



CULTURE AS A PARAMETER IN ASSESSING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

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Culture is not a new concept within the social sciences. In fact, culture has been widely discussed for years to investigate how it has evolved and how it still affects human communication. The aim of this article is to introduce the concept of culture and illustrate its relevance in key theoretical discussions and debates in the social sciences. Also, it aims based on secondary research evidence to highlight how differing cultural factors affect learning and assessing in higher education. The paper concludes that it is essential for assessors to consider the unique cultural characteristics when assessing their students' performance.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes in the existing literature on the role of culture in education by focusing on assessment. It is one of very few studies which suggests that assessing students' performance should not take place independent of cultural particularities and sets the ground for designing alternative, culturally responsive assessment tools.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several assessment opportunities are available, indicative of the fact that no shortage of possibilities can occur at any given time. Given this, it is significant to understand that it remains the responsibility of the teachers to utilize their learning experiences as a meaningful assessment experience. To ensure efficiency in assessments that are driven towards improving learning and teaching, information generated from such activities is utilized to inform the teachers and their students in determining what needs to be done next. As a significant resource in schools, teachers are required to raise the standards of education. Improving the equity and efficiency of schooling, therefore, depends on ensuring that the teachers are well resourced and motivated to perform their tasks (Nowell *et al.*, 2010).

This paper, therefore, seeks to understand the manner in which culture may be initiated as a parameter in the assessment of student's performance. This is pegged on the idea that the westernization of higher education does not consider the cultural particularities of students. As a result, non-English students studying in American/English universities often underperform because by western standards they are not "good" students. This is often the case with non-native students studying in American universities. This paper will discuss the

evolution of culture as a key concept in social sciences and argue for the inclusion of culture as a significant element in planning assessment tools for students.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURE

Culture is a highly debatable concept as it is used as an explanation for many variations in human behavior, in personal, professional, and academic discussions. Having an understanding of where this concept has emerged from gives us a far greater critical appreciation of that context and concept. Culture is essential and evident in how we think, communicate, and function as active members of society. Through culture, people's beliefs, as well as their social behavior can be understood. Despite the efforts of academic scholars to provide an accurate definition of culture throughout the years, it is still a rather multifaceted concept to explain. Below are quoted certain key efforts of academic scholars to define culture. In ethnographic terms, "culture of civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1913). In behavioral terms, culture consists in "patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts: the essential core of culture consists traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and specially their attached values" (Kluckhohn, 1951).

In symbolic terms culture is "... a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms using which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1966). In modern ethnographic terms, culture is defined as "...a shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of communicative actions" (LeVine, 1984). In organizational terms, Schein (1990) defines culture as the degree of involvement and commitment of people within an organization and he continues, adding that culture can be viewed as a set of values, beliefs, ideas, artifacts, dress code, daily manners, as well as "permanent archival manifestations such as company records, products, statements of philosophy, and annual reports" (p. 111). One of the most widely cited scholars on culture is Hofstede (1980) who conducted a research study that identified the six primary dimensions of cultural variations. These variations include the following: (1) immediacy, (2) individualism vs. collectivism, (3) gender, (4) power distance, (5) uncertainty-avoidance, and (6) cultural contextualization. In a latter study, Hofstede (2001) added a sixth dimension, indulgence versus self-restraint. These cultural dimensions affect people's perception of self and others (Anderson, 1997). For instance, people from high context cultures such as China, Japan, and Korea would not give every small piece of information about themselves, since, as Anderson writes, information in their culture is integrated into the environment, context, situation, and nonverbal cues. From all definitions above, it can be understood that culture is a broad term including each country's cultural characteristics, society's subcultural groups, and humans' learned behaviors. Through analyzing people's intercultural interaction, communication scholars can understand how verbal and non-verbal messages are filtered via each person's cultural characteristics. This paper highlighted the importance of culture in social sciences. Next, the paper will argue for the inclusion of culture related criteria as significant elements in assessing students in higher education.

