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Culture, the Classroom, and Electronic Contacts: Talk story and Email communications

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Introduction

The author provides a review of research and summary findings of prior studies regarding the college adjustment experiences of Asian and Pacific Islander [API] students from Hawai’i. She proposes the use of course-based electronic mail, listserves, and faculty-student communications within the context of cultural and conversational styles preferred by Hawaiian students. The cultural syndromes individualism and collectivism; high and low-context languages; and unique experiences of APIs in higher education are discussed with reference to the use of electronically-mediated communications. When electronically-available resources are cited, URLs are provided with the references both in text and in the reference list.

Oral Culture and the US Classroom

Academic expectations for particular forms of oral participation and the Western cultural preference for public demonstrations of praise for individual merit present challenges for students from collectivist cultures. Of particular interest, are the effects of these expectations on students of Asian/Pacific Islander (API) ancestry from the state of Hawai’i (Burns-Glover & Van Hoornissen, 2001; Dela Cruz & 2001; Kamehameha Early Education Program, 2001; at URL: http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/presrvce/pe3lk43.htm

Pacific University has a unique demographic situation: we have a very successful history of recruiting and retaining students from the state of Hawai’i: they are now the “majority minority” group on our campus. Since 1995, approximately 20% of our student enrollment has been from Hawai’i, and the majority of those students identify themselves as multi-ethnic Asian/Pacific
Islanders with strong collectivist values and ethnic identities (Burns-Glover, Tarutani-Reynolds & Harvey, 2000).

Internationally, Asian/Pacific Islander cultures have been identified as more “collectivist” in orientation than “individualist”, which is typically associated with majority US culture (Church & Katigbak, 1992; Hui & Villareal 1989; Triandis, Leung, Villareal & Clark, 1985.)

In the United States Asian Americans in general, and Hawai’i residents specifically, also demonstrate the “collectivist” pattern, attitudes, beliefs, values (Burns-Glover, et al., 2000; Burns-Glover & Veith, 1999; Centre for Applied Language and Literacy, 2001, at URL: http://www.ecu.edu.au/ses/research/CALLR/nesb/group.htm; Rezentes, 1996) and conversational goals and styles associated with “high context cultures” (Centre for Applied Language and Literacy Research, 2001, at URL: http://www.ecu.edu.au/ses/research/CALLR/nesb/conseq.htm#mid; Kim, 1994)

These cultural realities and the fact that Asian/Pacific Islanders are the fastest growing minority group in the US (US Census Bureau, 2001 at URL:http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/News2000.html) are important to reckon with in higher education. Sadly, however, these groups remain invisible and “neglected, mislabeled, and misunderstood” (Gunnings, 1997,p. 4). Many note the tendency to ignore the college adjustment needs of a putative “model minority” (Solberg, Choi, Ritsma, & Jolly, 1994; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998).

**Culture and college adjustment**

The US classroom has been identified a cultural space of “Western, middle class educational behaviors which have little to do with success in adult life” by researchers of (Takeuchi, Agbayani, Kuniyoshi, 1990, p. 82). Among these behaviors is a Western cultural emphasis on “classroom participation” expressed through discussion and a open-forum approach to conversational space: to, wit, “talkative” students are valued, and getting students to participate in class discussions has warranted enough attention, that educators now can take an entire course of their own on how to encourage it in the classroom (Evans, 1996; Newcomb, 2001) extending the boundaries of the classroom through the use of electronic websites, Email, and discussion groups (Kenner, 1998 at URL: http://rkenner.concordia.ca/).

According to prior research, professors and fellow students make distinctive judgments about “talkative” and “quiet” students, which include conclusions about their intelligence, creativity, dynamism, and helpfulness. These attributions go beyond the task of “participation” and can and do affect faculty evaluations of their work (Bell, 1995). Research on retention-attrition rates with students from minority groups has also focused on the need to improve faculty-student interactions and acculturation into classroom expectations [Brawer, 1996, at URL:http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed393510.html ]
The focus on this particular academic ability often puts students who are cultural or language minorities at a disadvantage in the classroom. At the University of Hawai‘i, researchers found that the Scholastic Aptitude Test scores for entering freshman failed its raison d’etre for the students from Hawai‘i: “it has “decreased to almost zero since 1982 among Hawaiian students… although mainland students at UH it is the same as the national average.” (Wainer, Saka, & Donoghue, 1993, p.91). This “enigma”, as they called it, was linked to the minority status of the students (76% of students are ethnic minorities, while the majority of the faculty are not) and the verbal SAT scores of students [although Hawai‘i students did not score significantly lower than the mainland average for SAT-V].

