

## Crossing Borders by “Walking around” Culture: Three Ethnographic Reflections on Teacher Preparation

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### Introduction

We live in a global society and because of recent trends in immigration and other factors, the demographics of the world have changed dramatically. This is especially true (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003; Hodgkinson, 2000/2001) now. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) documents that the world has become increasingly multicultural and multilingual as international migration rates grow each year (He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu, 2008).

The cultural and language diversity in the United States (Daniel, 2007) exemplifies this world phenomenon. In 2000, for example, the foreign-born population of the United States was 31.1 million which represented 11.1% of the total population. Of that 11.1% foreign-born population, Latin Americans represented 52%, Asians 26%, Europeans

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16%, and other countries of the world 6.0% (He, et al., 2008); and this trend is continuing. Census data from 2009 showed that the foreign-born population of the United States had grown significantly, to 38.5 million, which represented 12.5% of the total population. Of that 12.5% foreign-born population, Latin Americans represented 53%, Asians 27%, Europeans 12.7%, and other countries 6.6% (Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Further, at present, the 10 leading countries by birth, of the foreign-born population are (in order) Mexico, China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong), Philippines, India, Viet Nam, El Salvador, Korea, Cuba, Canada, and Dominican Republic (Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010; Kandell, 2011).

The United States of the twenty-first century is possibly the most culturally/racially diverse country of any nation in history (Howard, 2007), and families that are culturally/racially different from mainstream society do not always see that schools are meeting the needs of their children (Monahan, Oesterlie, & Hawkins, 2010; Wadsworth & Remaley, 2007).

This diversity in culture and language means that each person is different and students bring that difference into the classroom. Culture is discourse. It is our belief that in order to understand that discourse, teachers have the responsibility of learning how to cross cultural boundaries. If teachers can learn to do that, they will begin to understand the culture of their students and, perhaps, be more effective as teachers. In order to understand this diversity, researchers engage in ethnography. Ethnography means “a picture of the ‘way of life’ of some identified group of people” (Wolcott, 1997, p. 329). Ethnographers collect observational data in order to understand how ordinary people live their lives in everyday settings.

Teachers do not live in a vacuum. They work with people, i.e., students. It is essential for teachers to recognize that a person’s cultural/racial background is not checked at the classroom door. Often attitudes and experiences are different, which can result in a communication disconnect between teachers and students (Daley, Buchanan, Dasch, Eichen, & Lenhart, 2010). Communication is at the heart of any learning community (Clemmensen, Sparapani, & Booth, 2009; Ross McClain, 2009; Silverman, 2010).

Culture is communal and shared. To fully understand that communal, shared culture, and to connect to the customs, traditions, thinking, spirituality, social activity, and interactions inherent to the varieties of cultures and races teachers encounter in their classrooms each day, we suggest that teachers must learn to “walk around” culture. By “walking around” culture, we mean that teachers need to put feet to pavement

and purposefully “walk around” the neighborhoods of their students, similar to ethnographic study. Central to ethnography is participant observation (Best & Kahn, 2006).

Participant observation suggests that the researcher live in the participants’ situation for a length of time (usually a year) and observe their lives. Ethnographers purposefully talk to people. They pay attention to what people do, why they are doing it, and how they are doing it. In other words, they not only observe the culture, they try to get a sense of what life is like in that culture. We believe teachers and teacher educators should use this method (“walking around” culture) to effectively cross borders.

Our focus in this article is to present this idea of “walking around” culture. First, each of us will tell our stories (our ethnographic reflections) of “walking around” culture and how those experiences have helped us cross borders to become better teachers. After we tell our stories, we provide five key principles for teacher preparation.

### Three Ethnographic Reflections

In this section of the article, we describe how each of us has “walked around” culture ethnographically. As we describe our experiences, we write in our own voice. Voice 1 discusses “walking around” an urban culture. Voice 2 discusses “walking around” an Asian culture. Voice 3 discusses “walking around” an American Indian culture and an English-as-a-second-language culture. It must also be understood that as we “walked around” in our separate cultures, even though we (kind of) used the technique of participant observation (because we were living in the setting), we did not observe in the focused manner suggested by ethnographic research, but we were not casual either. As much as possible, we tried to live the culture.