2.1. Does National Culture Matter in Higher Education

Culture and education are two concepts that have been widely examined in the literature. Klementsova (2013) argues that both concepts of culture and education constantly relate the one to the other. A cultural comparison study on how technology might be integrated into classrooms was conducted by Tierney and Damarin (1998) in which they examined three groups of students having different cultural backgrounds. An unexpected outcome of the research investigation revealed that students coming from East Asia interpreted knowledge of the software programs by "using the norms and practices of Western networks, technology, and principles" (1998, p.266).

Eldridge and Cranston (2009) used Hofstede (1980) national cultural value dimensions as a research tool to answer the latter question by examining the critical role of culture in managing transnational education partnerships between Australian and Thai universities. Similarly, Chayakonvikom *et al.* (2016) employed Hofstede's cultural dimensions to evaluate the effectiveness of an international training program in Thailand. The findings of both latter studies showed that any international training or educational curriculum should accommodate cultural learning behaviors and bridge the cultural gap between the faculty and the student. Despite the fact that both terms globalization and internationalization are used synonymously in literature, do they have the same meaning?

Altbach and Knight (2007) disagree that the terms globalization and internationalization can be used interchangeably. The term globalization is mainly used in economic and academic discussions while academic scholars refer to the term internationalization in the context of the policies and practices in educational institutions. Internationalization mainly is used to describe a corporate advantage, an acquired knowledge or an enhanced academic curriculum that emphasizes on international content (law, communication, practices, etc.) (Ozer, 2016). Mitchel and Nielsen (2012) argue that "internationalization is seen as something higher education institutions do while globalization is something that is happening to them" (p.3).

A number of universities across the globe encourage internationalization in education to prepare students to work in a modern, more challenging, and the international corporate world. Tierney and Lanford (2015) surveyed the factors related to internationalization and the development of international branch campuses such as New York University's branch campus in Abu Dhabi and the new Yale-NUS College in Singapore. While conflicts and cultural misunderstandings are expected in such international and intercultural collaborations, Tierney and Lanford (2015) argue that international branch campuses serve a greater purpose in higher education by fostering intercultural awareness and enriching students' understanding of certain cultural dimensions.

Globalization is one of the most widely discussed terms in contemporary society. In the 1990s, World Systems theorists asserted that globalization brought the periphery closer to the center of economic and political power (Waters, 1995). Opportunities for other ethnic identities or cultures of the peripheral countries emerged in response to the acceleration of the flow of capital to outposts across the globe in search of less expensive labor. The convergence of global culture with the everyday activities of professionals around the world meant that foray into globalization in online employment searches aligned supply with the demand of qualified candidates in those locations. Information age culture and the proliferation of advertising and marketing collateral from developing countries soon informed the representation of professional selves. However, the question remains of how culture can be considered and eventually included as a significant parameter in assessing students' performance in higher education.

2.2. The Inclusion of Culture in Planning Assessment Tools for Students

Davies and Hazelton (2013) posit that assessment of learning enables students to integrate learning and teaching processes aimed at establishing the role of the teachers in education. Through assessment, teachers can determine the knowledge, perception, and misconceptions of students from different cultural backgrounds, thus informing curriculum planning and teaching practices that support students in operating at their edge of competence. Teachers, in this case, make use of a broad range of assessment tools and teaching methods that integrate assessment into the teaching and learning process. Regarding this, there is a need to determine that assessment goals remain explicit in assisting students to understand what they are learning and what is required of them. The mounting evidence demonstrates the significance of establishing an educational environment that reflects the relevancy of the students' cultures, backgrounds and realities (Urda and Ramocki, 2015). Research, as established by Urda and Ramocki (2015) proves the relevance of culture and ethnic identities in mitigating negative experiences that increase the learner's self-esteem, self-confidence, and resilience. Given this, it is necessary to examine that culture may be appropriated as a parameter aimed at assessing the performance of learners since this

initiates a shared language in regards to the goals of teaching. On the other hand, culture integrates a learning process that includes the common understanding of the core purposes of evaluation designed to enable students from different cultural backgrounds to meet their goals.