This disconnect between ability [SAT] and achievement [performance and persistence] is apparent in studies of Asian American students at mainland colleges. Contrary to the myths of superior abilities [viz., high school GPAs and SAT scores], Toupin and Son (1991) reported in their sample of a private, east coast college that Asian American students had lower university GPAs, and were more likely to be on academic probation, withdraw from university, and less likely to graduate than a matched sample of non-Asian students. Focusing on the culturally embedded expectations of the classroom is a starting point for resolving the enigma.

These findings are of particular interest when one intersects the classroom as a cultural space and the student-teacher interaction as a cross-cultural event. This intersection has been the focus of an action research project I have been conducting for several years on our campus.

**Culture, the classroom, and adjustment: An example**

As part of a larger study on ethnic identity and culture, the authors have assessed underclassman [freshman/sophomore, N=148] from Hawai‘i and the mainland using a questionnaire that asked students about their perceived efficacy in social, course-related, and roommate relations domains (Solberg, O’Brien, Villareal, & Kennell, 1994), their individualist and collectivist values (Chan, 1984) their ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992) and an interview with selected sub-groups regarding their college experiences in the above realms (Burns-Glover & Van Hoomissen, 2001).

Our cultural findings clearly demonstrated that Hawai‘i students scored as "collectivists" in their value orientations, while mainland students who self-identified as "white", scored as "individualists" in their values. Hawai‘i students also scored higher than mainland students of all other minority ethnic groups. Hawai‘i students also scored higher in their sense of ethnic belonging and ethnic pride than did "white" and minority students from the mainland.

The effects of this culture and ethnic identity dynamic were evidenced in our findings on the College Self-Efficacy measure. Residency (Hawai‘i v. not from Hawai‘i) was a significant explanatory variable in how students scored on their ratings of their social, course/academic, and roommate skills.
Our findings indicated that ethnicity and cultural values interacted to produce a different pattern of efficacy ratings for Hawaii residents, ethnic minority, and white mainlanders.

Hawaii/API students scored lower on the items on which they rated their confidence in their abilities to: "participate in a class discussion," "ask a professor a question," and "research a term paper." However, Hawai'i students scored higher than mainland students overall [regardless of ethnicity] on their perceived efficacy in dealing with a roommate.

An understanding of local Hawaiian [residents] and Native Hawaiian [Polynesian] cultural values and data generated from our interviews with our participants leads us to interpret the above findings as part of the larger cultural dynamic of collectivist values of self-effacement and humility [not drawing attention to self, or individual praise] and reticence [Hawaiian and API cultural values embrace silence, listening, and the power of the word, which is not to be squandered]. Talking in class, and talking directly to a professor cannot be presumed to be skills modeled in classrooms that are not populated by, "Western, middle-class" inhabitants. As one student told us:

"OK, like first semester, ‘cuz I come from Hawai’i, right so we were taught from the beginning to always raise your hand before you talk. If you don’t then you’ll get yelled at. So that’s how we are brought up, that’s how we are trained to speak in class. And then I come up here and everyone [in class just speaks up] and it just blew me away. I was like what are they doing? Like talking without raising their hand. That just completely threw me off."

Thawing Cultural Climates:

In the author’s ten years of teaching experience, the above comment is prototypical. Hawaiian students and students from other collectivist cultures consistently note that they had difficulty with the conversational expectations in the courses, particularly the dynamic, sometimes operatic, nature of classroom discussions. Such observations have been made with regard to gender (Benenson & Aikins-Ford, 1998; Caltech Women’s Center, 2001 at URL: http://www.cco.caltech.edu/~wcenter/chilly/chilly.html) and the “classroom climate” line of inquiry, but have not been expressed in measures of classroom adjustment. In fact, the ability to discuss, ask a question, etc. are listed on the “social” skills factor of the College Self Efficacy questionnaire, not the course skills factor. Our experience with the interviewees and the measures indicates that students are not averse to actually speaking in class, but rather, it is an acquired skill. We are now analyzing data across class cohorts from 1999-2001 (i.e., freshman-seniors) and we see a pattern that perceived efficacy on these skills is lower in incoming freshman from Hawai‘i then rises in later years. A junior level student from Hawai‘i noted:

“I was just looking at everyone doing that [discussing]… I felt like I was not gonna get a good grade. So I just start doing it. I can do it now, it’s just that it gets harder as the class gets bigger… Don’t worry about being wrong and stuff, just do it!”

While students who come from different cultural affordances can “just do it”, we might also ask
how professors might assist them in this “bootstrapping” effort to learn the ways of the classroom. The experience of the authors [one a professor, the other a clinician] in teaching students, contacting them for interviews, and gathering information from them has been to use electronic communications as a starting place for conversations.

