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27944c METHOD FOR CULTURAL AWARENESS

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

There are some problems which are becoming quite common among those students within the programs of international education in the United States. Lack of concern and apathy; brain drain; alienation from their own cultures due to an overadjustment (intellectual brain drain); no real communication, even when they speak the language, due to cultural differences. In many cases, lack of adaptation to the academic system is the cause of their taking only a superficial advantage of the educational resources, etc. These are some of the main problems that foreign students have when they come to the United States, especially those coming from the Third World. According to the conclusions of my research, these problems are increasing instead of decreasing.

Many methods have been used to avoid these negative effects of the international education: all kinds of training courses before students come or when they arrive, training according to sensitivity techniques, regular gathering of groups according to different nationalities, etc., but none of these seems to have solved the problem.

After extensive research on the problems of international education, I have found that the very problem lies in the cultural

base of the individual. The change to a different cultural environment creates "a real dichotomy of the personality," mainly due to the frustration of social perception to which the individual is already accustomed.

The two usual attitudes are: First, the student who finds it hard to adapt to the United States style of life tends to reject totally the new environment, thus dichotomizing that part of his personality related to his cultural background and that part related to the present moment in which he tries to accomplish his education (dicotomía regresiva de la personalidad). Second, the student who "takes" the new cultural environment rejects, partially or totally, his cultural background. Then, in conclusion, you have instead of adaptation, overadjustment (dicotomía progresiva de la personalidad). I consider the majority under this category.

In either of these conditions it is impossible for the student, on the one hand, to be progressively aware of his own culture in order to be able to apply later, back home, the education he is receiving here, and, on the other hand, to be aware of his role as a foreigner in the United States.

As an attempt to solve these problems of foreign students I have developed a method for cultural awareness based on the same environmental contrast of cultures. It uses those elements found in their cultural background and those found in the present moment

(momento de cultura vivencial) and follows the same steps as human social perception: to feel, to interpret and to evaluate the physical and social objects.

METHOD

The Method has as its goals: to help foreign students become aware of their own cultures so that they can apply back home the training received here, and to become aware of the role they have to play as foreigners in the United States. It is well known that most foreign students never fulfill the role as channels of their culture for the people of the United States.

The Method has six steps, and as I explained before, the steps follow the process of social perception. First: "feeling the culture" based on physical and social stimuli. Second: "the interpretation of stimuli," by which is meant the way in which the organism as an active and dynamic unity organizes the perception. Included in this action are his past experience and the meaning of it. Third: "the appreciation or evaluation" referring to the meaning of the perception within the social and cultural context.

I find it necessary to explain my concepts of education and culture for a better understanding of the Method. Education is the process of intellectual development beginning by reflection on reality or specific parts of it, which takes the individual to a point at which he

can make an abstraction of the same reality, and ending in the creative action which transforms or creates culture. This creative action can have as goals either the fulfillment of needs or merely personal realization.

Culture is that which man adds to nature, either to himself or to other objects. It includes everything that is due to the conscious and free intervention of man, and at the same time finds its goal in the perfecting of his own nature, creating a strong relationship between himself and his social and physical environment.

I find that there is one pattern under which any culture can be analyzed or studied: (a) the expression of culture involving all the arts; (b) the way a culture is structured; (c) the interaction with other cultures.

According to these concepts the Method uses the same reality in which the students live or in which they have lived, without trying to find motivations outside of this reality that would create an extraordinary or false environment. As any method of conscientization, this is directed toward action, especially group action.

MATERIAL, PEOPLE, TIME, PLACE, TECHNIQUES.

Material -- Needed are a camera, two slide projectors and a tape recorder.

People -- The Method has to be prepared and run by a team of four or five people who are members of the same group taking the method. It is essential that the team participate fully as members of the group. The number of people participating can be as many as can be controlled by the team. The students have to be divided by the cultural areas from which they come although in the fourth step they can be joined.

Time -- Since it is to be applied in six different sessions, according to the steps, the Method can take as a minimum six days, and as a maximum a period of three weeks. It can be judged according to the effects and reactions of the participants during the process. The second, third, fifth, and sixth steps can be subdivided into more sessions if it seems to be needed for a better effectiveness.

Place -- It is necessary that the session be held in places that are "familiar" and convenient to the students, such as lecture hall, meeting room or classroom, or it can also be held in one of the houses of the participants if the group is small.

First Step

The first problem we have to face is the natural insensitivity toward the environment. Due to the routine of the environment, cultural sensitivity is atrophied. It is so easy to become an object of the culture instead of a subject of it. The environment becomes

like a "bubble" that isolates the individual, group or community, hiding the presence of the integral reality. When this integral reality is hidden, the capacity for reflection is affected so much that it becomes impossible to be in a critical position in respect to culture. In the first step then, the purpose is to make the students feel in a conscious way those characteristics of their own culture which they already feel, but not with awareness.

