



Teaching Across Cultural Strengths: A Guide to Balancing Integrated and Individuated Cultural Frameworks in College Teaching

Chavez, Alicia Fedelina; and Longerbeam, Susan Diana
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Book Review

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Teaching Across Cultural Strengths is a guide for faculty seeking to apply a cultural lens to their teaching practice; the goal is to learn how to “draw from the cultural strengths of *all* peoples in service toward equitable and effective teaching and learning” (xx). Chávez and Longerbeam adopt a complex definition of culture visualized in successive layers: artifacts and behaviors, beliefs, values, norms, and underlying assumptions (71). A central thesis is that university teaching in the United States follows an Oxford or Germanic model that has not adequately served students of color. The authors describe a dissonance between an individuated cultural framework characterized by private, compartmentalized, and linear learning and an integrated cultural framework characterized by mutual, cyclical, and contextually-dependent learning. The intent is not to favor one cultural approach over another but to stress the strengths and potential rewards of pedagogy combining a wider array of cultural norms.

Based on research and faculty development conducted in Arizona and New Mexico, the book emphasizes Native and Hispano/Latino American students (12). Faculty interested in how their teaching is responsive to religious diversity in the classroom will find more than enough tools for reflection in this volume but only a small number of direct examples. The teaching of evolution in the biology classroom is mentioned as an example of potential incongruence between course content and student beliefs. Immediately following this case is the fascinating story of accommodations made for a medical student who dropped out due to a spiritual injunction against handling human remains (154-55).

In their first chapter, the authors introduce their data-supported Cultural Frameworks in Teaching and Learning Model with activities and vignettes meant to help the reader transform their own pedagogy. This chapter has a workbook feel with four graphics in the first eight pages. The second chapter, “Culture in College Teaching,” offers a more readable treatment of the basic principles of the book and I would advise reading it first. The next three chapters offer extended explanations of how to implement culturally balanced teaching supported by a large number of classroom narratives. The sixth chapter is particularly useful since it is organized as “The Top 10 Things Faculty Can Do to Teach Across Cultures.” The final two chapters discuss the authors’ own work in faculty development and how others might initiate similar projects. The book contains a helpful index and two appendices: one describing how to create a “culture and teaching autobiography” and a second containing a short list of books for further learning.

When I was in grade school, “Choose Your Own Adventure” books were all the rage. These titles were formatted in a way that let the reader jump around in the text to create her own story. In *Teaching Across Cultural Strengths*, Chávez and Longerbeam capture a similar spirit by arranging advice, questions, and activity prompts so that faculty can create their own workshop experience either individually or as a group. No one can be a perfect teacher but we are all called to be reflective teachers. In form and content, this book can be a useful asset on that journey and it is highly recommended.

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