The conversational styles and expectations of Hawaiian culture place a premium on the quality of one’s relationship with the other and the use of informal conversational contacts to build that relationship. It has been our experience that the “anonymity” of Email, the ability to set one’s own pace [as opposed to the rapid-fire style of the mainland classroom], and the ability of faculty to offer praise indirectly to a student who values self-effacement are all features that have been useful in enhancing self-efficacy of students in their efforts to adjust to class participation, and have assisted faculty in re-organizing their perceptions of the less talkative students.

“Talk story” and learning in and out of the classroom:

Talk story is a Hawaiian conversational style that uses personal narratives, verbal play, and mundane realities to forge personal ties in the telling (Shook, 1985; Kamehameha Early Education Program website, 2001 at URL: http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1thek.htm) Hawaiian cultural websites and the private web pages of Hawaiian residents and ex-patriots now explicitly use the new technology to maintain this cultural practice and communication style. What was once practiced on the lanai, at the grocery store, and in the fields is now thriving cyberspace at such URLs as http://www.moolelo.com/talkstory/messages/791.html and http://home1.gte.net/aplenty/talkstory.htm.

Electronic communications (Email) provide faculty (particularly those of us with larger class sizes) with a method of establishing this personal tie. Real-time conversations in the relatively anonymity of Email provide a space for faculty and students to interact at a slower pace, to exchange information, to provide succorance. While we acknowledge that the lack of nonverbal signals may affect communication between high and low context communicators, the Email itself provides the groundwork for later face to face meetings after students have established to the professor insights or abilities not readily demonstrated through “talking” in class discussions. The orally reticent student, in our experience, often writes with great insight and reflection.

“When Hawaiian students have a strong and nurturing relationship with their kumu [teacher], they feel a deep...responsibility to maintain all the knowledge the kumu has given them” (Dela Cruz, 2001, p.140).

Self-effacement and the Email conversation:

Cultural perceptions regarding the appropriateness of public and private praise (self-enhancement vs. self-effacement)and “deferential vs. affirmative” politeness are often mentioned as a dividing line between collectivist and individualist cultures (cf. Triandis, et al.,1985; Centre for Applied
Dela Cruz (2001) included an Email scenario for one of the “critical incidents” listed in the Intercultural Sensitizer she developed for use with Hawaiian students and non-Hawaiian faculty at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. A consistent theme in how Native Hawaiians perceived their interactions with non-Hawaiians was a misattribution about conversational style and the preference for indirect statements, teaching embedded within relationships, and group learning styles. Critical incidents [wherein a cultural interaction between a Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian was described, and four possible explanations for it were offered for the respondent to select from as the “best” explanation] generated for this task included positive and negative scenarios. It is interesting to note, however, that of 20 incidents generated to assess the typical sources of misunderstandings on a college campus, the majority specifically addressed typical experiences that would be considered basic social and course-related skills and those from the mainland do not see many as problematic. These included: communication styles (one included the use of Email to praise a student), discussions in class (a student’s discomfort with singled out as a Hawaiian to comment); a faculty member’s overt, aggressive conversational style of badgering the student with “what do you mean you don’t get it?” (this scenario was called “Humiliation”); discussion of personal achievements in the classroom setting; student use of office hours; and the use of “participation points” in class for discussions (the student loses points for not talking in class; the Hawaiian perception is that exams measured knowledge while talking was just “showing off”).

The culture-specific examples of sources of misperception invite suggestions for improvements. While certainly cultural sensitivity will enhance all interactions between faculty and students, it is also important to acknowledge that new ways of communicating might also assist in restructuring attributions.

Electronic mediation of the classroom climate: I do not wish to assert that these cultural variations excuse students from the skill-building experience of classroom discussions, rather we offer our ideas for using the electronic mail as a springboard such skill building.

Specifically:

1. the creation of a class list serve in which “discussions” can occur amongst members outside of the space of the classroom. Research on Hawaiian students (Dela Cruz, 2001) and on international students (Stoynoff, 1997) consistently points to strategies that encourage asking for help from fellow students [group learning] in addition to the professor as essential to success at college.

2. using Email to provide praise and guidance to students privately. Dela Cruz (2001) noted in her
research that Hawaiian students felt uncomfortable with “showing off” or being singled out for praise. This typical of collectivist cultures. This is the place to “talk story” with students. To provide informal and formal feedback that are not tied to exams or specific tasks.

