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### Using Critical Questioning To Investigate Identity, Culture, And Difference

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## Using Critical Questioning to Investigate Identity, Culture, and Difference

Jill Gladstein

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**A**s an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher I teach classes entitled “American Society” and “American Life and Language” where I am supposed to introduce students to several aspects of American culture. This form of multicultural education, common in the ESL curriculum for older students, has a unique presence in the ESL classroom. The underlying philosophy for these classes is to help new immigrants become American, to help them *blend in*. Traditionally these classes focus on cross-cultural differences, ways to overcome communication difficulties, and isolated facts about American culture or society. The course syllabus typically includes such topics as the American family, perspectives on health, the U.S. court system. It also includes a melting-pot view of American ethnicity.

My unit on ethnicity always brought many interesting—and unsettling—responses. Each semester, with each class, it was as if I had opened a dam on stereotypes and ignorance. After I would explain briefly about immigration trends and what different groups live in the United States, the following conversation would usually take place:

Jill, what ethnicity are you?

I’m an American Jew.

A Jew, does that mean you are Jewish?

Yes, why?

Well, you must be rich and smart.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a sample of a conversation that took place in many classes. It is not actual data that was transcribed, but rather a synthesis of many conversations that had taken place.

One by one students would tell me or ask me about being Jewish and about all the "horrible" things they heard *my* people had done. There were many times as a teacher in the ESL classroom that I heard negative representations of different ethnic groups in America. When asked where these representations had come from the students replied that they read it somewhere or someone told them and therefore they were true. The students rarely seemed to question what they had heard to see if it was valid.

As a teacher in ESL, I wanted to develop a space to respond to the ideas and experiences I encountered with the students and their views of difference in American society. It is because of these experiences and others like them that I designed a new course. The original course was set up as part of a dissertation research project. I originally wanted to see how the students were constructing their perceptions of people in the United States and how their experiences in the classroom might inform the representations previously held.

In the process of developing the research study, I discovered that before the students could explore their representations of others they had to explore their views of identity, culture, and then difference. Students needed to see how they were defining these terms of identity, culture, and difference as terms themselves and investigate how their understanding of these terms influenced how the students looked at their representations of difference in American society. Therefore, identity, culture, and difference became the three overriding themes of the course.

## Theoretical Background

The design of the course involved a complex theoretical framework.<sup>2</sup> One central aspect, which will be briefly presented here, was the notion of *critical questioning*. Questioning is defined as a process in which a person looks at a text and poses questions that may lead to a deeper understanding of that text. A text is defined as more than a written document, but also as a conversation or experience someone has in daily interactions. Questioning helps give some distance so that an individual might be able to look at a situation from a different perspective. The definition of critical questioning used in the course derived from the theories of reflection, metalinguistic critical theory

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2 For a more detailed description of the overall framework see Gladstein (1999), *Using Literacies to Question Identity, Culture, and Difference in the Intensive ESL Classroom*.

in education. Aspects from many theorists have been combined in order to create a style of questioning that was used to have students look at themselves and their representations of others.

The students were asked to read, write, and listen to a variety of media about the topics and taught to critically question the content of each. It is one thing to read something on the surface without asking questions, but it is another to carefully examine what a reading is saying and what interpretation the reader receives from the document. Critical literacy and language awareness has the potential of being a tool of empowerment for the learner. In the context of this course the empowerment comes from the awareness of the definition and complexity of identity, culture, and difference and their interaction with each other and within the students' lives. As students critically question and analyze the content of course material they become empowered learners.

One of the major tools for this empowerment is of critical reading (Wallace 1995). This idea of critical reading is more than a critical response to the text. It also involves critically looking at how the students read as a whole. Many of my students have expressed that their cultures discourage questioning or challenging that which is said or read in the classroom or written in a newspaper. Many of them have been taught to accept what they hear and read as fact. By incorporating a critical approach to learning about identity, culture, and difference through the use of questioning, I tried to give students tools they might use to question and think deeply about the course topics and issues surrounding them.

