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Culture: Conversations and Questions

I was shushed in Wellington, New Zealand. Not once, but twice was I shushed in Wellington. As part of a faculty development trip to New Zealand, Julie Davis, Jeff Kamakahi, Cindy Malone, Sam Johnson, and I attended a *Matariki* dinner at Victoria University to celebrate the Māori New Year at Victoria University. While at the dinner we were seated at different tables throughout the hall, so when we returned to our bed and breakfast around 9:00 p.m., we stood in the hallway outside our rooms and relived our experiences. We talked about the people we met: Ocean, who was the first Māori woman to receive a PhD in Physics; we talked about the foods we tasted: *kūmara* (sweet potatoes) and *tītī* (mutton-birds); we reveled over being on the guest list of this event; we were excited.



Michael Borka pictured at Karetu School near Kawakawa, New Zealand.

A Question

In the middle of our conversation we heard a knock coming from behind one of the guest room doors. It was the “shave and a haircut” knock. We stopped talking and looked around somewhat confused because we believed, mistakenly, that we were the only people lodging at the bed and breakfast that night. Even Nigel — real name, caretaker, and always up for a shivaree — seemed puzzled over the knocking. Hearing nothing else, we returned to our conversation. Moments later a robe-clad figure jerked open her door and sharply asked us to retire because it was late and she had a business meeting in the morning and needed to sleep. After this direct shushing, Nigel shot her an over-the-shoulder look as if to say, “Switch to decaf.” The rest of us apologized, moved into the lounge, and finally off to bed.

When I arrived at the breakfast table the next morning, most everyone else had gathered, including The Shusher. Awkward conversation ensued until she asked where we were from and what we were doing in New Zealand.

We answered, “CSB/SJU faculty development trip ... Gracious donor ... Different disciplines ... Inform our own learning and teaching ...”

The Shusher responded, “So, you’re here on jolly.”

A strained quiet followed, and then her parting shot, “Because you don’t really think this trip will benefit your students or help your teaching or help you?”

The Shusher had effectively silenced our voices twice in a 12-hour period. I know that many in the group found her remarks to be offensive and dismissive of our work, which is a polite way of saying that I thought Julie was going to crawl over the table and thump The Shusher with a breakfast biscuit. I approached the situation by thinking, “I do not have to justify anything to you,” and continued eating the porridge that Nigel had prepared for me. However, as I ate I realized that the question she posed was worth thinking about, so I dragged it around New Zealand and wrestle with it here. Certainly, I met new people and participated in cultural and educational events. So what? How might they support my teaching and benefit my students?

Initially the scope of the question seemed so broad that it gave me a headache. Then, I began to think about my trip goals of exploring Māori culture and education, and I recalled my reactions to the conversations and activities in which I participated. By reflecting on that which was new, surprising, and frustrating to me, I have inched closer to understanding how culture and language impel our actions and behaviors. In my attempt to capture the benefits of the trip, the best I can do, perhaps, is engender on-going conversations with my students as I continue to explore culture’s impact on teaching and learning.

Cultural Fingerprints

I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class male who was raised in a Christian home. I work in teacher education at an institution where the majority of students are white, middle class, and Christian. Collectively, we are members of the current dominant culture in the U.S. The classrooms that await my students as future teachers, however, mirror the changing nature of U.S. demographics and will not resemble the homogeneous schools that I and many of them attended.

Today’s public and private classrooms contain students from many backgrounds and ethnicities; these rooms are cultural mosaics. Even in the hallways of St. Cloud schools, in the heart of Lake Wobegon, new immigrants speak a dozen different languages. These students bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experiences. They know the traditions of their families and friends. Some have survived refugee camps. Some have been to school in their home countries and others have not. All of these

new immigrants are acquiring English and are, or soon will be, bilingual. They, like me, use traditions and beliefs to inform their day-to-day interactions with the world. It just so happens that their norms, beliefs, and values may not be the same as my students' and mine.

This difference is the essence of culture. Like the moon, culture is present even when we cannot see it. Culture influences the rules, traditions, behaviors, and beliefs that we practice. Culture informs whether we go to church on Sundays or not. It is what encourages us to celebrate a holiday, or not. It affects what we wear, when we speak, what we eat and drink, and what we fundamentally believe. Culture is one of the lenses through which we view the mundane and peculiar events of our lives.