#### ***Voice 1. “Walking Around” the Urban Culture***

In 2005-2006, I was hired to be the language arts department chairperson and curriculum coordinator for a small middle school on the west side of Chicago. As one who spent her whole life living and working in upper-middle-class suburbia, coming to Urban Middle School (UMS) required me to shift my perspectives and preconceived notions of poor, African-American students. On the first day of class, after the usual introductions, one student said, “You’re the first Asian I’ve seen that isn’t in a kung-fu movie.” Other students in the room nodded their heads in agreement. Welcome to UMS.

Chicago is comprised of neighborhoods, and each neighborhood has a specific population and history. There are 180 different neighborhoods

(Grossman, Keating, & Reiff, 2004). UMS is in Austin, one of the largest neighborhoods in Chicago. Similar to other west side communities, Austin has faced housing disinvestments, poverty, unemployment, and increased gang violence (Martin, 2004). From January to March, 2011, there were over 500 crime incidences in this neighborhood, ranging from murder and prostitution to robbery and drug abuse violations (Crime Finder, 2011). The persistent crime and lack of jobs wear on the residents. Students have no hope that their situation will change. When the most common way to earn money is to sell illicit drugs, identifying literary elements in Hamlet has little/no merit.

When driving, Austin looks like a lower-middle class neighborhood. The exterior of many of the homes are not dilapidated, and the residents make efforts to beautify their yards with flowers and lawn decorations. When the weather is nice, residents sit on their front porch and socialize. Loud music is heard for everyone's enjoyment, and there may be groups of people playing basketball in the alley. On foot, however, it is a different scenario. Many residents rent their homes, and the landlords neglect their properties. There is peeling paint, cracked windows, and leaking roofs. When I visited students' homes, rooms were very drafty with dim lighting and roaches on the ceiling. The homes were neat, and the residents did their best to keep them clean; however, there was only so much a family could do.

Before starting my teaching position, the principal and I visited the neighbors. Essentially, he was introducing me to them, telling them that I was a new teacher, that I could be trusted, and that I was *safe*. He also identified my car, to reduce the chances of something happening to it. In spring 2006, two of my tires got slashed. The next day, I got a note on my desk that read, "Sorry, thought it was someone else's car." After those introductions, a resident would pleasantly greet me. Otherwise, I would have been looked at suspiciously.

My students were not exposed to a variety of people, so they did not understand the need to adapt their language to different populations. They knew, however, that if they sounded differently, "too White," then they would be shunned by their neighbors. All of these students wanted to attend high school outside of the Austin community, and many of them wanted to attend schools in predominantly Caucasian populations. It was imperative that these students understand the importance and necessity of learning to negotiate language.

As an Asian American, my students saw me as a "neutral" person, not White, not Black, some other entity. I took advantage of my "ignorance." For instance, one student said, "I be goin' to the bathroom now," and I repeated, "I..Be..Goin'..To..The..Bathroom..Now?"

The student laughed and said, "That sounds funny when you say it." I replied, "If it's funny coming out of my mouth, what makes you think it isn't funny coming out of yours?...Try again." Inevitably, he restated his statement using standard oral English.

I was hired to get eighth-grade students ready for high school. While I knew that their literacy levels were lower than other eighth-graders, it was not a concern to me. As a taskmaster, all students were accountable for their daily homework, and they studied literature that others would deem as too difficult. Success in formal education took diligence and persistence, and when the children wanted to quit, I refused to let them. The parents/guardians questioned every endeavor. I was too demanding, too difficult, too rigid, and/or too unfeeling. In the beginning, I believed that the parents did not support me because they did not like me. Instead, I learned that it was the result of fear they were afraid that the material I was teaching their children was too difficult for them, and they would not be able to help their children with their homework. As a result, I gave the adults simple exercises so that everyone learned the material. Austin has a less than 50% high-school graduation rate. In 2010, 90% of these eighth-graders graduated from high school. In hindsight, my demanding ways positively influenced these students. Currently, over half of these students are enrolled in an institution of higher learning.