## Description of the Course

As mentioned, this course was designed around the concepts of identity, culture, and difference using a critical approach to learning.<sup>3</sup> The main goal of the course was to have the students explore their definitions and understanding of identity, culture, and difference in relation to themselves and their interactions in American society. A collection of materials and methods were developed to elicit a variety of responses and perspectives on the topics presented and to encourage

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3 The course has now been conducted in several intensive English classes at two universities. Materials and activities have also been adapted for use at different grade levels and in different contexts.

students to look at each topic from several angles so that they might begin to see the complexity and challenges of each.<sup>4</sup>

Through the use of critical questioning, the course was framed around the notion of questions. Each topic was introduced as inquiry to aid the students in their understanding of each concept. Key questions provided the foundation for six learning units:

1. What is culture?
2. What is identity?
3. How do others see me in American society?
4. How are identity and culture connected?
5. What is difference?
6. How do identity, culture, and difference exist in American society?

With each unit a variety of materials and activities were introduced. The students' exploration during the units resulted in both learning about the concepts and learning of the language. The course used an integrated skills approach to learning English in which students used the four major skills of language in the context of exploring the course content.

## Course Methods

The methods used in this course were many and varied. It is impossible to present them all here. Only some of them will be introduced. Overall, the course used many different literacy practices as well as the use of critical questioning in hopes of getting students to look deeply at the course content and to give them the tools to express the discoveries they had made.

### ***Critical Readings of Articles, Poems, and More***

The text for the course was no single bound document. Throughout the course many readings were presented to the students. The readings came from current newspapers, Shel Silverstein poems, excerpts from

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4 The materials and activities designed for the course are in the process of being prepared for a textbook to be used in the ESL classroom.

ESL texts, and so on. In addition to written documents, the text was also a video of a news program, or the content of the class discussion. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, Catherine Wallace (1995) used several questions in her study on critical reading. I adapted these questions and provided them to my students as a tool to critically examine a text in order to see the many perspectives the text represents. The questions used were:

What is the student's reaction to the article?

What is the author's message? Why was the article written?

Who was the intended audience? Who did the author want to read his/her article?

Are all perspectives represented in the article? If not, whose is missing?

Why do they think the author left out that perspective?

If they could change anything in the article what would it be and why?

Providing these questions has helped the students look at what they read differently. Once I included these questions in my class activities, I found that the class discussions took a different direction and also lasted for a longer time period. For example, I would present newspaper articles on a current issue in the United States such as bilingual education or Ebonics. Wallace's questions have given students the tools they need to not just accept the reading as fact, but rather to question what they are reading and to form their own opinions on the issue presented.

## **Essays**

To see how the students were interpreting the course themes I designed a couple of writing tasks. The most interesting and also difficult for the students was the writing of an essay entitled "Who am I?" The students were asked to answer this question in a one- to two-page essay. The following is an example from one of those essays:

### **Student Essay: Who am I?**

There are many things that explain me, my race, my family, my job, my hobby, etc. All of these things are part of me and to know about these is important to find an answer the question "Who am I?" Moreover, it is also required to combine these things, because these

facts cannot exist separately. I am a Korean and I am also a daughter, a sister, a student. And at the same time I like to listening music and watching movie.

Other essays revolved around the prompt of "What is culture?" Or students were provided with a small text and asked to explain how identity, culture, and/or difference were being discussed in the article.

### ***Journals***

In addition to essays, journals were used in many ways. They helped the students process the material for the course as well as showed me how they were interpreting the material. With many assignments the students were asked to write a response in their journals in order to better prepare for the next day's discussion. The journal gave students the opportunity to express their thoughts in writing first and also gave them a chance to familiarize themselves with vocabulary that might have been new to them.

