

The Problem of Cultural Relativism in Inter-Teacher Relationships ¹

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The multicultural framework wherein language teachers often work, having daily contact with co-workers of different nationalities, including Mexicans, together with the realities of being foreigners in Mexico ourselves, creates an interesting intercultural context pertinent to pedagogical study and very worthy of serious academic consideration.

Unfortunately, although this may have been the intention of Douglas Goodwin's article, it was widely perceived here in the language school and beyond within the University of Guanajuato as being poorly written and reflecting a very narrow vision of Mexican society.

This has brought to question why the article was accepted in the first place by the Journal, and there is concern that it could badly reflect on our Language School and the University itself. His assumptions and generalities, voiced, for the most part, from an un-supported ethnocentric point of view, portrayed our school as being in a state of permanent interpersonal conflict, caused by cultural, not personal, differences. His expressed objective of wanting to help resolve this situation has actually resulted in an increased level, or even new issues, of conflict.

As in all workplaces there is, and always will be, a certain level of conflict and differing interactional styles. This can be seen as normal when understood and conceptualized accordingly. In referring to the 'dangers of culturism' in teacher/student perceptions, Holliday states 'Kubota attributes the indiscriminate othering of the foreign to "the persistent racism of contemporary society" (2001:28). [...] I prefer *culturism* to racism as the root process we need to consider here. By culturism I mean reducing the foreign 'other' to simplistic, essentialist cultural prescriptions.' (Holliday 1999:245; 2002: 186, Holliday forthcoming).

The 'othering' of fellow workmates is also a possible risk in disrupting interpersonal relationships and thus affecting professional performance. In the academic guise of informed analysis, Douglas Goodwin has tried to explain the perceived conflicts as results of intercultural tensions beyond any normalcy. These he angles towards the Mexicans' supposed difficulty in accepting the presence of foreigners, especially in

¹ A response to the article by Douglas Goodwin in the spring 2002, issue of MEXTESOL Journal vol. 25, no. 4: "An intercultural perspective on conflicts between language teachers".

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positions of power, (he contradicts himself in the article by describing the larger and better accepted power distance that he says exists in Mexico, compared to the United States). He refers to resentment of Mexicans towards persons better qualified, and to women in authority due to machismo (which he erroneously calls "masculinity") and other unilateral prejudices. Sexism and other forms of social intolerance are present in all societies, not to mention, of course, the United States.

'It can be argued that "nice" middle class people from comfortable societies think that by talking about "cultures", and admiring their "exotic" qualities, they are "accepting" and "being tolerant" and "understanding" of them – whereas in fact they are simply reducing them to these stereotypes. [...] Jordan and Weedon assert that the "commodification" of "racial and cultural difference is a marked feature of the radical twentieth-century avant-garde"(1995:149-50) [...] "Other cultures" thus become objects to be "nice" about instead of groups of real people with whom 'we' can interact and be equally people.' (Holliday forthcoming)

The issue of freedom of expression has been brought up in discussions between the Language School staff, during the after-wake of the publication, as well as some criticism of the MEXTESOL Journal for its perhaps unethical choice of papers. Personal views, which could be interpreted as prejudiced to groups or slanderous of individuals, are perhaps legitimate in private circles, but unacceptable in a public forum, unless disclaimed by that medium as not representing the views of the publishing body or as part of a study of wider focus.

I would like to argue that, in opposition to Douglas's statements, there is, for the most part, a harmonious environment at the University of Guanajuato, both in the Self-Access Centre where I work as well as in the Language School, with a rich mixture of teachers, students and volunteers from around the world.

This wider exposure to a large number of nationalities produces a higher tolerance towards cultural differences, and reduces the 'us' and 'them' mentality that often arises when there is a reduced number of groups, as in Douglas's assertion that the situation is Mexicans versus Americans. There are actually teachers from eleven different countries in all of the language departments, and half of the English teachers are not Americans. It is precisely this multiculturalism that benefits the students in offering more authentic contexts and wider learning opportunities.

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