In this session the team puts on a slide show presenting the more outstanding characteristics of their culture (those with sentimental value may be included but with no particular emphasis on them).

Since usually the knowledge we have of our own structures is very theoretic or superficial, it is necessary, in this step, to organize the slides according to the social structures and to show those aspects of their daily life with which they were in contact in their own culture-- e. g., Economic structure: shops, markets, banks, factories, etc., especially those they used to frequent. Political structure: since the most common way for us to be in contact with the political structure is through the expression of power, the slides to be shown can be of policemen, soldiers, stop lights, people voting, political party signs, etc. Erich Fromm says that one of the most outstanding manifestations of alienation is the fact that we are governed by laws that we do not control and do not even want to control.

Religious structure: slides of places of worship (churches, temples, mosques, shrines), celebrations, saints and holy men venerated in the area, seminaries and monasteries, priests, ministers, monks and nuns, etc. Educational structure: slides of schools, universities, libraries, laboratories, etc. Recreational structure: slides of movies, theaters, parks, cafes, bars, stadiums, people playing popular games, famous art objects, etc. Family structure: slides of family groups, families gathered for meals, on a picnic, etc.

It is very important that the human element appear throughout the slides.

In this session their own music, dance, dress, and food should be included if possible. Anything that helps to recreate the students' native cultural milieu should be used.

Surely the material presented will make it evident that the perception not only is influenced by the nature of the physical stimuli, but also by the condition of the organism which perceives according to the way it has been affected by the cultural and social learning. It is clear that the socio-cultural factors affect not only perception, but also imagination and memory. Things are seen not only the way they are but also the way we are.

At this session it is convenient for the team to record the spontaneous comments and expressions made about the slide show so that later, on the basis of their reactions, they can find gathering points and key aspects (remarks, words, circumstances, etc.).

If the team finds the common feelings of the group it will be easier for them to wake people's interest in reflection.

Second Step

Note--this step can be subdivided into more sessions according to the needs.

This second step is totally dedicated to group reflection.

Students are asked to join one of the four different groups to prepare and discuss a "panel" on:

- a) National problems
- b) International problems
- c) Family problems
- d) Education problems

The reasons for giving such broad topics for discussion are, first, that each student will join the group that will discuss those matters of his own interest and those he knows best; second, that he will choose the more outstanding aspects in the life of his own culture.

It usually happens that the topics the students choose are those with which they have been more familiar and in which they can be more "effective."

It has to be clear that it is not necessary for them to present a general view of the problem but that it is much better for them

to present one well-prepared topic.

Group discussion of a problem, especially "a common problem," has different positive aspects: it helps to make concepts clearer, to express ideas in an organized way; it provides the opportunity to have more options in relation to a problem; it gives the opportunity for the projection of the individual's personality; and it helps to find those common ideas which serve as ties for the group unity. In addition, this type of discussion is also a good opportunity for the discovery of leaders.

Through discussion and expression of his own ideas in a group, one also finds the best ways of organizing his own concepts as well. Psychologically, the social images and experience not only affect perception and memory but also the forming of concepts. In the same way, the use of language and symbols tremendously affects the formation of them.

The Method requires clear and organized ideas as a necessary step for action. The cultural identification (decodificacion cultural) gives place to the identification of the self, and essential requirement for cultural action.

Note-- It is good to have a secretary and a representative for each of the groups, so that they can present their conclusions to the whole group at the next step. The possibility of recording the discussions is desirable.

Third Step

In this third step, also open to subdivision, the different groups (national problems, international problems, etc.) present their conclusions to the whole group. In case no agreement was reached after discussion, the different conclusions and the reasons for disagreement must be presented. It is not necessary to reach a final agreement.

Very little can be said about the practical process of this step because it depends totally on the response of each of the individuals and the group as such to the first and second steps. Nevertheless, it is the most important step of the three--it is the "praxis step" of the first half of the Method.

The importance of the step has its basis in the very fact of human expression. The oral expression of one's concepts is the first "moment" in human creation, in human praxis. It is the "coalition" of experience, the opportune moment, and the essential human need of creating. It is the becoming of a more perfect self in the same act of its expression. Any act of communication, either at a physiological or symbolic level, is the expression of the "human social essence."

Its importance can be better understood by anyone experiencing frustration derived from the attempt to communicate himself and the lack of knowledge of the new language and still more the lack of

cultural experience in the new environment. The older we are, the stronger the frustration is, because the cultural experience is deeper introjected in ourselves. But the frustration goes further than that, since in the capacity of introjection is included the capacity of incorporating ourselves as objects of the same act of perception. Thus the introjected memory of being frustrated becomes an increasing obstacle.

