Cultural Lessons for North American Educational Exchange

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Students and professors who travel across North American borders can expect to encounter not only cultural linguistic, political, and social differences, but an apparent strangeness in the routines of daily life. This presentation will look at critical issues that vary from one North American country to another such as: individualism-collectivism, universal-particular, and time orientation (Hofstede, 1980: Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman. (1999); Trompenaars, 1995: Triandis, 1995).

Canada, the US, and Mexico differ along several important cultural dimensions. For example, one country may value individual rights and privileges over those of the group and conceive of justice as assessing everyone by the same standard while another may take the opposite view. The differences may at first seem strange and unusual, but ultimately, they can lead to new awareness of other cultures and a deeper understanding of our own. The authors recently completed a research project that focused on identifying the administrative concerns of school directors in Mexico. The perceived a lack of motivation among teachers in primary and elementary schools that manifested itself in both instructional difficulties in the classroom and teacher attendance patterns. A deeper understanding of the cultural context of Mexican education may help to explain the differences between directors and teachers.

Entry into another culture—an individual perspective

I went to Mexico City for the first time in 1996. On the one hand, it seemed like a city of danger. A high crime rate, volcanoes, earth quakes and loud and chaotic traffic were frightening and different from life in San Antonio, Texas. On the other hand, a trip to the pyramids at Teotehuacán is to experience another world as though the gods are nearby in the sky and wind.

After eight years and many more visits, I received another invitation to Mexico. My colleagues, Carlos Topete and Jose Maria Garcia were teaching at the Universidad de Baja California in Ensenada about 50 miles south of the California border. They invited two doctoral students and me to give a workshop and to investigate the challenges faced by school directors in rural areas.

I wish I could say that by then, I had adjusted to cultural differences, but every trip to Mexico is like going for the first time. The night before the workshop, my colleagues dropped us off at the hotel and suggested that they would register students the next day and then pick us up for the 9:30 workshop at 9:00.

I said, “Oh no, I want to get their early. Pick us up before registration at 8:15.”

They agreed, but the next morning we waited until they picked us up a little before 9:00. When we arrived, all 25 school directors were in their seats ready for the class. All places were occupied, and the tables were set in a U shape with no space to get by the wall in the front and no table, desk, or podium for the instructor.

I was nervous about getting started, but at this point, I stepped outside myself, as though I were looking down at the classroom from above and wondered how this

problem would be solved. Of course, Carlos, Jose Maria and the school directors immediately looked for a desk and rearranged the furniture.

Octavio Paz (1961) wrote a considerable portion of *The labyrinth of solitude* while he was outside of Mexico in California. The contrast of a different culture helped to give him insight about his own. Each of us is alone as an individual, but our future lies in overcoming that separateness and recognizing the "otherˆ. Paz says, "To be oneself is always to become that other person who is one's real self, that hidden promise or possibilityˆ (p 175). The missing parts invariably involve those half seen aspects of others' ways of life. Paz looks for "a world in which men recognize themselves in each other...ˆ (p. 175). In this way, we can not only learn about one another, by strengthening our own identities, but also, allow us to transform ourselves. We are especially interested in what kind of leadership might take us to these new understandings.

Focus Group Research

Our research methodology consisted in conducting focus groups with school directors and asking them to reflect on the challenges that they faced. Focus group monitors were bilingual US graduate students and professors from Mexican universities. The directors spoke freely about their concerns, listening carefully to one another, sometimes with serious intent and other times with laughter and tears. We believe that the comments we heard reflect the authentic concerns of the school directors.

The results are reported as brief stories that participants shared during the focus groups. We called one of the stories "The Persistent Doorman." Eduardo is 50 years old and has been working in education for 29 years. He is the director of an elementary school in the afternoon shift. The circumstances that led him to take a leadership position

were his desire and willingness to carry on with his lifelong dream of promoting educational change, and to implement inclusion and participation in a collaborative way among teachers, parents, and students.

He mentioned attitude of teachers and lack of punctuality as major challenges. Classes start at 1:00 p.m. in his school, and teachers work a double shift. Some are even directors in the mornings. He cited lack of punctuality as a chronic problem. Teachers were following their own schedule and would not arrive on time. He had to reach other directors and supervisors in the same school area to coordinate schedules, but still, they would be late. He was going from class to class until teachers arrived. He had to plead with them to come to work on time. Even the janitor arrived late and left early. Eduardo stated that although in the last four years he had witnessed some improvement; still, it was a challenge he faced daily.

Another challenge he mentioned was that teachers are not equally committed to both schools. While they give 80 percent of themselves in their morning jobs, they are too tired to work in the afternoon. They schedule their leaves and meetings in this shift. He urges them to schedule their meetings in the mornings, but teachers are not willing to make this change. He said, “This is an ongoing challenge… right now I am the doorman, the one who is ‘kind-of’ picking up things, and, yes!.. I am opening doors too.” He believes teachers respect him because he sets an example by working long hours (double shift) and arriving at school early.

