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Culture Influences Learning Style and Self-Perception: Some Insights for Teachers

TANAI GIRL

There are various learning styles and different kinds of self-perception. In part one of this article, two learning styles, group and individual, are illustrated by referring to the stories of Taro, a Japanese student, and Wolfgang, a German student. The type of self-perception that a person possesses is likely to be influenced by the type of cultural environment. This argument is discussed in part two. Part three focuses on the transfer of knowledge. Knowledge should be appropriately modified according to the level of understanding and to the culture of the students. Individual differences exist across cultures as well as in a culture.

Culture and learning style: Group versus individual

On the first day of the university life, Taro, a freshman of the Tokyo Institute of Technology who was just released from the high school examination stress, entered into his "honeymoon" years with great excitement. In contrast, Wolfgang, a freshman of the University of Munich, rushed to the crowd for registration and to the student service for consultation.

On the first day of the final year, Taro reported to his sensei (professor), and the co-workers of his kenkyushitsu (the laboratory). He shared a room with the joshu (assistant to the professor), two senpais (senior students) of the doctorate program and two senpais of the master program. Taro worked in team, and stayed long in the kenkyushitsu. He had to be there before nine and to leave after the sensei and the joshu. His sensei was diligent and he sometimes spent a couple of sleepless nights in the kenkyushitsu. At the university of
Munich, Wolfgang received the approval to write his thesis. The supervisor seemed content with his proposal. Wolfgang had a period of six months to complete his thesis. There was no mandatory schedule to meet his supervisor. Wolfgang knew that it was beneficial to consult him at least twice before the final examination. Courteous visits are often rewarding.

Various learning styles exist. Two of them, *group* and *individual*, are illustrated above. Taro represents many Japanese students whose behaviors are shaped in a collectivist culture where in-group is reinforced. Wolfgang is an example of German students who live in an individualist culture where the individual's wish is respected (see Hofstede, 1980, for the classification of culture). "Educators in Japan believe that all students can achieve if they persevere (gambaru) and endure hardship, especially in the pre-school and elementary school years." (Blinco, 1992, p.408) Working hard is one of the indispensable principles of learning. Learning to achieve the best with a persevering attitude has been Taro's life aim. He has insisted on enrolling in a prominent university as it affects his career path. A senior manager of an enterprise, for instance, will recruit a new graduate from his own university or prefecture, and will mentor him for many years (Lorriman, 1995). Usually, the *senseis* are consulted during the recruitment. Perseverance extends to interpersonal relationships. Taro's mother has prepared him since young to get along in the various social elements in the society such as the school and the group (see de Vos, 1973, for the Japanese's socialization). He has put efforts in establishing a good *senpai-kohai* (senior student-junior student) relationship. His *sensei, joshu and senpais* were mentors. Education, however, does not end at the university. It continues in the enterprise. It is well known that "Japan's success in international markets has been very much based on the excellent education of its people" (Lorriman, 1995, p.249).

Wolfgang was allowed to *explore* his strengths and weaknesses. A year after his enrollment to the university he discovered the joy in learning foreign languages unintentionally on a trip to East Asia. Wolfgang's parents were surprised to be informed of but accepted his change to major in East Asian Studies. The thirst for new experiences initiated him to spend a year in Japan. Wolfgang is at present a research assistant in the Max-Planck Institute for East-Asian
Patent. His work in this institute enriches his knowledge of and increases his experience in Asian cultures.

*Implications for teachers:* The stories of Taro and Wolfgang implies that there is more than one type of learning style. The style of learning is often influenced by the type of culture, though there are exceptions. Taro is a typical example of a *group* learner. His learning is rewarded from this continuous efforts in academic performances as well as in maintaining a cooperative attitude with the members of the *kenkyushitsu*. Wolfgang, on the other hand, is a typical example of an *individual* learner. His learning involves discovering own strength and weakness. Teachers should be aware of the variation of learning styles in different cultures. Students should be given a psychologically secure environment to cultivate and to select the learning styles that are suitable for them. Teachers should understand differences among people even of the same culture. Generalization that one type of learning style is suitable for all people within a group (e.g. of the same culture) should be avoided (see next section, the "shift" of the type of self-perception across cultures).

