

Introduction to Cross-Cultural Teaching and Learning

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The world is becoming a global village. Increasingly, all ministry is becoming cross-cultural, whether at home or abroad. We are bombarded with unprecedented opportunities for teaching all nations to obey everything Jesus commanded.

Yet the person who desires to obey Jesus' command to teach all nations faces unexpected challenges. The first challenge stems from growing national and racial tensions. While communication technology, speed of travel, and immigration trends pull the world closer together, racial tensions keep tearing people apart. The second challenge is that people from various cultures think and learn differently. Many assumptions about how people think are below the level of our cultural awareness, so that much cross-cultural teaching is ineffective.

The normal human tendency for people from every culture is to think of themselves as "insiders" and everyone else as "outsiders." The more one learns about the world the more one learns how small his or her own "inside" group really is. One college sophomore walked out of a modern history course exclaiming, "The world is crawling with foreigners!" It is natural for people from every culture to feel that they are the center of the universe and never think of themselves as foreigners. Such ethnocentrism is often innocent and natural, but it cools the passion for obeying Jesus' command to teach all nations.

The United States is one of the most racially mixed nations on earth. Nowadays people talk about the United States as a "tossed salad" rather than a "melting pot." Many nationalities are mixed together, but each culture maintains its own flavor. Urban specialist Ray Bakke writes,

The United States really is becoming a third-world country. For years the U.S. has been the largest Jewish nation. For years it has been the largest Irish nation. It is the second largest black nation in the world. (Only Nigeria of all the 53 countries of Africa has more black people than the United States.) Currently, only Mexico and Spain, maybe Argentina, have more Spanish people than the U.S. By the year 2000, Hispanics in the U.S. will outnumber Anglos. Very soon Hispanics will outnumber blacks.¹

Time magazine recently featured a cover story about America's changing colors, predicting that whites will soon be a minority. In San Jose, California, "bearers of the Vietnamese surname Nguyen outnumber the Joneses in the telephone directory 14 columns to eight."² These are wonderful statistics for people who have a passion for making disciples of all nations.

But many people see internationalization as a threat rather than an opportunity. Ethnocentric tensions go beyond America and are sweeping the whole world. Tribal, racial, and ethnic tensions in Africa, Asia, Europe, the South Pacific, and South America make it difficult to waken the church around the world to the growing opportunities for

teaching all nations. In order for the church around the world to fulfill Jesus' command, a revival must take place. The greatest hindrance to fulfilling the great commission is not lack of money, personnel, or cross-cultural skills, but lukewarm churches with a dulled passion for the glory of God. We need a renewed vision of the glory of the Lord.

The Great Commission of Psalm 67

Psalm 67 challenges us to have God's perspective of the world. Only when we have a passion in our hearts for the glory of the Lord will we be truly motivated for cross-cultural teaching.

Verse one is the heart-cry of Aaron's prayer. "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us." We are all hungry for the blessing of the Lord on our lives. But a major reason why God blesses his people is so they can be a blessing to the nations. God promised to bless Abraham and make him a great nation so that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. God didn't bless Abraham so that he could be proud and comfortable, but so he could be a blessing to the nations.

The longing of the Psalmist is for the nations to praise God. "May the peoples praise you, O God: may all the peoples praise you!" Then, and only then, will the nations will be glad and sing for joy. Anyone who is aware of what is going on in the world realizes that the world is not praising God, the nations are not glad and they are not singing for joy. The nations are wrestling with economic, political, and racial problems. The Lord God Almighty has the only solution -- the good news we are commanded to teach. God's name is not being praised by all the peoples of the earth and such a condition should motivate us for cross-cultural teaching. If we are hungry for the blessing of God in our lives, we must rekindle a passion for teaching the nations to obey all that Jesus commanded.

There are three great motivations that should stir our passion for teaching all nations:

- 1) God wants to bless us so that we can be a blessing to the nations
- 2) the nations are in serious trouble, and we have the only Good News
- 3) God's name is not being glorified in all the earth. If we love the Lord, we must be deeply bothered by this fact.

The Need of the Church Around the World

Almost four billion people in the world today make no claim to new life in Christ. Most of them have never clearly heard the good news. The more we can learn about the influences of culture on thinking and learning, the more likely it is that the gospel will be understood by all nations. The task of world evangelization will be enhanced if basic principles of cross-cultural teaching can be better understood.

