

TRAINING FOR HUMANIZING SKILLS IN A  
BICULTURAL AMERICAN SCHOOL IN MEXICO <sup>1</sup>

Rosalind Beimler  
Asst. Supt of Instruction,  
American School  
Mexico, D. F.

Can Rock Hudson and Celia Rodriguez and Tom Feng find success and happiness in an American school in Mexico City with bilingual and bicultural goals and a multinational student body?

Well, maybe, if we have the humanizing skills with which to achieve positive, cross-cultural encounters: this means the teachers, the students, their parents and the administration in a tossed salad mix where the flavor of each ingredient is maintained, but the salad is a new and richer taste treat. Otherwise the ingredients wilt and the whole salad goes soggy.

It's not easy to have a positive cross-cultural experience. Meeting someone different, off your own turf, can be devastating. You have to be a certain kind of a person to be able to manage certain situations and relationships. Margaret Mead says a good interactor has:

communication skills

adaptability

a nonauthoritarian personality

empathy

social displacement from family

She suggests that cross cultural situations require flexibility in symmetry relationships. One needs to recognize and manage situations which each culture role plays differently:

the role of host and guest

the role of giver and receiver

the role of dominance and submission

the role of men and women

<sup>1</sup> An address given at the National Convention of ASCD

relative physical size

deference to age or class

language style: oratory vs. simple statement

face-saving devices

frankness vs. circumlocution (1)

and I would like to add intimacy styles and body language communications.

Some other things also get in the way:

The J Curve: reaching a balanced picture of the second culture, neither gushing over its local color, nor deploring its Alice in Wonderland upside-downness.

The sense of betrayal of your own "mother" culture when you adapt too well to a new one: Dr. Luis Feder, a Mexican psychoanalyst who studied the effect of long term residence in a second culture, found that "To defend one's own object is psychologically equivalent to holding on to one's mother. To renounce it is equivalent to losing her." Rejection of the new culture becomes the equivalent of a vote of loyalty to one's own culture. (2)

How you view your own culture as being seen by the other culture, flavors your view of the second culture. If you feel that yours is appreciated and given equal status, you like the second culture; if not, you turn against it.

Ramirez and Castañeda's new research on field-independent and field-dependent teaching and learning styles, helps us understand why some teachers and students work well together, and some don't. The Anglo-type teacher who is task oriented and expects students to work for work's sake, and the Latin-type teacher who is relationship oriented and expects them to work "for me" and for their relationships' sake, find the Anglo and Latin student counterpart either accepting or rejecting them and school on the same terms. How much this field independent, field dependent work style is cultural, and how much it is class, we are trying to find out in the American

---

(1) Mead, Margaret, The Selection of Personnel for International Service, World Federation for Mental Health, Genova, 1963

(2) Feder, Luis, "Psychogenesis and Phenomenology of the Encounter" Proceedings of the Third World Congress of Psychiatry, Canada, pp. 346-351

schools of Mexico City working with middle class children whose parents, like all middle classes everywhere, are achievement and task oriented. (3)

How can the school give the insights and humanizing skills which make such encounters positive? At the American school we try in many ways, at all levels. At present we are using some of these strategies:

Magic Circle: At the primary level we believe that helping children express feelings will improve their personal and social communication skills, show them the community of mankind, give insight into how others feel and evaluate, and make the children less authoritarian and more open personalities.

Kohlberg's States of Moral Development, using especially his discussions of moral dilemmas: Both parents, high school students, and teachers have been working in a variety of groups towards building "the just and moral community" at school. These discussion groups bring their own personal and cultural dilemmas which help them gain insight into how most values are culture related and serve the social realities of that culture, but some basic few seem to belong to a hierarchy of universally cherished values, which after values clarification, sift down to essence.

Second Language classes: English and Spanish are both taught as second languages to students coming into the school with only a first language. These introductory courses are a blend of language and culture, and all language lessons are based on interpreting the culture to the student, eg. The beginning lessons in greetings are taught as culture capsules of how to relate to the people in the new culture... how to address peers, older people, and even the new maid.

In-service culture capsules: Introductory discussions with new staff, interne teachers, and parents help reduce culture shock. They help interpret such mutual communication conflicts as that which exists between the gringo's terse "No" and the Mexican's polite and round about in-order-not-to-hurt-you "No." They provide historic background for why things are as they are and how people manage with things as they are.

---

(3) Ramirez and Castañeda, Cultural Democracy, Biocognitive Development and Education, 1974. Academic Press, Inc. New York.

A values clarification and comparative approach to curriculum:  
 Many of our content courses are taught with a comparative approach: eg. comparative economic systems not only looks at Fenton's Marxism vs. capitalism, but also at Mexico's famed "Mixed economy." We take comparative looks at the 1948 war between Mexico and the U. S. as seen by both sides, then and now. We look at the work ethic as it relates to Northamerican settlers coming into a country where there was no labor force at hand, and Spanish conquistadores finding whole villages to do their heavy physical labor for them. Clarification of cultural and individual values as they relate to issues is the classroom teacher's role.

Cross cultural problem solving groups: We are now working with our guidance counselors as humanistic discussion leaders to open up the areas of conflict between groups of Mexican and American students and teachers. Such problems as having all the gringo's on the American football team and all Mexican boys on the soccer team divide the student body. Talking things through seems to work when there is time and leadership. But it never seems enough.

Role playing and values clarification strategies are used in all these experiences, everywhere we can put them to work in opening up conflicts and contradictions to build insights, appreciations, understandings and acceptance.

"Teacher training"? I believe we are working more with "Everybody" training: parents, students, and teachers, as well as administrators are all involved in all the activities described. Our guidance counselors play an important part in all of this as group interaction skills builders, and we bring outside workshop people to train us to carry on: Fenton inquiry people, Magic Circle people, humanistic psychologists from college campuses, local psychoanalysts, economists, anthropologists, parents who have lived abroad, United Nations officials, etc.

Any help you can give us, we welcome.