### ***Web Page***

The more I taught the course the stronger I felt that there was not enough time available in class for most discussions. To continue the discussions (as well as to allow follow-up on my research) I created an internet web page for the course.<sup>5</sup> The web page contained an on-line discussion in which students responded to posted questions about the course and posed their own questions. Other sections of the Web page included, updates on the research project, on-line interview questions, and news from alumni. This Web page was created with ideas from students. As time has progressed each group of students has added something to it.

### ***Interview Project***

In order to have students be able to use the tools presented in the course and explore one aspect in depth, the following final project was created: students chose a topic related to the course themes and American society and formed a research question. The students then needed to interview a certain number of Americans in order to get a

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5 The web page was created from a grant received from the Penn TESOL East organization. Funding was provided for instruction in web page creation and editing. Thank you to Penn TESOL East for its generosity and support of this project.

better understanding of their question.<sup>6</sup> Finally the students conducted library research in order to see if they could reach any conclusions about their question. One purpose of this project was to challenge some of the perceptions the students have made about American society by speaking to a variety of people. In the beginning of the project the students were asked what their expectations for their project were and then they reported in their final presentations whether these expectations were met. Some past research questions were:

- Why are Americans so concerned with race?
- What are Americans' values? Do they believe only in money?
- What does freedom mean to Americans?
- How important is individuality to Americans?

The students have found this assignment to be very rewarding and challenging. Most of the time their expectations were not completely the same as the results of their research and they felt that at the end of the project they had a better understanding of American society. Most reported that they realized how complex the issues were and that the issues were not easy to understand without talking with more people.

This is just a sampling of the methods used to develop and implement the course. In order to get a richer understanding of the course, the following two activities are introduced and explored.

## Focus on Activities

As varied as the methods used were so too were the activities. The following two activities come from different units and illustrate the integrated nature of the course as a whole. A description of the activity will be presented as well as examples of how students responded to each.

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6 In order to make this project more accessible for the students I put out a call on e-mail at the university for volunteers. Most semesters I had thirty to forty people volunteer for a fifteen- to twenty-minute interview. The volunteers would be students, both undergraduate and graduate, as well as staff from the university. In each session I have had a variety of ages, gender, and races represented in the volunteer pool. In a higher-level class I had the students find their own interviewees. Both ways have been successful.



## Identity Quotes

This activity was created as a way to integrate several of the ideas the students had been discussing up to this point in the course. Many of the students found the topic of "What is identity?" very difficult for two main reasons. First, the students thought the topic was abstract and difficult to discuss both because of their English and because it is something they had never thought about before coming to the class. The second reason was the personal nature of the topic. In many of the students' cultures they were not encouraged—in fact they were discouraged—from looking at themselves as individuals. The following quote from a student interview sums it up best:

To know identity is very important in some aspects. If man has his own identity he try to make himself better. To know identity includes recognizing his talent and calling. It makes him the way which he should go and through whole life. To know identity also unique which never is changed to other. I heard that if man knows his worth and value, he acts in different way and feel happiness and makes his effort to be the best. Unfortunately I didn't still have my own identity. Identity could be mainly formed during adolescence. But in my country we had no time to think over our identity during that period. We are only pushed to enter the college, so many college student wandered during period of college. It was same to my case. Because I don't still have a confirm identity, to think of the identity helps me to find and seek who I am and what I shall do through my whole life." (1/14/97)

The "What is identity?" quote activity involved the teacher making posters of quotes that define identity. When I began this activity I used quotes from famous people, but as time went on and I began to gather a collection of student quotes I used instead. Before the students enter the class the teacher posts the individual quotes in various places throughout the classroom. The students are instructed to read the quotes as they enter and sit by the one that they most agree with or wish to discuss. Once the students are settled they are given three questions to discuss in their group: (1) Share why you chose the quote you did. What stood out for you? (2) How is your quote connected with identity? and (3) Each group should create their own quote about identity. Some of the quotes I have received and use to post on the wall for future groups are:

"If others judge me it will not be correct, they do not know me because I don't know myself."