On the other hand, culture as an assessment parameter remains essential in the planning stages of instruction that meet the educational needs of students, an aspect that ensures that appropriate teaching methods and learning outcomes are targeted and integrated into lieu to the learner's capacities. Through this, teachers are in a position to determine areas where students may lag behind emotionally, developmentally and behaviorally. This can help in the initiation of procedures aimed at supporting learners to overcome their difficulties. In other words, this remains a continuous approach that enables teachers to understand learners from different cultural backgrounds in order to be aware of the expected results of a subject and the procedures that need to be utilized in assessing their performance by the learning outcomes (Steffen and Höble, 2017). Teachers are bound to gradually involve themselves in assessment processes aimed at enhancing the student's lifelong learning skills irrespective of their cultural backgrounds. Given this, the evaluation of learners enables teachers to initiate effective decision making and judgment in regards to the value, quality, and worth of response. Assessment according to Hahn and Leslie (2017) reflects on the learners intended learning outcomes of a curriculum that need consistency with the approaches that teachers utilize in teaching different students in a classroom. It is, therefore, significant to understand the sense of differences in socio-economic, cultural, and gender backgrounds that allow diverse students to acquire opportunities aimed at demonstrating the extent of their skills, knowledge, and abilities. Culture as an assessment tool may additionally be utilized in reporting and determining the progress of the learners and in the decision-making process that relates to the promotion of the student's abilities.

According to Sang-Bin (2015) culture as a parameter in the assessment of the performance of the learners occurs authentically, thus allowing the teachers to demonstrate the learning capacities and capabilities of students through the demonstration of meaningful tasks. An instance of this is evident in identifying misunderstandings in the students learning and in providing corrective direction and feedback that enhances further instruction. Assessment in this regard improves learning and the manner in which instruction is delivered to students. Culture influences the students' responsiveness, an aspect that determines their norms, practices, and beliefs regarding their backgrounds and environments. Besides this, implicit cultural assessment shapes the students' cultural and learning expectations including their interpretive frameworks. The most prominent cultural influence in the assessment of students is perceived as proportional to the content of the learning needs of the students (DeBerg and Chapman, 2012). Meaningful contexts and content for assessments help the learners from different cultures to engage their attention and encourage them in the sharing of ideologies, thus enhancing the learning process. Students, in this case, are therefore required to undertake active roles in the assessment process. When students from different cultures understand the need for specific evaluation criteria, they take ownership in circumscribing the quality and quantity of the process of their work, thus enhancing their self-assessment skills. The primary rationale for utilizing culture as a parameter in establishing the performance of students remains in developing independent life-long students who can determine their progress and make improvements in their lives.

The teachers, therefore, make use of culture in assessing their learners. Through this, the teachers can design assessment tools that detail two broad purposes that include the collection of relevant information that informs the classroom instruction and the monitoring of the learner's progress towards the achievement of the learning outcomes. On the other hand, culture enables teachers to assist students in initiating self-monitoring and self-assessment strategies and skills. To effectively achieve this, teachers are required to ensure that their students are involved in the setting of their learning goals, using the assessment processes in monitoring their achievements and making action plans aimed at improving their learning outcomes. Teachers also enhance opportunities for their students to celebrate their successes and progress. Given this, the teachers learn about their students' progress through regular and systematized observance of the learner's actions and interaction during instruction (Medina,

2013). However, since students from different regions and cultures have their knowledge, strategies, skills, and attitudes as internal processes, the teachers are in a position to gather data, which will enable them to make judgments based on their assessments and observations that seek to understand that students' performances, interaction, and work. Teachers additionally demonstrate that assessments remain a significant element in learning. Through this, effective assessment approaches are modeled in the development of an assessment procedure such as the development of rubrics or checklists. The teachers, therefore, remain in a position to collaborate with colleagues and parents in regards to the learner's assessment.