Eduardo talked with pride when he said that he enjoyed having the opportunity to participate in workshops and training related to his job. He strived to improve himself

and others professionally. He said, “I don’t keep anything to myself. I always share with my co-workers everything I learn.”

He did not receive any educational training prior to assuming the role of school director other than his years of experience and his knowledge of educational programs. He said that he fell short in training in interpersonal relations, human resources, and personnel management. He mentioned that working with adults was a serious challenge for him:

> Each one has different ways of thinking, different academic backgrounds, and it’s very difficult to manage them. They are already set in their ways....Any type of training in how to deal with your personnel can give you the elements and knowledge you need in order to improve communication between teachers and parents, parents and directors, and students and teachers.

Eduardo considered himself an agent of change. He believed other leaders and directors are beginning to think about the importance of inclusion, trying to involve parents, the community, teachers, and students in a more collaborative way (Slater, Esparza, Peña, Topete, Álvarez, Cerecedo, & García, 2005).

In the story of Eduardo, what is the source of the conflict between the school directors and the teachers? How might cultural concepts help explain the problem?

Cultural Theories

Culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one human group from another” Hofstede (1980, 1997). In a classic study, Hofstede identified the dimensions which have formed the basis for discussion about leadership and culture. They are: power distance; collectivism versus individualism; femininity versus masculinity; and uncertainty avoidance. Taken together, these dimensions constitute a

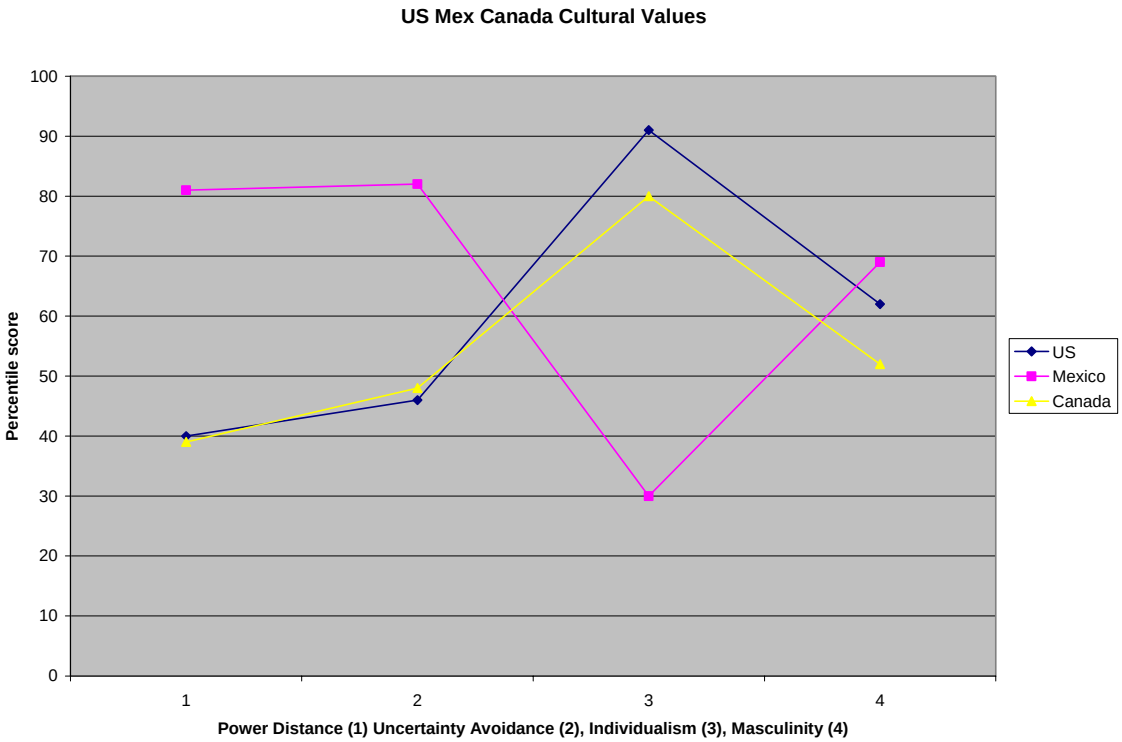
model by which differences between national cultures might be measured. Each dimension of culture has a specific definition:

1. Power distance represents the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power within then society is unequally distributed. Power distance can be measured form small to large.
2. Collectivism represents a society in which from birth people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.
3. Individualism is the opposite of collectivism and characterizes a society in which the ties between individuals are loose and individuals are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family.
4. Femininity describes a society in which gender roles overlap. Both men and women are expected to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.
5. Masculinity is the opposite of femininity and characterizes a society in which gender roles are clearly distinct. Men are expected to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success while women are expected to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.
6. Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a society feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. A society's tendency towards uncertainty avoidance is measured from weak to strong.