Here is the crux: Culture shapes our choices and how we think about and interpret everything that happens to us and within us. My cultural lens is subtly different than my students'. Their future students' interpretations about relationships, authority, gender, and learning could be drastically or subtly different from their own. A teacher's, a student's, a person's awareness of these differences is essential, for without some level of insight, culture becomes another criterion that distinguishes "us" from "them." I have more questions about these issues than answers, but while I was in New Zealand, I experienced for the first time in my white-male, dominant-culture, privileged life a small taste of what it felt like to be the other.

Culture as Rules and Routines

Early in the trip, we made our way to Whakatane and met with teachers and administrators from Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, a Māori university offering graduate and undergraduate degrees in the arts, sciences, and education. The Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand and, as an indigenous people, their situation is unique. They have found, and continue to find, ways to establish a social, political, and economic presence within the greater New Zealand society while maintaining their cultural traditions and language. When we arrived at Wānanga, Hawira, an administrator, introduced himself and explained that we would begin our visit with a traditional, Māori welcoming ceremony called a *pōwhiri*. To prepare for the *pōwhiri*, we needed to select a male who would speak for our group. Rock, paper, scissors and Jeff won — or lost. When we cued up for our procession into the meeting hall, tradition dictated that the men would walk at the front of the line and the women would walk at the back, so Jeff led. Sam and I followed. Cindy and Julie entered last. In the hall, we sat in two rows of chairs across from and facing our hosts. Much like the processional lines, the men sat in the front row of chairs, and the women sat in the back row.

Because of my past and present professional associations with women, I was unfamiliar with these set, gender divisions. I worked in elementary education for 14 years, so nearly 90 percent of my colleagues were women. During that time, my bosses were often women who served as principals, district directors, and team leaders. Currently, my office is on an all-women's college campus. The college's president is a woman. I work in an education department chaired by a woman. In my classes, I prepare students to enter the teaching profession, which is, as I said, about 90 percent women, so most of my students are, well, women.

When I looked back at Cindy and Julie, I felt uncomfortable with my perceived position in the line. In my mind, I had done nothing to warrant walking in before them. I experienced a disorienting dissonance between my past experiences and beliefs and what I was being asked to do. My cultural guidelines were being overwritten by those of my hosts. I recognized the game, but I did not know the rules; I was an outsider with limited information, and I worried about making even the smallest misstep. As uncomfortable as I was, I wondered what the rest of the group thought and if their feelings went beyond uncomfortable because even though culture is universal, it does not affect each of us universally.

When the *pōwhiri* began, a male from Wānanga spoke first. In his speech, a *whaikōrero*, he honored the ancestors and explained how our groups had come together. After his *whaikōrero*, the host women stood and began a *waiata*, a song that supported and reinforced the ideas in the first speech. I do not know the specifics about what was said or sung because this portion of the ceremony was conducted entirely in the Māori language. Throughout, I sat quietly, tensely, and vigilantly, fearing that I would make an offensive mistake and unleash an international incident: "Dateline, Whakatane. Assistant professor's first trip abroad cut short when he inadvertently ..."

I continued to wobble through the ceremony. Hawira spoke next. He commented on his familial connections and finally introduced our group. Jeff took his turn and addressed the group on our behalf. He spoke first in Hawaiian. Each time he referred to his heritage and mentioned Kamehameha our hosts looked up, smiled, and nodded. Jeff finished his comments in English.

I grew tired because I understood so very little. I listened intensely for repeated words. I did not know what they meant, but with each repetition they became more familiar to me and provided a toehold of comfort. I listened, too, for the few words that I did know, relaxed a little when I heard them, and silently waited for the English portion of the program to kick in.

After Jeff finished his introductory remarks, we sang *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, as our *waiata* and presented a turtle-adorned potholder made by Native Americans as

our gift, *koha*, for our hosts. After our hosts spoke and sang again, all the women were invited to move from the back rows to the front. Our hosts then invited each member of our group to introduce her- or himself individually. We were asked to say where we came from and why we were there. So, I stood and spoke briefly of my German and Dutch heritage (my *whakapapa*), and my hometown (Waconia), and of my gratitude for the hospitality, and just like that, my silence was replaced with my story. Albeit ritualized, these few particulars of my life had a place in the proceedings. Even though I shared something familiar, I still felt like I was learning the rules while playing the game. I was also getting tired of sitting. We were coming up on 45 minutes of formalities and the effects of a trans-Pacific flight and extended van rides lingered. I was ready to move, but we were not finished.