Assessment for teaching grants students and teachers the opportunity to discuss their strengths and areas that need improvement and thus enabling them to set their learning goals. It is, therefore, possible for teachers to discover a great deal of their students understanding of information, as well as their skills, and attitudes towards learning. This will aid them in establishing strategies that enhance their learning and expertise during the learning process. It will also provide an opportunity for improving an individualized teaching approach that helps in guiding the teachers and learners to understand challenging resources in determining their future instructional needs. Cultural responsiveness in assessment remains an aspect that is grounded on the beliefs of fundamental differences of students that are essential in underachieving. This, therefore, provides the learners with an equal opportunity and initiatives that ensure students' differences are utilized to enhance their personal development. In other words, culture as an assessment parameter is perceived as a foreground of improving the positive learning approaches for the marginalized students that build on the learner's development instead of their challenges. For instance, according to [Bottge et al. \(2014\)](#) cultural relativity in assessment is pegged on the need to ensure that students experience and achieve their academic success. It also focuses on students' need to develop and maintain their competence and contact with their cultural heritages. Additionally, cultural relativity explores the manner in which challenges, critiques, and privileges are used in the process of learning. Culturally responsive assessment, therefore, incorporates substantive processes including the acquisition of cultural competence that facilitates better learning and teaching. Implicitly, culturally responsive training can improve several kinds of achievement that are considered as beneficial to learners from different backgrounds. Over the recent decades, increasing attention to the cultural diversity of learners in the United States has seen the need to highlight the role of the students in the appropriation of academic content. The culturally-based assessment parameter remains responsive and requires the pathological and different perceptions of students from diverse backgrounds, as much as the challenges and issues students face about learning. Meaningful contexts and content for assessments, therefore, helps teachers to harness different instructional approaches aimed at capturing the attention of students and encouraging them in the sharing of ideologies, to enhance the learning process. Students are therefore required to undertake active roles in the assessment process. [Jalomo \(2013\)](#) suggests there is a need to analyze the manner in which educational issues of different learners should be explained. The rationale for utilizing culture as a parameter in establishing students' performance is that it will help develop independent life-long students who have the capacity to determine their progress and make improvements in their lives. To ensure efficiency in assessments that are driven towards improving learning and teaching, information generated from such activities is utilized to inform the teachers and their students in determining what needs to be done next. Teachers, therefore, need to understand the need for the use of culture as a parameter employed in the assessment of student's performance since this approach serves different causes and varied forms. Culture as an assessment instrument follows an implicit approach that requires students to decode and understand elements that are intended to enhance academic meaning as compared to literal meanings. Linguistically, non-native students need to ensure they recognize their practical frameworks in their learning processes to understand the sense of differences in socio-economic, cultural, and gender backgrounds that allow them to acquire opportunities aimed at demonstrating the extent of their skills, knowledge, and abilities ([Jalomo, 2013](#)). Culture as an assessment tool may additionally be utilized in reporting and determining the progress of learners and in the decision-making process that relates to the promotion of the student's abilities.

In a nutshell, it is essential to consider that teachers are bound to use culture as a parameter in the assessment of student's performance in order to ensure the learner's baseline learning achievement is reached. In this regard, it is vital to establish that there are no standardized assessment instruments that are perceived as flexible to the choices of the methods and approaches used. Learning institutions, therefore, need to ensure that their learning environments embrace culture as a parameter of assessment with the primary objective of establishing the performances of learners (Jalomo, 2013). Moreover, a culture of assessment ensures that the faculty members of an institution determine the results the institutions produce and the manner in which these results may be translated to the required institutional and learning outcomes for the students, their parents, and the stakeholders. Equally significant is the use of results as a tool that directs a continual process of improvement in the effectiveness of the students learning methods.

3. CONCLUSION

The process of ensuring that students are competent in their fields of study establishes the need to be divided into larger numbers of small steps. In this case, assessment is used in reinforcing the contingent knowledge acquisition process upon the accomplishment of every step. As demonstrated in this paper, assessment for learning is an essential tool that helps teachers and their students to integrate the teaching and learning processes in enhancing instruction, an approach that aids in harnessing the potential of the teachers in education. Culture as a parameter in assessing students' performance helps the teachers understand the knowledge levels, challenges, and perceptions of the students. This is an aspect that remains significant in the planning process of both the curriculum and the teaching approaches which should aim at supporting students from diverse backgrounds to acquire knowledge emphatically.

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