Hofstede and Bond (1984) added another dimension of national culture: long-term orientation in life versus short-term orientation. Hall (1983) examines cultural time orientations as they play out in daily life. In a monochromatic timeframe tasks are controlled one at a time with attention to schedules and a high level of regularity and consistency. In a polychromatic timeframe, several things are done at once with a high sensitivity to context and greater orientation to people and relationships. US and Canadian cultures tend to be monochromic whereas Mexican

culture is traditionally more polychromatic, although these orientations may be changing with increasing industrialization and urbanization.

The following graph shows Hofstede's value preferences most commonly held in North America. Canada and the US are close together, at least in 1980 when the data were published, but Mexico is quite different. It exhibits a higher level of power distance, higher avoidance of uncertainty and a preference for collectivism over individualism.



Trompenaars (1993) extended Hofstede's schema into six categories: universalism-particularism, individualism-collectivism, neutral-emotional affect, achievement-ascription, time: sequential-synchronic, and nature: control-harmonize. These are useful ways to think of the dilemmas we face when we enter other cultures and

they provide ways to understand the challenges faced by school directors within one country.

A good illustration is Dorfman and Howell's (1997) investigation of managerial and leadership practices in *maquiladoras* (Mexican manufacturing entities clustered on the US-Mexico border). US managers tended to work in a rule-bound context where success was defined by adherence to procedures and processes. Status was often earned with concrete achievements. Advancement may be based upon the notion of merit rather than on connections. Mexican managerial behaviors tended to include extreme courtesy, devotion to ceremony, and a reluctance to engage in conversation that might appear too direct or lacking the adornment of *simpatía* (congeniality). The ability to negotiate with *simpatía* and to work within the existing management framework was a quality found in successful Mexican managers.

Of course, these categories are limited. Cultural stereotyping, (Osland & Bird, 2000) can occur when categories designed to explain large group behavior are used to explain the behavior of individuals in every situation and at all times. Individuals and groups within a culture vary widely and cultural norms change over time. Situations that seem to contradict the cultural rule are a ripe area for research. The give clues about broader phenomena.

The categories themselves need further clarification. Collectivism, for example, might be expressed quite differently in work groups and professional organizations as opposed to families and society as a whole. Triandis (1995) believes that most people start as collectivists closely attached to their families. Eventually, during the process of adult development, they start to detach themselves. In collectivist cultures this

detachment is minimal, and collective goals take priority over personal goals. Usually, individuals do not give up relationships. Triandis perceives these cultures as being more stable. He adds, “When they get married, they link with another collective, and personal emotions are much less important than obligations and duties, so divorce is also rare” (xiii).

Unlike collectivist societies, in individualistic cultures this detachment is maximized. People’s autonomy and personal goals take precedent over the goals of the group or the collective. If the cost of maintaining personal relationships is greater than their personal goals, they tend to withdraw from that relationship:

> They change relationship often, and when they get married, they do it on the basis of personal emotions, which often change over time, and thus divorce is frequent. They raise their children to be independent of their collectives. Freedom from the influence of the collective is a very important value (Triandis, 1995, xiii).

To understand the interaction among members of different cultures, Triandis (1995) further explains that approximate 70 percent of countries in the world are collectivists and many disagree with Western views. Thus, “the individualistic emphasis on human rights does not necessarily suit all the leaders of collectivist countries” (p.13).

Recently, Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, and Dorfman. (1999) conducted a multi-country study to determine which leadership characteristics are universally desired and which are country specific. Integrity, trust, teamwork, and communication were universally valued. On the other hand, Triandis (1993) has suggested that successful leaders in a collectivist culture tend to be paternalistic and

supportive, whereas in an individualistic culture successful leaders tend to be achievement-oriented and participative.

In an analysis of one leadership theory (Kouzes and Posner, 2002) Slater, Boone, , Price, Martinez, Alvarez, Topete, and Olea (2002) found that a group of Mexican educators favored leadership practices that encourage the heart (through building subordinates self-confidence, setting high expectations, and celebrating successful performance) while US educators favored challenge the process (through identification of opportunities for change, encouraging risk taking among subordinates, and learning from experimentation). In an open ended study, Slater, Boone, Fillion, Galloway, Munoz, Base, Romero-Grimaldo, Korth, Alvarez, Topete, and Iturbe. (in press) identified participation, communication, change and values as important dimensions of ideal leadership for both Mexican and US educators, but their were subtle differences in how they applied and understood these dimensions. These differences can lead to new levels of understanding and insight. We call this level metacultural because the dialogue goes beyond mere exchange and creates new ways of seeing that would not have been possible in either culture separately.

Conclusion

Dorfman (2004) suggests caution when choosing a partner in cross-cultural research to make sure that understanding is complete and that honest dialogue occurs. Our experience in working with colleagues in Mexico and Canada would suggest that we do not necessarily get to choose our partners. Time and circumstance sometimes dictate with whom you work. When you do have an option, do you choose according to the task

that needs to be done or the person whom you know? This question poses a dilemma which is itself a cultural question.

There are bound to be frustrations in working with people different from ourselves. It takes time to understand and trust. Continued faithfulness makes lasting relationships and contributes to successful research.

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