About a billion people in the world are at least nominally Christian. One of the most urgent needs of the rapidly growing churches around the world is for culturally sensitive Bible teaching. Dr. Byang Kato warned about the dangerous lack of Bible teaching in Africa.

Biblical Christianity in Africa is being threatened by syncretism, universalism, and Christo-paganism. The spiritual battle for Africa during this decade will be fought therefore, largely on theological grounds. But the church is generally unprepared for the challenge because of its theological and biblical ignorance. . . The church in Africa is suffering from theological anemia...³

Luis Palau says that the church in much of the world is exploding. He points out that there are at least 50 million Christians in mainland China with very few Bibles. Regarding Africa, he comments, "it's not difficult to win Africans to Christ today. The challenge is seeing them disciplined."⁴ Palau says that revival in Latin America is beyond his wildest dreams. The church desperately needs people who know how to teach the Bible in multi-cultural situations.

Culture, thinking and learning.

A second obstacle to cross-cultural teaching is that there are puzzling differences in the way people from different cultures think and learn. Every human being is a thinker, but not all people think in the same way. Rules for processing information are influenced by culture, but cultural differences are variations on a common theme.

Some early studies of culture and thinking mistakenly designated non-Western thinking as "pre-logical, mystical and entwined with emotional life."⁵ Even recent descriptions by some missiologists have labeled people of different continents as being either intuitive or logical. To categorize all non-industrial societies as "pre-logical but relational beings" and high-tech societies as "logical but non-relational individualists" is a dangerous oversimplification. All people from every culture are created in the image of God with tremendous potential to think and feel. Every culture has ways for forming categories, systems for planning action, and a means for quantifying objects, people and time.⁶

Not only are there important similarities within all cultures, there are also important differences within each culture. The amount of schooling people have can predict wide variations in thinking patterns even within the same culture. People from anywhere in the world who have several years of formal schooling use similar thought patterns. Those without formal schooling use somewhat different thought patterns even though they live in the same cultural setting. In one study, differences were observed between schooled and illiterate Tangale males of Nigeria. Even though the men lived within a few miles of each other, and were of the same tribe, they displayed significant variations in the way they made categories, based on whether or not they had formal schooling.⁷

The basic patterns of thinking and human development seem to be the same in all cultures. An important study of Nigerian Bible school students found that ability to perform higher level thinking tasks increased the longer a student was in school.⁸ The development of moral reasoning follows a similar pattern in many cultures but the rate and end point of development seem to be influenced by culture.⁹ Studies in cross-cultural faith development show similar variations on the common theme.¹⁰ All these studies show that cultural differences in thinking are based on fundamental cognitive structures.

Awareness of Context and Culture

Probably the most fundamental influence on culture and thinking is the degree of people's sensitivity to their context. Some people have a high sensitivity to the concrete context around them. Other people seem to be more interested in ideas and issues that are broader and more abstract than the immediate context. Edward T. Hall gives a helpful explanation of "high context" and "low context" people.¹¹ Both types of people can be highly intelligent and the two thinking styles both demand complex cognitive functions.

High-context people pay special attention to the concrete world around them. Everything in the immediate physical context communicates something subtle but significant: the atmosphere of the room, sounds, smells, expressions on people's faces, and body language. High-context people tend to be person-oriented. They remember people's names and details about personal events. The subtle cues in a real-life setting intuitively but intentionally communicate important information. High-context teachers tend to be more sensitive to the feelings of other people.

Low-context people, on the other hand, pay special attention to words, ideas and abstract concepts. They may remember a conversation about an important topic but not remember the names of the people in the conversation. The specific explicit words and ideas communicate more clearly than the implicit tone of voice. Low-context learners enjoy analyzing and comparing abstract ideas. A low-context manager will insist on a signed legal contract, while a high-context, person-oriented manager would put more confidence in a friendly hand shake. A signed legal contract might seem like an insult

and a sign of mistrust for a high-context leader. Low-context teachers and learners would enjoy integrating one theory or philosophy with another.