Following our introductions we sang again and then stepped forward to *hongi*. The *hongi* is a Māori greeting in which two people face each other and touch noses. Some Māori tribes *hongi* in one long touch, pressing noses and foreheads together and looking into each other's eyes. Other groups prefer two quick touches, like birds pecking at food. Unfortunately, nothing in my history prepared me to *hongi* in either fashion. I wondered how long does one hold the *hongi*? Do I *hongi* the same way with a man as I do with a woman? Where exactly should I put my hands? I am from Minnesota, the land of 10,000 viruses. What if my nose runs? International incident number two.

Now, these worries seem ridiculous. Then, they were real physical, psychological, and emotional reactions to an unfamiliar situation. While I have listened to many speeches, sat on panels, and participated in numerous formal functions, this *pōwhiri* was different. Every part of the ceremony was ritualized and governed by a set of well-established cultural behaviors. The Māori men and women easily enacted their familiar roles. I, in contrast, did not know what to do. For one of the few times in my life, I did not know where to look and where not to look, how to move and how not to move, what to say and what not to say. I was uncertain about this new social environment, so I watched my hosts for cues that might signal appropriate and inappropriate ways to act.

Place and practice that were familiar to some were a maze to me. In a small and temporary way, I felt what it was like to be culturally off balance. During the *pōwhiri*, I was the outsider, the other, and because of that experience I gained a new awareness of how, in some situations, the cultural rules that guide behavior might be transparent to most people but may remain hidden to others. I connect this awareness to the classroom, well known to me as the teacher, and realize that it could be a confusing and anxiety-filled environment to those students who are experiencing it for the first time. I have probably taken this fact for granted. My former students who were new to the U.S., who were learning English as a new language, who were international students,

and even those who were first-generation college students entered my classrooms as competent navigators of their own cultures. However, they likely scrambled to keep up with unfamiliar, unknown, and unarticulated routines. In time, they seemed to decode the secrets of my systems. Unfortunately, I did not ease the stress of their transition by making the implicit cultural differences explicit.

Language as Culture

Besides my desire to survive the 12-hour flight, I hoped to meet with New Zealand educators and observe first-hand how they addressed the challenges of teaching a diverse school population. In education circles, New Zealand is a bit of a rock star. The school systems and educators have spent the better part of two decades working on ways to instruct both Māori and *Pākehā* (European New Zealander) students. I wanted to learn about some of the successful practices these teachers used.

The first school I visited was near Kawakawa in the Bay of Islands. Other than the palm trees on the school grounds, its small size and rural setting seemed quite familiar to me. As a former classroom teacher, I even felt at home with the activities that the first and second year (kindergarten and first grade by U.S. tally) students were engaged in: make a shape and then count the corners and the sides. I knew the questions to ask, “How many corners in your shape? How many sides? Can you make a different shape?”

If I set aside the accents, I could have been in any number of U.S. public schools. Even the lesson I received from one first grader on how to put down a cow for slaughter could have been part of a classroom discussion here in central Minnesota. As I looked and listened more closely, however, the familiarity remained but the distinctiveness increased. Throughout the classroom, all official school signs were written in both English and Māori. The teachers included Māori and English words on bulletin boards, bins, and cupboards. I saw both languages printed everywhere in the room. The sound of the Māori language came moments later.

Midway through the morning, Lauren, the teacher, began her reading lesson with a small group of children. In a classroom, there are only two groups: the one the teacher is working with and everybody else. It is the “everybody else” group that usually becomes a concern, and so it was on this day that a few children were not attending to their independent work. Instead, they were more than a little off task. When Lauren noticed, she looked directly at the offenders and gave some firmly-worded directions in Māori. The students, Māori and Pākehā alike, snapped their heads her way, sat stock still, and then returned to their work. Lauren turned to me and said, “They are so starved for this, their language.”

Her words: The Māori children are starved for their language.

I found Lauren's comment interesting because in her classroom, Māori words and images were generously blended with English. As a visitor, it seemed to me as though both western-European and Māori culture were on display and welcomed in this room, in this school, and yet Lauren sensed a gap, a missing piece for her Māori students.

