other norms as valuable as cooperation (versus competition) and interdependence (versus independence).

Although culture is taught, it is generally considered implicit and conveyed unsystematically (Schein, 1992). That is one of the reasons why it is difficult for anyone to describe in explicit terms who they are culturally. Our own norms, values, and usual patterns of interaction most often work subconsciously. It is no surprise then that the times we are likely to experience uniqueness as cultural beings occur when we are in the presence of those who appear different from ourselves. For example, a person from a family and community that value and model emotionally demonstrative behavior as a sign of open and honest communication may befuddle or embarrass a person whose family and community of origin contain emotion as an understood reverence for that which is greater than oneself. When we meet others whose family and/or community norms vary from our own, it is akin to holding a mirror up to ourselves, provoking questions we might not otherwise think to ask. Contrast and dissonance awaken important assumptions and make it possible to deepen and expand the discovery of who we are, who others may be, and ideally, the rich variation within and between cultural groups.

The most obvious cultural characteristics that people observe are physical. Ethnicity, race, gender, and physical ability are often the antecedents to recognizing possible differences in experiences, beliefs, values, and expectations. Physical characteristics, however, provide a cursory sense of who we are. Our families, friends, jobs, organizational ties, and lifestyles draw upon a repertoire of behaviors, obstructing a clear view of who we might be culturally. Similarly, our unique personal histories and psychological traits interact
dynamically to distinguish us from other members of our own cultural groups. The subtle complexity of who we are makes it difficult to define human beings according to narrow, static lists of expected characteristics.

It is a mistake to second-guess a person’s cultural identity when the sole criteria are observable characteristics and behaviors. The influences of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, and social class do not, in and of themselves, give meaning to the fullest definition of our cultural being.

At the same time, it is important to be aware that when we do not acknowledge the variation and distinction among cultural groups we may think in terms of a single set of cultural norms. These norms typically represent the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the historically dominant European-American middle class. When we accept these norms as universal, we are likely to see deficit rather than difference within the rich variation of human beings. For example, some students have learned the cultural norm that respect for one’s teachers is demonstrated by deferring to the information they present. If a teacher expects students to actively question a lecture or interact eagerly about seminar material, students who reserve judgment out of respect may be misjudged as, for instance, linguistically or cognitively limited, underprepared, lacking in initiative, easily intimidated, or arrogant. The presumption of deficit in human beings who fail to conform to expectations and standards that are commonly associated with the dominant culture is one of the key factors accounting for dropout in kindergarten through postsecondary education. Throughout the literature on retention and attrition, these phenomena are attributed to a broad range of institutional barriers that fail to take into account the expectations and experiences of students from various cultural backgrounds (Smith, 1989; Butler and Walter, 1991; Adams, 1992a).

Amid the often perplexing ambiguity of how to correctly understand and respect unique cultural characteristics as well as common human qualities, most theorists agree that culture is the deeply learned confluence of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors that pervade every aspect of a person’s life, and that it is continually undergoing minor changes. What it is not is an isolated, mechanical aspect of life that can be used to directly explain phenomena in the classroom or that can be learned as a series of facts, physical elements, or exotic characteristics (Ovando and Collier, 1985). In the words of Geertz (1973), “The human being is an animal suspended in webs of significance she or he has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (pp. 5, 29).

Geertz’s perspective is fundamental to this book. There are few hard and fast rules about people, especially those who are culturally different from ourselves. Similarly, there are rarely any hard and fast rules about the ways in which we might work and learn together.

As teachers, being aware and open to the meaning that is created in interaction with another person will help us to avoid stereotyping. Stereotyping is rooted in our assumptions about the “average characteristics” of a group. We then impose those assumptions upon all individuals from the group. For example, some people believe that all European Americans are individualistic because, as a group, they are commonly considered to be more individualistic than other groups (Sue, 1991). All cultural groups exhibit a great deal of heterogeneity. “Seek first to understand” is a bit of wisdom whose genesis lies within many ethnic and religious communities.

We, as well as our learners, will have beliefs and values regarding learning and the roles of teacher and learner. These are culturally transmitted through such avenues as history, religion, mythology, political orientation, and familial and media communication. The ways in which we experience a learning situation are mediated by such cultural influences. No learning situation is culturally neutral. If we teach as we were taught, it is likely that we sanction individual performance, prefer reasoned argumentation, advocate impersonal objectivity, and condone sports-like