High-context people may be exceptionally able to remember events from their past experiences, while low-context people are more competent at recalling impersonal facts they learned in the past. For example, my mother can remember details of a lunch with a stranger in a foreign country 20 years ago. She can remember particulars about their children, their work, and what they ate together. My dad is the opposite. He was with my mother at the same lunch, but he can't remember anything about the event. My dad, however, is a brilliant research chemist and can imagine molecular structures for tomorrow's experiments while he sits in the easy chair in the evening working on a crossword puzzle. While most people are adept at remembering both personal events and impersonal facts, some people may tend to be better at one or the other. High-context people more easily remember personal events while low-context people more easily recall impersonal information. Preliminary research suggests that people may retrieve different kinds of information from different parts of the brain. The frontal lobe is more active in some people when they are remembering personal knowledge about past events in their lives. Impersonal knowledge of facts seems to be retrieved from the medial temporal lobe of the brain.¹² Insights about remembering and recalling information have significant implications for cross-cultural educators.

Are There Western Thinking Styles?

A popular misconception is that Western values are dominated by the low-context thinking patterns of ancient Greece that encouraged people to concentrate on ideas instead of events. Thus Western educators might be adept at seeing broad patterns in a philosophy of education, but be less sensitive to the needs of students.¹³ But a generalization that suggests North Americans are low-context and Africans are high-context is deceptive and even dangerous. Some Africans tend toward being high-context and others low-context. It is equally an error to blindly label North Americans as one or the other.

Recent research suggests that cultural differences are not the primary explanation for differences between the so-called Greek-oriented Western world and the non-Western world, but stem from factors such as rural-urban, industrial-agricultural, or the amount of formal schooling. For example, the teaching-learning process in rural societies anywhere in the world is often guided by consensus, conformity and cooperation. Other studies suggest that urban and rural groups may operate with different dynamics. People anywhere in the world who live in rural sub-cultures tend to be more high-context and cooperate more willingly than people in urban sub-cultures. Teaching and learning in an low-context, high-tech society on any continent may emphasize personal convictions, individual initiative and competition.¹⁴

Culture has an important influence on preferences for leadership styles. Low-context cultures value individual effort and personal freedom. Leadership that encourages individual participation in decision-making is important. High-context societies tend to prefer leaders with powerful personalities or even autocratic and centralized styles of leadership. A charismatic personality is more important in a high-context society than the ability to generate abstract, and low-context, five-year plans.

Another research survey showed that women in many cultures around the world have similar cognitive styles.¹⁵ In some cultures women tend to be more high-context than low-context. But generalizations are dangerous.

Orientations toward the personal or abstract ways of thinking are good to understand for the person involved in cross-cultural teaching. A well-educated business executive in Singapore or Accra might have a learning style similar to that of an executive from Buenos Aires or Brussels.

Context and Learning

No person is totally low-context, focusing only on ideas, or totally high-context, focusing only on the present context. Teaching and learning preferences fall along a continuum between very high-context and low-context orientations. Learners who enjoy wrestling with ideas might be classified as low-context. Learners who prefer to think about the world and people around them would be more high-context. Academic schedules are rather abstract concepts divorced from the unfolding present situation. Training schools that emphasize course schedules, tight syllabi and the amount of time to be spent on each subject would tend toward the low-context end of the continuum. Teachers that emphasize authority and relationship-building without particular attention to schedule or agenda would tend toward the high-context end of the continuum.



The following chart may be helpful in summarizing some of the potential teaching-learning differences between high-context and low-context teaching and learning.¹⁶ The ideas are “informed hunches” and worthy of further investigation. The two columns are not distinct categories but may be likened to extremes of a continuum. Few if any individuals are examples of extremes. In every culture there will be people who tend toward one side of the continuum or the other.

	High - Context Teaching & Learning (Shame-based)	Low - Context Teaching & Learning (Guilt-based)
Possible Cultural Factors	Rural Agricultural Non-formal schooling	Urban Professional Formal schooling
Culture and Thinking		
Cognitive Style	Field Dependent	Field Independent
Cognitive Function	Concrete Operational	Formal Operational
Moral Reasoning	Conventional	Principled
Faith Development	Synthetic-Conventional	Individuative-Reflective
Time	<u>Polychronic</u> Many things can happen at the same time. It may be difficult to begin and end on time, or to isolate one topic at a time.	<u>Monochronic</u> The class will begin and end on time. Subjects can be scheduled in an orderly sequence. People will want to stick to the topic.