Education is a long-term endeavor. Learning takes place over time, and it has a cumulative effect on the person. For those who are marginalized, they are more worried about the day-to-day survival. The idea of planning for a career is unfathomable. Students say that they want to become a doctor or a lawyer, but many are not aware of the time it takes to reach that goal.

To become a doctor or a lawyer, including internships and examinations, can take at least fifteen years after middle school to achieve that goal. If people are conditioned to focus on today, then the idea of having fifteen more years of formal education is beyond their comprehension.

"Walking around" in this urban setting allowed me to grow as a person and as a teacher. I learned that intelligence and determination are never issues with impoverished students. It is about time and money. Time studying means time away from a job to supplement the family's income. Formal education costs money. Even public universities cost thousands of dollars to attend. I am relentless in my persistence and dogged in my methodologies. At the beginning of the school year, colleagues criticized my idealism in getting these students ready for college-preparatory high schools. With clear boundaries and a set routine, UMS's students wrote a true research paper, they learned to identify literary elements in literature, and they worked together to produce collaborative projects. In

high school, they needed these skills to be academically successful, and they were successful, since 90% of them graduated from high school.

Working at UMS was one of the most challenging and gratifying teaching positions I have had. Teaching these students literacy and mathematics skills is one thing, but I also needed to teach them a new way of thinking and a new way of looking at their future. For their parents/guardians, the eighth-grade graduation may have been the only graduation that they attended. I wanted my students to envision lives after eighth grade; I wanted them to have the hope and confidence to beat the odds and graduate from high school and even university.

Similar to most schools, a successful teacher must differentiate instruction and be willing to change and adapt the lesson at a moment's notice. At UMS, however, teachers need to be aware of the societal influences that are pervasive in their students' lives, such as violence in the community, and the insecurity of parents/guardians and their child's schoolwork.

Individuals who want to teach in an urban environment need to be very secure in their instructional methodologies, their content area, and their classroom management skills. Urban students can be difficult to teach. One reason is that many teacher education programs do not adequately prepare pre-service teachers to effectively meet the needs of urban students. Another reason can be the urban student's attitude towards education. Dr. V. Scott-Thompson (personal communication, July 5, 2011), a principal who lives and works in this community, believes that her students' “jaded, disrespectful behaviors” may be the result of limited role models who value formal education. Urban teachers are tough, and they need to be diligent in penetrating the students' guarded, hard exteriors. It can be exhausting and combative work, yet at the same time, when the light bulb is lit, all is right with the world. Would I return to UMS? Absolutely. It is, by far, one of the most physically difficult, mentally exhausting, and emotionally draining teaching experiences I have had. I would not trade it for the world.

### ***Voice 2. “Walking Around” an Asian Culture***

I have always been interested in travel. I have always been interested in education. I have always been interested in culture. I was told at an early age that if I worked hard and was diligent, I could accomplish anything. Consistent with that and what I have always believed and wanted to do during my career as a teacher, I have remained interested in education, travel, and culture. Through circumstances in my life, I was invited to a position at a university in Taiwan for six months as a visiting professor.

First of all, the Taiwanese were very courteous and polite, and were always interested in me, being an American. They were especially polite and courteous in the classroom, and outside the classroom when they found out I was a teacher. The Taiwanese hold teachers in high esteem, especially professors from outside their country, and particularly professors from the "West." They always refer to teachers as either "teacher" or "professor" and never use the teacher's last name. When a student spoke to me, it was never "Mr. ...." or "Dr. ...." I was always addressed as "Teacher" or "Professor" or "Honored Professor" and my last name was never included. No one seemed to know why a teacher's last name was not used, except that when a teacher's last name was used, it seemed to have something to do with being a sign of disrespect.