**Culture and the self: Interdependent versus independent self-perception**

Culture affects self-perception (Dhawan, Roseman, Naidu & Rettek, 1995). The type of self that one may sample in a society is influenced by its culture (Triandis, 1989). Cousins (1989) investigated the self-perception of the Japanese (of a collectivist society) and the American (of an individualist society) subjects by asking them to answer a simple question "who am I?" His results showed that many Japanese subjects referred their self-concepts to social situations, for example, I am in the gymnastics club and I am a student of the Kyoto university. The American students, on the other hand, referred frequently to pure psychological attributes, for example, I am easygoing. These findings are supported by Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) hypothesis. People in collectivist societies are likely to define self primarily by referring to aspects of social roles and memberships that are related to others. As a result, members of collectivist cultures are likely to elaborated interdependent self-construal. They suggested that the normative tasks of persons in an individualist culture are
unique. These individuals are likely to construct a well-elaborated independent self-construal (see Table 1 for the characteristics of interdependent and independent self-concepts). However, the self-perception of an individual is not static. It changes according to the external environment. This statement is proved by Triandis, McCusker and Hui’s (1990) findings about the similar scores of the Asian and American subjects on measures of independence or self-reliance. They speculated that high scores on the measure of independence may due to modernization pressures in many East Asian countries (see the next section on the characteristics of culture). Cross (1995) presented similar findings. His findings showed that Asian subjects developed a firm independent self-perception when they are in an individualistic culture. As such, I hypothesize that Taro is likely to show a strong interdependent view of self when he is in the group, for instance, with his parents, friends and people of his kenkyushitsu (see Figure 1). In the group, Taro is likely to set a high priority for the group's goals that emphasize harmonious relationship with other people. However, he may engage in an independent view of self when he is in an individualistic society. Wolfgang, on the other hand, is likely to possess an independent view of self in his culture. He is allowed to voice his opinions and to preserve his own goal. Wolfgang may have to adjust his self-perception to a more interdependent one, when he is in a collectivist society such as Japan. Typically, universities in Japan are places to learn and to spend free time (Moritz, 1988). Foreign students, to a certain extent, may have to adapt to the in-group tradition, though some of them might spend their leisure doing other activities such as traveling (Tan, 1989).

Implication for teachers: Taro and Wolfgang are students living in two different social systems. It is obvious that they possess different self-perceptions, behavioral and learning patterns. Teachers have to realize that cultural differences as well as similarities also exist among individuals of the same social system. With the rapid development of the mass media and telecommunication system, students are exposed to various types of cultures. It is therefore important to be aware of individual differences of self-perception. In curriculum planning, teachers should take these differences into account. Teachers should recognize the students' preference and provide them the opportunity to explore other types of behaviors. Teachers should know that the shift between interdependent-independent view of self may happen in any individual.
Table 1: Summary of key differences between an independent and an interdependent construal of self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature compared</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Interdependent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Separate from social context</td>
<td>Connected with social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Bounded, unitary, stable</td>
<td>Flexible, variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important features</td>
<td>Internal, private (abilities, thoughts, feelings)</td>
<td>External, public (statuses, roles, relationships)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>Be unique</td>
<td>Be indirect; &quot;say what's on your mind&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express self</td>
<td>Occupy one's proper place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Realize internal attributes</td>
<td>Engage in appropriate action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote own's goal</td>
<td>Promote other's goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be direct; &quot;say what's on your mind&quot;</td>
<td>Be indirect; &quot;read other's mind&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of others</td>
<td>Self-evaluation, others importance for social comparison, reflected appraisal</td>
<td>Self-definition: relationships with others in specific contexts define the self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of self-esteem</td>
<td>Ability to express self, validate internal attributes</td>
<td>Ability to adjust, restrain self, maintain harmony with social context</td>
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* Esteeming the self may be primarily a Western phenomenon, and the concept of self-esteem should perhaps be replaced by self-satisfaction, or by a term that reflects the realization that one is fulfilling the culturally mandated task.

Source: Markus & Kitayama (1991, p. 230)

Figure 1: Conceptual representation of the self

Taro's interdependent view of self

Wolfgang's independent view of self
Culture and education: How should the knowledge be transferred?