Communication Style	Communication will be indirect, with emphasis on non-verbal messages. Tone of voice, posture, and facial features will have group meaning. The whole context communicates.	Communication will be direct, either spoken or written. The concept being discussed will be more important than the feelings of the person making a statement. The ideas communicate.
Authority ¹⁷	Prestige is given by the group and becomes almost permanent. Others will be expected to respect rank. Formal credentials are important and need to be evident.	Authority is earned by individual and personal effort. It is temporary and dependent on continued performance. Formal credentials are not as important as performance.
Leadership Style	Leadership is usually highly controlling in order to maintain group harmony and conformity. Leader often has "charismatic" personality. Leaders reward loyalty to the group.	Leaders will allow each person to have significant input into decision making. Group members are more likely to question the ideas and decisions of the leader. Leaders respect individual initiative from group members.
Conflict Resolution Style	Indirect resolution is sought through mutual friends. Displeasure is shown through non-verbal, subtle communication. Conflict resolution may be avoided for as long as possible.	Resolution is sought through direct confrontation. People will meet face to face and explain the difficulty verbally. Speaking the truth will be emphasized.
Teaching Goals	The purpose of the teaching will be to build interpersonal relationships. Group will be people-oriented.	The teaching will be task-oriented. Group will want to cover a specified number of verses or finish particular projects.
Preferred Bible Passages	Bible stories and history will be preferred. The Psalms and passages that encourage the imagination will also hold interest.	Bible doctrine from different parts of the Bible will be emphasized along with the didactic passages of the Epistles.
Interaction Style	High group cooperation and a tendency to conform to decisions of others will characterize style. Group harmony will be important.	Interaction will be personalized with an emphasis on individual "ownership" of ideas. Conformity will be de-emphasized.

Religious Emphasis	The Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit will have special emphasis. Emotional commitment and a feeling of belonging is important.	A solid understanding of the Word of God and correct doctrinal belief is stressed. Expository sermons will be appreciated.
Major Focus	Testimonies and sharing of needs are emphasized. Application of biblical passages is important.	Bible study is the focus, with an emphasis on understanding and interpreting the major ideas of the passage.
Missiology Focus	Spiritual signs and wonders are important. Prayer is emphasized.	Strategizing long-range plans such as "The world by 2000" are important. Statistical church growth is emphasized.
Difficulty	Students have problems relating life needs to the objective truth of the Bible. Can lead to heresy and syncretism.	Students have difficulty relating the objective truth of the Bible to the problems of life. Can lead to dead orthodoxy.
Strengths	Builds empathetic relationships. Christian commitment is fervent and caring.	Builds a solid understanding of God's truth. Places a healthy emphasis on personal ownership and responsibility.

Integrating High-context and Low-context Thinking

Both high-context and low-context learners have healthy strengths and dangerous weaknesses. Is there any way that students and teachers can have the benefits of both high-context and low-context ways of thinking? Are there ways that the weaknesses of both extremes can be overcome? Merely to aim for the middle of a continuum may not be the ideal way to emphasize strengths and de-emphasize weaknesses. Perhaps the strengths can be fused together so that learners can have the strengths of each thinking-learning style. Can Christian education work to develop people who are both caring and interactive as well as people with reflective personal convictions? Neither kind of thinking by itself is ideal. Teaching methods need to take into account both the preferred thinking style and also the ideal thinking style. Teaching should aim to build the strengths of both the person and abstract orientations, and should work to overcome the weaknesses of both orientations. The following chart illustrates the strengths and weaknesses.

		Low-Context (Guilt-based)	
		Weaknesses	Strengths
High-Context (Shame-based)	Strengths	Independent Theoretical	Caring Personal Convictions Reflective Thinker
	Weaknesses	Dependent Unreflective	Sociable Experiential

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Learning in all cultures has much in common. But merely describing cultural preferences in learning does not necessarily tell how we should teach. Good teaching does more than merely discover cultural learning styles and adapt teaching to these styles. Some cultures are so used to oppressive teaching methods that these methods may be the preferred learning style. For example, some religions teach students to memorize a holy book in an unknown language. New Christians from that culture may prefer to memorize the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew without understanding the meaning of the words. Empirical research may find that meaningless rote memory is the preferred learning style. An unreflective legalism based on the dictates of a charismatic leader seems to be the preferred learning style in some cultures. But it is doubtful that such learning will develop reflective biblical Christians.