Another area in which the minority student dynamic can be addressed is the “token” experience of being called upon to “represent” one’s group in the class discussion. Email contacts with students who may have ethnic or cultural experiences which bear on course topics can occur more fruitfully when professors pre-contact such students and ask if they are willing to talk about their specific experiences, not as “on the spot” commentators.

3. using Email to provide “mentoring” amongst upper division and entering students. Incoming students can be linked with successful upper division students [within and outside their own ethnic/cultural group] for encouragement and exchange in a manner that may not be available when upper and lower division courses can segregate students in their experiences. API students are statistically underrepresented in certain majors [Goodwin, 1985 at URL: http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC Digests/ed3798386.html] and I have found it invaluable to have former students, upper division students, and students who have already taken my courses all available by email to give informal students insights, information, and background information about our major and career options.

The use of listserves has been effective in allowing students to converse with each other in a conversational space in which exchanges we have observed include creation of study groups for exams and tasks; a place to “ask a dumb question”; a place to request clarifications from the professor. The listserv approach also affords the professor the opportunity to react individually to students, to Email them about classroom topics, and to encourage the student to share them at the class meeting [the first author has used it effectively to "set up" a discussion on Email that she continued in the classroom wherein she read student comments from the list serve and then let students follow up on them]. Recruiting students via listserv to be a “presenter” or “demonstrator” on a particular day [e.g., "Kainoa, could you please help us discuss this study at Tuesday's class section?"]]. This approach has met with success amongst the Hawaiian students.

The other areas of success using Email listserves and private Emails have been in its use to provide praise and also to encourage students to pursue the major. Praise in written form, with the ability to provide a longer interaction than a brief “good” in the class or on the exam, is inestimable.

The research conducted by the authors (Burns-Glover & Van Hoomissen, 2001) indicates that API-Hawaiian students are more strongly influenced by their family in choice of major than are Mainland students. This translates into certain challenges in encouraging students to follow their talents, rather than their declared majors. We have found it useful to provide the student with contacts with program graduates from Hawai‘i, and with elder adults. As others have noted, recruiting API students into certain majors requires different approaches that for those of majority-
Conclusions

We believe Email has been and can be useful for establishing the formal and informal contacts between classmates and between faculty and students that are culturally valued in the groups we have described. In my experience in classes of 90 students, I have found Email list serves to be invaluable in sending out questions for both public and private responses; for student use as a “study group” format before exams; and for providing encouragement and praise to students. My experience with students from Hawai‘i and students from collectivist cultures in general is that Email facilitates my ability to establish a relationship (informal queries about their interests in the course topics; advice about career goals and personal quandaries) later, face to face. I have found that these conversations—slow, deliberate, and with the volume “off”—provide me with a better attributional basis than my initial impressions of chatty students or ones who come to all my office hours.

Creating a classroom climate that is amenable to a diverse audience may seem a daunting task for those of us with 50 minutes, 50 students, and 50 exams to return. Getting any students to speak in class, regardless of their culture, is the bete noir of the seminar professor. We spend a great deal of effort facilitating conversations in a particular space, without being able to establish the groundwork for conversing with strangers.

My confidence in the ability of the electronic to initiate the oral is based on observations, anecdotes, and strong inference. But, as has been noted, the cyber classroom is becoming more popular (Newman & Scurry, 2001), and those logging on are likely to be culturally diverse, with different skills and gifts (Centre for Applied Language and Literacy Research, 1999a at URL: http://www.ecu.edu.au/ses/research/CALLR/nesb/conseq.htm#mid). This mode of communication should be explored as a method of addressing the cultural sources of misattributions outlined above. “Don’t worry about being wrong and stuff, just do it!”

References


“Diversity and the Experiences of Hawai’i Students in Higher Education” for presentation at the 81st Annual Convention of the Western Psychological Association, in Maui, Hi. May 5th.


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4 thoughts on “Culture, the Classroom, and Electronic Contacts: Talk Story and Email Communications”

dating
on February 4, 2014 at 10:15 AM said:

upset to your vast analysis, but I’m incredibly loving the post, and hope this, as well as the excellent analysis some other persons have written, will assist you resolve if it’s the appropriate choice for you.

nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:26 AM said:

Hi Shane, I’ve really appreciated these content as well as the helpful summaries that they provide. You say both “the Son is God” and suggest we shouldn’t say “God died on the cross.” Can you explain? Thanks!
nigeria entertainment news  
on February 4, 2014 at 10:35 AM said:

Great post! I’m heading to obtain to check these all out! I have observed bits from the a single Scorcee film on a Stones.

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cork board ideas  
on February 5, 2014 at 2:48 PM said:

You’ve made some decent points there. I looked on the net to learn more about the issue and found most people will go along with your views on this web site.