“You need to love yourself in order to experience yourself or understand yourself.”

“If you want to succeed in your life, you have to know about yourself.”

“Identity is all the colors of the world.”

As can be seen, the students use this activity to begin to look more deeply at the concept of identity and their relation to it. Once each of the individual groups is finished I conduct a large group discussion around all the quotes and the activity as a whole. Students are encouraged to question each other about why they wrote the quote they did and how it helps to define identity. This discussion usually spawns additional questions around the topic of identity and serves as a good introduction into their essays on “Who am I?”

As I used the topic of identity in the classroom, I questioned its use. Do students need to be given an opportunity or place to explore themselves in the new culture? Will this give them a better understanding of the new culture? One student on a midterm evaluation of the course, when students were asked how they would describe the course to a friend, said:

If you pursue your identity, I mean who you are this class is helpful to you. In the class you will think of many things around you and you will think of their influence on you. This course is a process in which you can find yourself in America.

As a teacher and creator of this course, I'd like to believe that a space can be provided for students to “find yourself in America” and that by providing this space we are helping students gain a better understanding of the new culture and the differences they have with it. In addition, this topic brought some of the students' English to a new level of discussing abstract concepts. Prior to this experience, many of them had only used their English for concrete conversations, and they appreciated the time spent trying to comprehend and discuss this concept. For some this topic of identity was about finding themselves and for others it was about finding the language to discuss identity as a concept. No matter which one was the focus each provided support for why the topic of identity is an important addition to the ESL curriculum.

### ***Culture Museum***

The topic of culture is difficult and complex and yet too often it is presented very simplistically. When developing this section of the

course, I wanted students to discover the complexity of the notion of culture and provide them with activities and language to discuss this view of culture. Culture Museum is my favorite activity in the course. It has always provided many opportunities for discussion of the complexity of the concept of culture. The initial idea came from an ESL textbook, but as time has gone it has been adapted and incorporated into the following activity.

The Culture Museum takes place over two days. The first part involves the students in small groups illustrating culture. I write on the board, "What is culture?" and ask them to draw their answers. I provide each group with some butcher paper and markers and about twenty to twenty-five minutes to construct their drawings. Figures 1 and 2 are a couple examples of the students' drawings. In the caption I have included students descriptions of their picture.

Many would expect this activity to produce only the visible aspects of culture (food, clothing, and so on) because of its instruction of illustration. I like to use the pictures because it helps some of the students describe an abstract concept without having the English necessary to explain their ideas fully. For some, the pictures give them the focus to describe the concept of culture. As the examples given show, the students created a deeper view of culture than just the visible

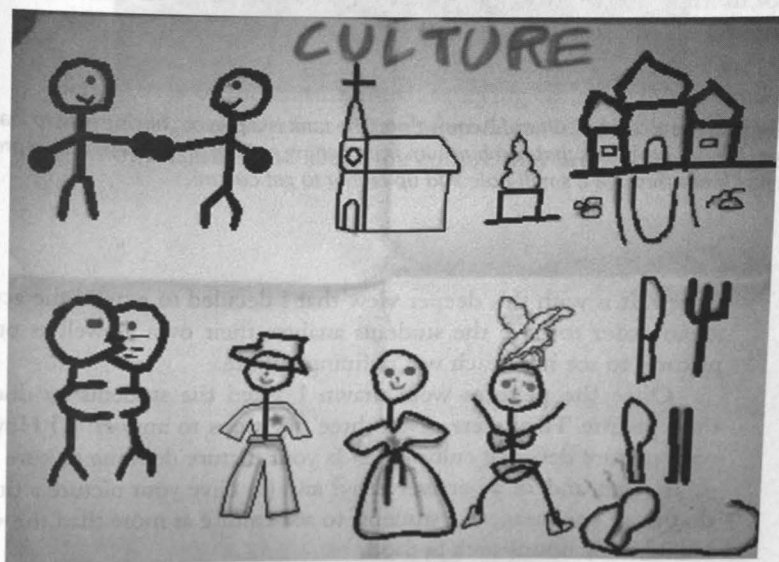


FIGURE 1 *Vision of Culture: We want to express all the different things about culture. First is a way of greeting, second is religion, and third is kitchenware.*

