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## Chapter 17: Learning Cycles and Anthropology

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## Chapter Seventeen

### Learning Cycles and Anthropology

Ellen Dubas

I was first introduced to Piaget in a traditional lecture format while I was in college. I didn't pay very much attention to the theories, just as I paid little attention in college to anything introduced to me in a lecture format. My first successful exposure to his theory was as a Spanish language assistant in a Montessori pre-school. I was thunderstruck by the autonomy and independence of three-year-olds who had been schooled by Piagetian systems. Later as a foreign language teacher, I slowly began to incorporate student-centered activities into the classroom, with my success in teaching growing in proportion to the amount of student involvement in the process. Anthropology was a second career for me and by the time I began teaching it, student centered activities were a fundamental part of the learning environment.

The use of the term "disequilibrium" was the one that keyed me to the realization that the people in the ADAPT program were very much working in an environment that I could identify with. Disequilibrium, or unsettling students and placing them in an environment where they need to make new conclusions about their cultural choices, is closely related to the successful teaching of the concept of culture.

Teaching someone about culture is like trying to teach a fish about water. One is so inundated in the medium of his own culture that it is very difficult to convince him/her that they are in "one of many" cultures, rather than in "the" culture. A healthy ethnocentrism (a conviction that one's culture is the "real" one) is typical and is a necessary aspect of all cultures. If we could afford to send all of our students to New Guinea and if we could be assured that New Guinea would never Westernize, this concept would be much easier to teach.

We can rarely send students to live in cultures we want them to learn about. Yet all of them are proficient in living in their own culture. Since I am asking them to do fieldwork in a culture that they are extremely well acquainted with, they are able to assume a level of competence and confidence that gives them great interest in the cultural system they are manipulating.

A learning cycle in anthropology consists of three stages: exploration, invention and application. One exploration phase of a learning cycle in cultural anthropology consists of, firstly, asking students to put their last names on the blackboard. I then ask them to do something meaningful with the last names, for example make a conclusion about American culture. Eventually students will conclude that the last names give an indication of national origin of the people in the room. The national origin of each person is investigated and then I ask them what conclusion they can make from the names. Ultimately, depending on what part of the country one is in they will conclude that there is a dominant group that appears on the board. In Nebraska, that group is English, with German a close second. In Albuquerque, it would be Spanish and English co-dominantly ruling the board. The final conclusion from this exercise is that the United States has a wide variety of peoples who have been acculturated under a dominant cultural system.

The invention phase for this exercise is designed to make students aware of some of the varying rules in our culture. It consists of asking the students to meet the eyes of strangers on the sidewalk, or similarly, to stand too close to someone on an elevator. In the first exercise, since there are segments of American culture where people do regularly meet other peoples' eyes, i.e. in small towns; males looking at females; some students find little to examine, especially if they are extroverted and male. But even with this exercise many students, often the majority, are struck with the significance of eye contact, and they become immediate advocates of the "Let's do something else and see what happens" school of social science. Many really enjoy the objectivity that the situation gives them.

In the second instance, that of asking the student to stand too close to someone on an elevator, reactions are universally more profound. Only among people of Spanish origin in the United States do people stand close to each other and then only when speaking. The space is enclosed, the rules are set. The other people in the elevator cannot escape and are often quite uncomfortable. Students respond widely, some with a distinct personal discomfort, which is the purpose of this exercise, and others with a distinct and growing appreciation of how much fun learning can be. Whatever the response of the student, whether or not they enjoy themselves, each now understands what culture is and how important it is to them in their everyday lives. Contrast this with telling students to memorize the definition of culture in Webster's dictionary. All of the students will know the meaning of culture at the end of a learning cycle, whereas only a few will memorize it with any level of understanding from lecture material.

An exploration phase in this learning cycle relating to culture is that the student must choose a cultural rule to break. They are urged to be very specific. Many of them have a very good time doing this, and at times their amusement gets in the way of their learning, but usually class discussion and ultimately grading exert some amount of disciplined learning on a rather wide spectrum of possible alternatives. For example, a student chose the experiment of standing too close to someone in an elevator, an exercise which I later moved into my regular course. Another student recently chose a sequence of events which I may eventually use in the same way. In breaking his cultural rule, this student chose to slightly vary his walk patterns on the sidewalk to be slightly too close physically to the subject, or too closely in sync with the subject i.e. walking at the exact same foot length as the subject. I might add that the young man chose same sex subjects, as he realized he would be too upsetting to an opposite sex subject. Both of these examples demonstrate a remarkable ability to generalize to the larger concept of culture. There are some students who might have been able to glean my meaning from a lecture but certainly the majority of the students would not have understood the concept as well as they do after going through the three step learning cycle.