In some cultures, the educational systems are focused on passing external exams. Such a system may seem quite credible. On the other hand, the exam system can promote the “diploma disease.” After a while students begin to prefer the kind of teaching that will cram meaningless facts into their heads to help them pass exams. Passing the exam to earn formal credentials rather than learning how to be a growing Christian can dominate the preferred learning style.

Thus to describe a culturally preferred learning style is not to prescribe a good teaching style. How culture affects thinking is crucial, but does not determine how one ought to teach. Good teaching methods will tie together the strengths of each thinking style.

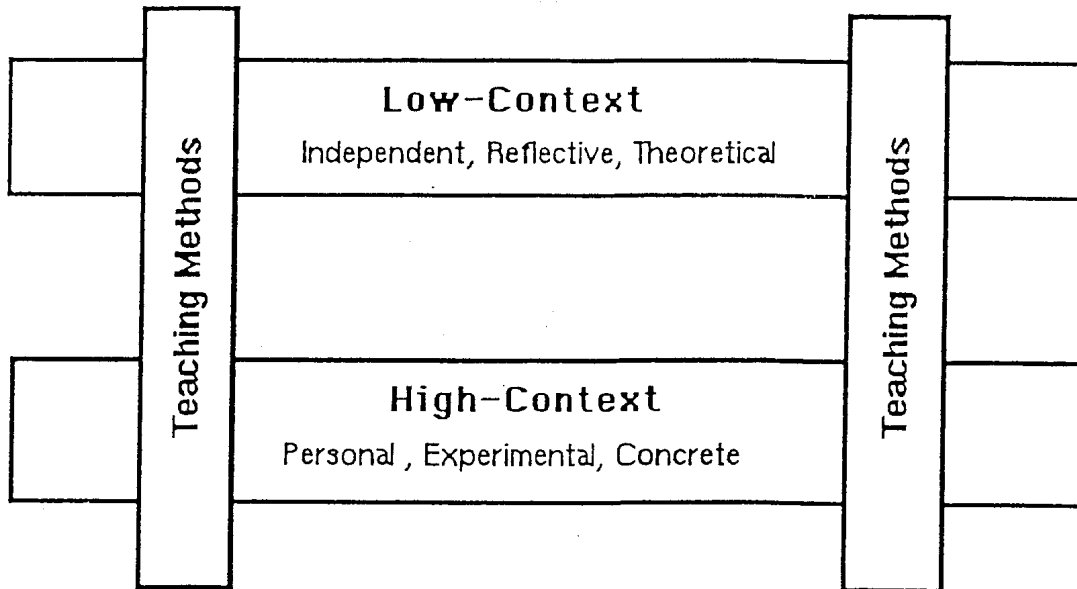
Principles for Cross-Cultural Teaching

Low-context learners and teachers bring many strengths to the learning situation. They are good at thinking creatively for themselves, are able to understand broad theoretical relationships and reflectively see low-context relationships between important ideas. But they also have weaknesses to overcome. Low-context teachers and learners will not automatically be able to relate theoretical insights to personal growth in grace.

High-context learners and teachers also bring valuable strengths to Christian education. Students and teachers are willing to cooperate, will have a desire to be practical, and will want to test theories in the “real world.” But high-context learners also have weaknesses to overcome. Students and teachers may be so tied to the practical that they will not be able to understand why something works. Without understanding theory, they will not be able to generalize insights into other settings.

The kind of teaching that will help students integrate personal convictions with social concern, theory with practice, the active with the reflective, and the concrete with the abstract will intentionally tie together both preferences for context. The teaching model might look like a rail fence.¹⁸ The rail fence training model can integrate the strengths of both high-and low-context learners.