I try to imagine walking into a classroom in which I would hear little English being spoken or see few printed English words. In such a room, I could not consistently use my voice and my first language to communicate with others. What would it be like to listen to words, phrases, and sayings that were not mine? If I were a productive citizen of a country but not a member of the dominant culture, what might I expect from my children's school? I think that I would want them to feel as though their language and cultures were accepted and had an integral place in a learning environment, for schools and societies that place language issues at the center of human interactions and recognize language as the foundation of culture send strong messages of inclusion to their members. Conversely, institutions that do not recognize the essentiality of language send strong messages of exclusion to their members.

I think grappling with these issues on an intellectual level is a difficult task, but it is made more challenging when I step out of my own shoes and stand where others stand. Through Lauren's comment, I understand a little more clearly how directly language links to culture. As she suggested, it is as necessary as food. Everyone wants it and needs it. Part of my job as an educator, then, is to work with my pre-service teachers to find ways to honor and welcome the languages of today's students. These students reflect the increasing globalization of our world and the shifting demographics of the U.S. More importantly, though, their languages are the essence of their cultures and culture is essential to the person. If I negate one, I dismiss the other.

A Conversation

For teachers, adroitly understanding and including varied languages and cultures is one of the great challenges of classroom work. During a discussion I had at the *Matariki* dinner, Ocean commented on the complexity of this work. Recently, she made the transition from teaching science classes to teaching courses in culture. She said, "I used to teach physics, but now I teach Māori culture. Teaching physics was much easier."



The elements of family, language, and children symbolically represented in a wood carving on display in a Māori school, Wellington, New Zealand. (Photo by Michael Borka)

To the outsider, culture is messy and mysterious. To the insider, culture is what is. At any moment, in any place, we are both outsiders and insiders. Simultaneously, we are surrounded by others who are, at once, insiders and outsiders, teachers and learners. I had one of my last conversations of the trip with Pania, a professor who works in Māori education. As we chatted about teaching and learning issues she talked about her son's classroom and how she hoped that every day his teacher would help him better understand his Māori identity; it was and is, she said, the core from which everything else would grow. Anyone who has sent a child, niece or nephew, granddaughter or grandson off to school, probably views Pania's request as reasonable: Help my child develop into a person who is proud of himself or herself. While there may be a general meaning to these words, "person" and "pride" are specifically shaped by the complexities of the speaker's culture. The cultural translations become, "Help my Māori child develop; my Mexican-American child; my African-American child; my child of color; my global child; my child who ..."

To me, her hope seemed to be an essential and attainable goal for a student attending a Māori school. I wondered about the reality of that hope in other schools. I asked Pania about the demographics of European-New Zealand schools. She said that the classrooms would be a mix of European-New Zealanders, Māoris, and Asian-Pacific Islanders. If her expectation were echoed by all of the families in these schools, how could one teacher acquire knowledge of every represented culture, be protean enough to address the innumerable mores in the room, and ensure mastery of the required academic content?

I thought about my current students and became overwhelmed by how impossible the task seemed. I wondered aloud to Pania how a teacher in a classroom of 25–30 students could possibly do this kind of work. She was silent for a moment and then said, “It begins by knowing them and building a relationship with each child.”

On a Jolly?

I was elated to take part in this trip, and other than backing into a car in Auckland, getting car sick in the mountains, and eating really bad food in some armpit of a diner one day, I enjoyed myself immensely. Given my elation and enjoyment, however, I do not consider this trip a jolly. In New Zealand I talked with teachers and students while they worked. I heard a language that was new to me. I met people fiercely dedicated to their families, their traditions, and the importance of education.

As I address the question of what I brought back from New Zealand, the answer serves as my un-shushing. To this end, I returned with a more personal understanding of how it feels not to know. I experienced the nervousness that accompanies the unfamiliar. I increased my awareness of how a tradition, language, and culture can shape the individual, and I learned how much these human inventions matter. I remain both challenged and energized by the hurdles of teaching in tomorrow’s schools because last June, in Wellington, New Zealand, a stranger chided me and challenged me to make something of my travels. The something I choose, then, is to create opportunities for my students and their future students to use their voices, to use their languages, to speak of their cultures and to help them know that they are relevant.

Michael Borka is an Assistant Professor of Education. He undertook this faculty development trip in June 2008 with colleagues Sam Johnson (Art); Jeff Kamakahi (Sociology); Cindy Malone (English); and Julie Davis (History), who led the group.