The Taiwanese are an ancient people with a long history. They are proud of their heritage and of their country, and tend to be very traditional. Everyone in Taiwan knows its history and its traditions. Younger people, I learned, are not so traditional. For example, when I would meet an older person (and by "old" I mean someone who was in their fifties or sixties) that person would bow to me, not necessarily a full bow, but a "from the waist" bow. Younger people (someone in their teens up to their thirties), on the other hand, would barely nod their heads. Because the older person would bow and the younger person just kind of nodded at me, I thought that perhaps the tradition of bowing was not continuing with the younger generation. I asked about this. It was explained to me that the tradition was still in place, but not so much in the young. As a person got older, however, they tended to be more traditional and take on more of the "ancient" traditions.

The people of Taiwan are very interested in the United States. Many people have traveled to the U.S. for their jobs or studied at U.S. colleges and universities. In spite of this, the Taiwanese really know little about the U.S. What they do know is based on television and television news (CNN world news), American movies, sports, and the internet. People in Taiwan study the English language beginning in the early grades, but they do not study the culture of English-speaking countries. The general understanding of young people about the United States seems to be that in America people are interested mainly in movies and sports.

This was brought home to me in an English communication class that I was teaching. I had divided the class into teams of four, it was February (and in the U.S. February is Black history month). I decided to assign each team a well-known Black person in history and gave each team a list of questions that they had to answer and report to the class the following week. After each team selected a person, I gave them some time to develop a plan and ask me any questions. All the teams were

animatedly discussing their person. One team asked me a question about their person. It was George Washington Carver. I thought they could not read the name, so I said, "You have George Washington Carver." They said to me they knew that. I said, "Okay. Is there a problem?" They said, "We never heard of George Washington Carver. What NBA team does he play for?" Surprised by this, I replied, "NBA team? He's not a basketball player. He's a famous Black inventor and educator." They said to me, kind of astonished, "You mean he's not a basketball player?" Then the other teams chimed in with questions like "Is our person a singer?" "Is our person an actor?" "Is our person a basketball player?" Knowledge of African Americans is that they are singers, actors, or athletes.

A long-standing tradition in Taiwan is that the young are expected to care for the old. The tradition in Taiwan is that the children take care of their parents when they get older. If the parents are healthy, they usually live on their own, but more often the oldest son moves into the parents' home (he will eventually inherit the property) and cares for the parents. If there is no son, then the oldest daughter takes on the responsibility of caring for the parents. One day three of my English communication students showed up at my office. In class one day I told them if they wanted to become more proficient at speaking English, they needed to spend time each week speaking English with someone. They came to my office to "talk English" with me. I knew that the Taiwanese valued education. I thought that I would have them talk to me about what they were studying. I said to them, "You're all working on master's degrees. Right?" They looked at me blankly. I asked them if they understood what I had asked them. They said, "No." I asked them again, and they then looked at each other and talked to each other (in Chinese) trying to figure out what I had asked them. I said, "Do you understand master's degree?" and they said, "No." After about five minutes of explanation, I finally got them to understand that they already had earned a bachelor's degree and were now studying to earn a master's degree. I then asked them what master's program they were in. They were all in the computer information science program. I asked them why they wanted a master's degree. All three responded, "To earn more money." So I asked, "That's the reason? To earn more money?" In response to that, one of the students (a young woman) said, "When my mother retires from her job, I have to take care of her. I need to make sure that I have a job that pays enough money." When she said that, the other two students nodded their heads in agreement.

In Taiwan, just like everywhere, young people are very proficient with technology and are comfortable with it. Everywhere I went I saw young people talking into their cell phones, playing computer games,



or doing something “techy.” On trains and buses, if young people were by themselves, I seldom saw them reading a book. They, again, were doing something with technology, talking on a cell phone, playing a computer game, checking the internet. One time I was on a train and I watched a young man talking into a head set (on his cell phone) and playing a computer game. As I watched him, from what I could determine, he was playing some kind of game with the person with whom he was talking.