Goal = a balanced teaching style



Christian Education for Low-context Cultures

Low-context or abstract-oriented students will prefer the kind of teaching that integrates ideas. They will prefer teachers who don't force their ideas on students or demand meaningless rote memory. They will not be impressed with the teacher's formal credentials or experience if the teacher is not able to challenge them to think. They will feel free to disagree with the teacher and with other students. They may not appreciate assignments where students need to work together. Low-context students will be upset if textbooks have not arrived on time or if the course seems disorganized. They will feel free to directly confront their teacher about disagreements in assignments, grades, or theoretical consistency. They will most likely prefer academic courses such as theology or philosophy of education and try to avoid practical internships.

Classes with low-context students are never dull! Discussion will be free and even electric. Assignments will produce many creative and original ideas and students will leave the course with genuine personal convictions. When these students confront teachers and other students they are not trying to be rude but are trying honestly to get to deeper issues.

There are things teachers can do to help students grow beyond the limitations of low-context thinking. Give assignments that challenge students to integrate theory with practice. When teaching a section on philosophy of education, assign students to interview or observe experienced educators to discover how their philosophy affects their practice of teaching. While being sensitive to the strength of individual effort, give some assignments that require students to cooperate and work together. Assignments can challenge students to integrate theory with practice. Ask questions that stimulate students to describe the implications of theory or theology for a practical problem in the church.

Christian Education for High-context Cultures

High-context, or person-oriented students respect the formal credentials of the teacher and will be interested in receiving formal credit for a course. They will be concerned with the

practical and personal implications of the information learned. They will be willing to work together and will never forget the friendships made while in training. Students will be interested in discussing experience.

High-context students are respectful of the teacher and cooperative with each other. They are interested in the practical and personal benefits the course will have for them. They probably won't be too bothered if the textbooks don't arrive on time or if the teacher doesn't teach the subject matter in the order listed on the syllabus.

There are things that can be done to help high-context students move beyond the immediate context and to benefit from the power of good theory. Christian education must prepare students to solve problems, and there is nothing as practical as good theory for solving unanticipated problems. Give assignments that build on the strengths of high-context students. Since they are good at understanding the present situation, challenge them to also critically reflect on the context. For example, a teacher could give assignments to interview older Christians and generate hypotheses as to why they became Christians. Challenge students to contrast the actual "folk" theology of the average person in their city or village with what they know about evangelical theology. When training high-context students, begin teaching with experience and challenge students to intellectually reflect on the implications of that experience for Christian education.

General Principles

Good Christian education in any culture will challenge students to bring together practice and theory. High-context students may prefer to learn practical "how-to-do-it" techniques. But high-context students merely learn a "bag of tricks" for ministry they will not be able to solve complicated problems. Low-context students may prefer to study theoretical knowledge. If low-context students only learn theoretical "book knowledge" about missions they will have difficulty knowing how to put their knowledge into practice. Teaching methods need to stimulate integration.

Good Christian education does not try to segregate students into homogeneous groups of people who have similar thinking styles. The ideal is to mix person- and low-context students together. This diversity helps to emphasize the strengths of each thinking style. Low-context theory without practice leads to hollow intellectualism, and high-context practice without theory leads to shallow pragmatism. Intentionally mixing person- and low-context students in the same class will stimulate both to see problems in the church from each other's perspectives. Encourage class discussion where both kinds of students talk with each other and broaden each other's thinking.

A good focus for Christian education is to teach problem-solving. Problems in the Christian life grow out of practical difficulties but require theoretical insights for solutions. While high-context and low-context students approach problems differently, problem-solving is a relevant activity for both. If Bible teaching merely imparts bodies of knowledge, students will not be able to use the information to solve problems. On the other hand, if Christian education teaches only behavioral skills, people will not know how to adapt those skills to different situations. Actual case studies challenge students both to think and to act, and are appropriate for either abstract or high-context students.

The learning setting should encourage students not only to learn information, but to practice what they have learned. People don't always learn from experience nor do they always learn from books. It is the interaction between thinking and doing that produces the best learning. Neither thinking nor doing alone is adequate unless the student can be challenged to integrate the two. Christians can learn from their experience, from each other, and from the broader insights of the teacher. Teachers need to have relevant experience in the Christian life as well as theological insights for understanding that experience.

Christian education that integrates theory and practice will foster biblical growth in grace in people from any culture. It is a task with eternal significance.

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