The student in this step has to feel free in presenting his own conclusions, even in the case when they are in disagreement with the conclusions of the rest of the group.

The students' act of stating their own conclusions and the fact that they are free to express themselves, and that there is a real cultural communication with the audience (I do not mean agreement necessarily) are the basis for the individual to define his relationship with his cultural background.

Fourth Step

At this step the two slide projectors are needed. With one is again shown the same series of slides shown in the first step. For the other one it is necessary to have slides of those places of motifs of the area where they actually live. This new series has to correspond either in meaning or in role to those of the first step, e.g., on the one hand, a picture of the house where they lived and, on the other hand, a picture of the dormitory of house where they live now.

The slide series of the United States has to represent the different social structures in the same way the first did.

The two series of corresponding pictures have to be shown simultaneously, so that, through looking at them, students can realize the contrast, appreciating the different social values or roles as well as the physical differences. If the slides are run according to the different social structures, students will have a better picture of them as wholes and at the same time will feel their participation in them.

The importance of using the technique of contrast to stimulate reflection transcends the Method. Due to the rapid development of science and technology, cultural interaction is becoming a fact of everyday life. The presentation of cultural contrast will become an essential technique in the normal methods of education.

This session employs the well-known theory of using the presence of an objective different reality as a means for the realization of the self through the awareness of the non-self. In this case the identification of a different culture is the means to identify one's own culture.

When the student is able to stand consciously in front of a new objective reality, in this case a new cultural environment, he is at the stage where he can be aware not only of his own culture as a different reality but also be aware of the different value of his own

membership in both realities. It is the awareness of his belonging to a distinct environment, through the presence of a new one, that will permit him the introjection of the new environment without being absorbed by it. Of course, if the student can identify both realities, through the introjection he has made of them, he can reach as well a better understanding of "himself." This is also a necessary step for an integral cultural action.

Overadjustment to another culture and the dichotomy of personality is produced basically by the lack of self-awareness and the unconsciousness of one's own culture as a part of the self, too.

It is important to have the image of both cultures present at the same time to avoid the "cultural mechanism of defense"-- that is, to select the stimuli for cultural perception according to the experimental value given to the native culture.

In this step begins what I call the "breaking of the bubble" process. The bubble is usually created by the fact that the new culture is analyzed and judged according to a scale of values set by the living experience in a different cultural context. Awareness about the presence of not only the extrinsic but also the intrinsic differences of cultural characteristics will give the student a more integral approach to the new culture.

Note-- Music from both cultures can be played as background music for the slide show.

Fifth Step

In the fifth step students get together in small groups to discuss the slide show and to analyze their reactions to it.

The goal of this session is to find, through discussion of the slide show, their common interests and common problems. Finding themselves members of a community sharing problems and interests motivates them toward group action.

It would be ideal for this session to have the groups gather according to their study majors. If this is not possible, the groups of steps 2 and 3 would be the best. However, it often happens that from the first meeting, students tend to gather according to their majors.

At the beginning of this session, the two following questions direct them toward a more organized and practical discussion:

- 1) What is your role as a foreigner in the United States?
- 2) How can you take better advantage of your educational experience, so that it can be used back home?

Note-- This fifth step follows the same philosophic basis as the second step, and is also open to subdivision.

Sixth Step

In this last step of the Method students are asked to present the conclusions of the previous session. Here suggestions or

possible programs for the future may also be presented.

This step follows the same philosophic basis of the third step. It is only later through changes of attitude and a more organized action, that we can tell if the Method has been successful.

C O N C L U S I O N

As in any method directed toward group action, "the step" following the last step of the Method is the most important. It would be naive to believe that the Method itself is the solution to the problems of international education. The Method is only the "door" leading to aware cultural action.

Usually after going through such an experience, the students have two further needs: first, support and help for the leaders and the group programs; second, the means of communication to be in a more constant contact with the life of their own countries. In any culture there is a great conflict between routine and the attempt to get back to the fundamental realities of existence. Once this is resolved through awareness, the greater conflict is then to fight the routine with these fundamental realities.

It is necessary to keep in mind that the students will encounter many more problems than can be faced with a method, e. g., the problems of cultural solitude and cultural inhibitions. Actually I am

doing research on these two problems, and I am beginning to see that these problems have many educational potentials.

I think that these potentials are far-reaching, to the point of helping a person remain in touch with the fundamental facts of his existence, experiencing the exaltation of love and of solidarity. To discover how to use loneliness for the development of man still remains an urgent need!

IMPORTANT-- In this presentation the Method is applied to foreign students in the United States; however, and foremost, its philosophic basis can be used by many different kinds of groups dedicated to cross-cultural relations, such as volunteer movements, missionaries, cultural exchange movements, international press, etc.