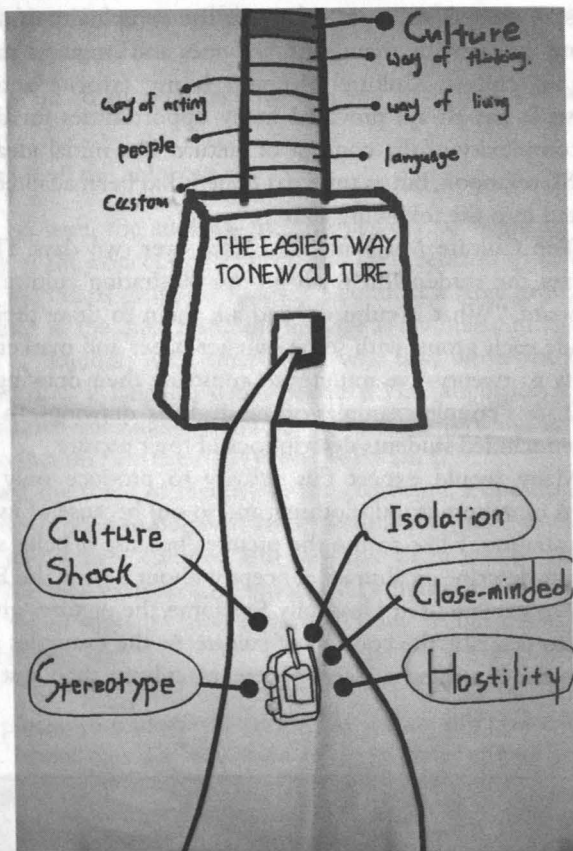


FIGURE 2 *The Road to Cultural Acquisition: The tank is a person. He is trying to learn culture. He has problems that can hurt him from getting culture. If he doesn't have problems he climbs through a small hole and up ladder to get culture.*

aspects. It is with this deeper view that I decided to extend the activity in order to have the students analyze their own as well as other pictures to see how each was defining culture.

Once the pictures were drawn I asked the students to discuss their picture. They were given three questions to answer: (1) How is your picture defining culture? (2) Is your picture defining culture as a noun, verb, and/or adjective? Why? and (3) Give your picture a title. I do this to encourage the students to see culture as more than the visible items or nouns such as food.

The following day, I post their pictures throughout the room, as well as some pictures from past classes. I write a message on the

blackboard welcoming the students to the "Culture Museum." In their small groups they are asked to interpret two to three pictures in the museum using the same three questions that they used for their own picture. Once the students have completed their small group discussions I conduct a large discussion around all the pictures. It is through this large group discussion that students begin to see the different views of culture and begin to question their own and others' views in order to get a better understanding of the concept. There is a fascination at looking at each other's drawings as well as hearing how different people had differing interpretations of the same picture.

This activity clearly demonstrates the complexity of culture for the students. It is from this point on that the students ask for clarification on the term *culture* and verbalize the many aspects of it. It is a fascinating experience to be a part of, from the time the students begin their drawings until the museum is closed.

## Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to show the reader how a course can be designed to have students explore the concepts of identity, culture, and difference. I discovered both in my research and practice that once the students began to define and know the complexity of these terms, they began to look at their representations of American society and groups within it through a different lens. The students go through a process of learning about themselves as well as about their views and perspectives of the culture they are trying to learn more about. It is through this exploration that the students learn about themselves, their own culture, and about the culture they are trying to acquire.

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