Once the principle of culture has been introduced, an anthropology class can proceed into other topical areas. In a learning cycle designed to teach the role of mythology in American culture, the students are asked first to list every model of car that they can think of. In some instances makes of cars are accepted because of the symbolic value that the make name has developed over the years. A list of makes might resemble the following:

Dart	Fury	Toronado
B-210	Corona	Corolla
Terrel	Scirocco	Bug

Cressida	GLC	3232
626	Mustang	Cadillac
Mercedes	BMW	Duster
Prelude	Civic	Lincoln
Rabbit	Golf	Citation
Chevette	Skylark	Flacon
Ram	Tempest	Celica
Seville	LeSabre	Camaro
Thunderbird	Cutlass	Grand Prix
Monte Carlo	Galaxy	Escort
Bronco	Ranger	

The students as a step 2, are asked to categorize the makes by meaning of the words used as a make description.

Galaxy  
Corona  
Corolla

GLC  
323  
626 B-210  
BMW

Mustang Bronco  
Tercel  
Bug  
Rabbit  
Thunderbird  
Skylark  
Falcon  
Ram

Lincoln Mercedes

Cressida  
Prelude  
Celica  
Camaro

Golf

Citation  
Chevette  
Escort  
Civic

Tempest Fury Toronado

Scirroco  
Ranger  
Cutlass  
Dart  
Duster

Grand Prix  
Monte Carlo  
Seville  
LeSabre  
Cadillac

A list of categories might be as follows:

number, letter  
animal, mythic animal  
prestige proper name, prestige foreign name  
music, pretty  
odd  
responsible  
strength, power, storm

We then discuss the nature of symbol and myth in American culture as it related to the naming of cars. Foreign manufacturers have a tendency to use numbers on many of the cars they sell in this country. This seems to indicate their satisfaction with the meaning that we give the otherwise meaningless number sequences of the car names.

As a final step, the students in their small groups of about five students are asked to name an American car to be successfully marketed in Japan. One of the best names that has been put forth this last summer was the Crescent or the Crescenda. Some students, rather suggest names like the Scimitar, which reflect their own idea of the violent nature of Japanese culture, and which indicate that some of them have not understood the learning cycle. This final application is a good test and one clearly knows who understands the material and who doesn't, so that one can check ultimately to see when they do come to an understanding of the concept.

The teaching of revitalization movements is a learning cycle that I am still developing. It is very difficult for students to understand because not because it deals with religious ideas, but because it is difficult to develop a learning cycle that encompasses religious ideas. I begin the exercises by asking them to tell me what they think of Iranians, really, not being afraid to express their real opinions to me. The majority express negative sentiments about them. I then have the students do a reading on Cargo Cults of the Melanesian islands (Worsley 1959), and then discuss with them the Ghost Dance of the American Indian. Both of these examples discuss cultures under severe stress of culture contact by a culture of significantly different and of stronger technological capabilities. The stronger culture moves into the area of the less strong culture and the less strong ones develop a religious response to their problems which suggest symbolic, ritual ways for them to rid themselves of the new menace. The rituals do not work, and in the case of both the American Indian and the Melanesians, the rituals eventually die out, though in the case of the Melanesians, not for several generations. The Ghost Dance received its

greatest blow at the slaughter at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. When the ritual dance failed to protect the Indians against the bullets, it lost its significance in the Indian belief system and has been replaced by other religious beliefs.

When the students show an understanding of what these two incidents mean, and understand that they are called revitalization movements, we then return to the issue of the Iranians. We discuss the history of the situation in Iran, and the rise of power of the current religious, charismatic leader. The situation is an example of a classic revitalization movement. In response to a cultural threat from a technologically advanced culture, the people have allowed their own religious system to reaffirm itself. This reaffirmation has taken paths that have considerably startled most of the western, non-Muslim countries that are trying to maintain connections with the oil resources of the region.

#### REFERENCES

Worsley, Peter. *Cargo Cults* , Scientific American 1959.