Prior to coming to Taiwan I wondered if I would be a good representative of the U.S., my university, of the teaching profession, and of me. One of the first things I learned was that the people in my department at the university were also wondering about me. Just as I wanted to make a good impression on them, they wanted to make a good impression on me. I learned that, as a group, the Taiwanese are polite and courteous and friendly, but, perhaps because I am male, they kept me at a distance. I was never sure if that was because I was male, or because of me being “me.” I learned that the Taiwanese value education, but not more than how education is valued in the United States. I learned that Taiwanese students are similar to U.S. students. I learned that if I taught clearly, articulated my expectations clearly, listened to them, and was flexible, I was just as successful with them as I was with students in the U.S. Actually, I learned to enjoy everything about Taiwan, the customs, the traditions, the food, the people, and would enjoy living in Taiwan again.

### ***Voice 3. “Walking Around” Native American and ESL Culture***

I would not say that I began my teaching career “walking around” other cultures. In fact, if I had to describe it, I might say I unwittingly “stomped” on other cultures instead. My first teaching assignment was in Maricopa, Arizona, a small reservation town on the Ak-Chin Indian Reservation. Most graduates of traditional teacher-education programs know little about the cultural traits, behaviors, values, and attitudes that different children of color bring to the classroom and how they affect the students’ responses to instructional situations (Groulx, 2001), and I was no exception. I went on a guided bus tour of the reservation and was handed the keys to my own classroom. Unfortunately, my lack of awareness led me to misinterpret students’ actions as deviant and to treat them punitively and lower my expectations.

I was interested in learning about the cultures of my students, who were an even mix of Native American, Mexican migrant workers, and White, but I focused on the history of the tribe and the Spanish language, and failed to realize that many of the “discipline problems” I encountered in my classroom were due to cultural misunderstandings.

For example, my Native American students did not give me eye-contact and I interpreted this as a lack of respect. My Hispanic students missed school regularly and I interpreted this as not valuing education. When I asked a direct question of one student and that student did not know the answer, I could not get another student to give me the answer, yet, I did not realize during that first year that this was a cultural phenomenon. I was learning some facts about the cultures of my students, but not enough to help me with the heartaches and headaches of teaching students from cultures that were foreign to me.

Toward the end of my first year I took on a coaching role for the girls' softball team. I learned quickly that my students were enjoyable people on a one-to-one basis and I talked with some of them about their lives. This is when I began “walking around” their culture. I learned that my migrant students missed school to help their parents work the fields. I learned that the lack of eye contact was a sign of respect from my Native American students and that their refusal to answer questions after a classmate could not was also a sign of respect. I learned to dig deeper with one student and lead that student to the correct answer rather than to move on quickly to another student, a skill that has helped me in many learning situations with students beyond those from the Ak-Chin tribe. As a coach, I spent long hours working with students after school and riding on the bus to weekly games. During this time, I talked to students and learned to like them as individuals. My role as a coach gave me the impetus to begin “walking around” the cultures of my students.

My transformation as a teacher took time and formal educational experiences. Over the summer, I took a “Diversity Education” course that introduced me to Geneva Gay's (2001) guidelines for diversity, which encompass four primary areas: self-knowledge, understanding differences in cultural values and behavior codes, development of pedagogical skills, and development of public relations skills. As a middle-class White teacher I had to become aware of the privilege associated with my cultural status and develop the ability to critically analyze my own experiences. It was not until I had started this journey that I was truly able to understand the differences in cultural and behavior codes that led to misunderstandings in the classroom.

My next teaching assignment was as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in South Phoenix. It was here that I truly “walked around” the cultures of my students. I learned from my students daily, valued their input, and became an advocate for my students. I did this in small ways, such as having family picnic days in the local park, and in larger ways such as challenging the teacher evaluation process at our school.

The family picnic days began after my first parent-teacher conference night. I sat in my classroom for six hours straight and had exactly two parents show up to discuss their children's progress. Instead of jumping to any conclusions, I asked my students the next day about why their parents had not attended. A lackluster response from students, with a lot of "I don't know" answers, led me to send students out to interview their parents about schooling and they came back to me with the answer to my question the next week. The reasons indicated that my students' parents were not comfortable at the school, led busy lives, and believed that it was my job to educate their children—the school was a realm that did not have a place for them. So, I organized a picnic at the park. Students brought their families and a dish to pass and we played music and soccer. I met parents, grandparents, siblings, and cousins. I played soccer and got invited to *Quinceaneras*. I formed relationships that allowed me to draw upon students' families as I taught classroom lessons.

