Stages in Culture Learning

Students come to our classrooms at different stages in culture learning. Milton Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* is particularly relevant as it provides insights into how teachers can help young people overcome ethnocentrism and develop intercultural competence.

Bennett's Stages of Intercultural Development and Knowledge

Intercultural Stages	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Strategies
1. Denial of differences	Demonstrate cultural differences that are obvious but not threatening. ■ a guest speaker shares her video of Gaborone where she lived and taught in as a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana.
2. Defense as evidenced by denigration, superiority	Focus on commonalities and contributions. ■ demonstration of how the Yoruba show respect to their parents and older people in the community; ■ instruction on how Arabs have contributed to scientific achievement.
3. Minimalization of differences	Illustrate how ignorance of differences can have profound effects. ■ body language acceptable in one culture can be insulting or forbidden in another (for example, passing food with the left hand or direct eye contact with a superior)
4. Acceptance of behavioral and value differences	Teach cultural complexity. ■ case studies of how people within a culture can differ based on their social class, gender, age, etc. ■ academic study of culture's affects on behavior
5. Adaptation of skills for interacting and communicating	Focus on real-life interaction and skill development across cultures. ■ cooperative learning through shared tasks and goals ■ experiences where people have more/less power
6. Integration of intercultural competence	Experiences with different cultures, social classes, etc. ■ sustained intercultural experiences with different groups ■ academic study of cultural hybridity and change

Bennett describes the psychology of peoples' thought processes and identifies educational strategies that meet the needs of people in that stage. For example, if students are at the denial stage ("there are no cultural differences I need to know about"), activities such as holding an international festival or visiting an exhibit of Chinese art would help them develop recognition of some differences without overwhelming them with profound cultural contrasts.

However, if they are at the stage of minimization where cultural differences are recognized but trivialized (the 'one world' view of "we are really more alike than different, so I don't have to worry about all those differences"), activities are needed to help students recognize the importance of cultural contexts. From his research on how students move from one stage to the next, he recommends using experiential learning such as simulations and shared experiences with people from other cultures for the last three stages. Cross-cultural experiential learning reinforces students' recognition of profound cultural differences as it helps them acquire cross-cultural interaction skills to mediate differences.

It is important that children learn that there are times when "just being themselves" with people of another culture is inappropriate or even insulting. Unlike cultural studies that are solely academic, substantive culture learning requires students to use their cultural knowledge and intercultural skills in everyday life to recognize, manage or resolve real cultural misunderstandings and conflicts.

From Merryfield, M. & Wilson, A. *Social Studies and the World*: *Teaching Global Perspectives* (Washington D.C, The National Council for Social Studies Education, 2005).

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