What is culture? "Definitions of culture are numerous." (Herskovits, 1969, p.17) "A society is composed of people; the way they behave is their culture" (Herskovits, 1956, p.29, italic in original). People who possess the same ethnic and education background, use the same language, attend the same social festivals and commit the same religion or living philosophy tend to have a similar culture. Culture is shared by human beings' living in organized aggregates and is kept relatively uniform by social pressure. It changes with geographical and social environment changes (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

What is education? Education is a socializing process in which values and norms of a society are reinforced and are transmitted. Education is a social activity. It is not a matter of an individual's concern, but a collaborative work of an individual and his institution. Through education a person receives knowledge and understands social expectations. Education may be conducted in a formal way, e.g. in schools and institutions, as well as in an informal way, e.g. at home or at social associations.

Transfer of knowledge from a cross-cultural perspective: The contributions of cross-cultural research to educational practice began with the stage of applying the methods of educational practitioners from the United States and Europe to the Third World (testing universality), and the search for culture-specific features at schools and the understanding of culture-specific modes of learning and reasoning (looking for variability) (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1986). From the 1980s until today, cross-cultural researchers and curriculum innovators produce practical solutions to domestic educational problems (indigenization in methods and contents). The process of indigenization includes adaptations of foreign knowledge and innovations according to the needs of the receiving culture.

The stories of Taro and Wolfgang illustrate that culture can be treated as a natural environment for discovering variability of psychological phenomena (see Segall et al., 1990; Berry et al., 1992). Culture in the 1990s is an integral part of social sciences (Valsier, 1995). Cross-cultural research emphasizes the appropriate methodology for discovering common and culture-specific features.
of the contributors and receivers. New expertise has to be modified in accordance to the needs of the receiving culture (Figure 2). The innovation stage is essential to generate new and useful ideas. The example of Japan's success in education highlights the importance of cross-cultural study in education. After the Meiji's restoration, many prominent scientists and researchers of the West were employed to set up universities and institutions in Japan. The key to the success of Japanese education system lies in the Japanese's competence to match the "imported" knowledge with her indigenous needs. The acceptance and accommodation of new knowledge were done at the level of the suitability to the Japanese society (Lorriman, 1995). Similar to cross-cultural psychology, the ultimate goal of cross-cultural research in education is to develop universal laws and models. As education is a local as well as a global activity, educators should, on the one hand, be aware of the domestic demands, and on the other hand take care of the global needs of the people.

**Figure 2:** Processes of the transfer of knowledge across cultures

Explanation: In step 1 culture A is the giver, whereas culture B is the receiver. Knowledge of culture A is modified to meet social and cultural needs of culture B. New ideas are shown in culture B in step 2. In step 3, knowledge of culture B is transferred back to culture A. In this case, culture A is the receiver, and culture B the contributor. The transfer of knowledge again undergoes an adaptation process. In culture A the innovation process of the knowledge occurs (see step 4). The adaptation process takes place in step 5 when knowledge is transferred to culture B again.
Implication for teachers: In the classroom, teachers are agents who facilitate the transfer of knowledge as well as are researchers who investigate common and specific features of students. Teachers should recognize the diversified needs of their students. They should also realize that any classroom is, to a certain extent, multicultural. Teachers should also be conscious of similarities and differences between them and the students. In the classroom, teachers select techniques that befit the cultural background and the level of understanding of the students (adaptation). Students should be encouraged to internalize the new knowledge pool in an innovative way and apply it in their daily life (innovation). Students should be invited to evaluate teaching approaches. Teachers can improve their methods of transfer of knowledge using this feedback.

Summary

This article highlights the existence of various learning styles and different views of self and how they change in different cultures. It emphasizes that judgment shall not be made on the learning style and the type of self-perception. Students should be exposed to different learning styles and opportunities to select those that match their personalities. In this respect, teachers are responsible to provide them a comfortable and a secure classroom environment. This manuscript serves to remind teachers to recognize the existence of different self-perceptions. Students are exposed to diversified cultures with the advance of telecommunication and mass media. During the process of knowledge transfer, teachers should take the cultural backgrounds of the students into account.

References