The family picnics were a way for me to "walk around" the cultures of my students and form connections that allowed me to improve my pedagogical skills. I also found ways to improve my public relations skills in South Phoenix by being an advocate for my students. Many of the ESL teachers I worked with were having difficulties with our district's evaluation procedures. The evaluation instrument was designed for a traditional lecture-format classroom. Some of the teachers had administrators leave their classroom and say "I'll come back when you're teaching" when they were scheduled to be evaluated and were using ESL methodologies. So, we organized a workshop for district administrators on "Best Practices for ESL Teachers" and worked to get the evaluation instrument changed to reflect these practices. In this way, I was able to guide administration as they "walked around" ESL classrooms, and impacted the expectations of administrators who entered our classrooms.

Nieto (2005) has identified five qualities that she considers necessary for teachers to explore cultural diversity and social justice issues with an open mind. These are:

1. A sense of mission to serve diverse children to the best of their abilities;
2. Empathy and 'valuing' of students' life experiences, culture and human dignity;
3. Courage to question mainstream school knowledge, conventional ways of doing things, and assumptions about students;
4. Willingness to improvise and be flexible; and
5. A passion for equality and social justice.

These are also the qualities one needs to possess in order to benefit from “walking around” the cultures of our students.

### Essential Principles for Teacher Preparation

Each of us has had fascinating experiences “walking around” culture. As we have analyzed our experiences, several common themes have emerged. We have combined these themes into five critical factors. We have labeled these critical factors “key principles” because we believe they are essential (key) for teacher preparation. These five key principles are:

1. *Culture is communication.* In the introduction to this article, we write that culture is discourse. From “walking around” cultures we have learned that there are similarities and differences across all cultures. To effectively communicate in a culture, however, teachers must fully understand their culture and how their culture is similar to and different from another culture.
2. *Culture is personal.* We have learned that everyone has a culture (as we write in the introduction “culture is communal and shared”), but at the same time culture is personal. We have learned that the persons in a culture take pride in that culture. At times that pride may be suppressed, but, nevertheless, it is still there. When teaching across cultures, teachers must be mindful of the personal nature of culture (the pride individuals have in their culture), and be sensitive to how what they do or say in the classroom affects that nature.
3. *Culture has boundaries.* All cultures have parameters of behavior. In order for teachers to be successful crossing borders, they must know and be familiar with the boundary conditions. They must understand that what is acceptable behavior in one culture may not be acceptable in another culture.
4. *Culture is perceived by those who stand outside the culture.* Perceptions lead to stereotypes. To be successful in cross-cultural teaching, teachers must set aside any perceived stereotypes or beliefs they may have about that culture.
5. *Culture is defined by the people in that culture.* Often we see culture in the abstract. It is much easier to discuss culture if we view it in the abstract; however, understanding that culture includes real people who have real lives, makes culture concrete. To be effective cross-cultural teachers, we need to know

the people in a culture. When we get to know the people in a culture, it changes our perceptions of that culture, and knowing people and changing perceptions is what “walking around” culture is all about.

### Conclusion

The United States has become the most culturally diverse country in history. That diversity brings a variety of learners into classrooms. The responsibility of a teacher is to help students learn and be successful. We believe that all teachers want this. For many teachers, however, helping students learn and be successful means teaching the curriculum and assessing students to make sure they have learned the curriculum at an acceptable level. We maintain that such practice is just a part of a teacher’s responsibility. In many instances, depending on the circumstances, it may be the smallest part. We believe that, in addition to teaching the curriculum, a major responsibility of any teacher is to help all students learn how to successfully navigate the mainstream culture. To be able to do this well, teachers must understand not only their students’ culture, but their culture as well.

In this article we present a method teachers can use to learn about culture, both theirs and their students’. We call this method “walking around” culture, and each of us related stories about “walking around” culture. We have learned a great deal from those experiences. We have learned that “walking around” culture is not easy. We have learned that crossing borders takes determination. It takes hard work, diligence, and tenacity. The pay off at the end is worth the effort.

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