In the late 1800s, Franz Boas, the father of academic anthropology in America, changed the concept of culture from its long-prevailing association with progress in the arts, sciences, knowledge, and refinement to one that embraces a distinctly anthropological context. Boas—the first to use the term culture in the plural form cultures, with which we are familiar today—maintained that we cannot understand what is common to human beings unless we take full measure of how they differ. Judith Shapiro, president of Barnard College, discusses implications of the modern view of culture and the often distorted concept of relativism for the liberal arts curriculum today.

**Culture and Cultures**

Most of us grew weary of the so-called culture wars long ago, yet the struggles they involve are by no means over. Central questions about the meaning of a liberal education remain unanswered, and any attempts to revise core curricula continue to provoke heated debate on campuses across the country. A brief discussion of the concepts of culture and cultures serves to shed light on the issues at hand:

During the 18th and 19th centuries social evolutionists saw culture as something humans developed to free themselves from control by nature and human instincts. They presented unilinear schemes of humanity’s steady march upward in every area of cultural life, with Europeans at the top. It wasn’t until the late 19th century that, according to historian George Stocking, Boas modernized the term culture by giving it a distinctive anthropological meaning, combining the elements of historicity, plurality, integration, behavioral determinism, and relativity. Historicity means that cultures develop over time and that one needs to understand their past in order to understand their present. Plurality indicates that there is not a single culture but many. Integration means that the parts of a culture fit together in some significant way and that cultures should therefore be viewed as systems. Behavioral determinism means that we are less the masters of our culture than we are its servants. And relativity means that cultures must be understood from the inside on their own terms and not just from the outside in the cultural terms of a foreign observer. Relativity also means that there is no simple royal road to objectivity in comparing cultures.

An unfortunate distortion regarding cultural differences has been perpetrated by those who regard cultures as separate islands unto themselves. This view
has had negative consequences for both the curriculum and campus life, as in its most extreme form it supports the assumption that only those who are themselves members of a culture can speak of it with integrity and authority. As this approach has converged with the praiseworthy desire for greater tolerance of difference, the result has been a naive and uncritical concept of cultural relativism.

Protests focused on attempts to introduce multicultural studies into the curriculum often stem, not surprisingly, from this uncritical concept of relativism. Relativism, as it developed in anthropology, is about learning and understanding as much as possible about those who are very different from us—whoever “we” may happen to be. Its goal is not to approve of and validate every possible form of human behavior.

Lessons from Linguistics
The true message of relativism is, I believe, most clearly revealed in the context of anthropological linguistics, the study of those unwritten languages long ignored by scholars and generally believed to be simple and lacking the intellectual resources of languages belonging to so-called civilized peoples. As anthropologists in the United States turned their attention to the languages of the earliest North Americans, they found all sorts of complex, intricate, and refined grammatical structures hitherto undiscovered by linguists.

Relativism in linguistic study means that we approach each language with care and respect, ever on the alert for something unexpected and unfamiliar—something that lies beyond what we already know. Learning not simply to speak but to describe and analyze a new language is a challenging voyage of discovery, with its failures as well as its successes. The goal of a comparative study of languages that is as broad as possible is to develop categories of analysis that truly work for the full range of human linguistic behavior. The alternative is simply imposing our own grammatical categories on other languages—in other words, remaining trapped in our own linguistic provincialism.

Perhaps the clearest and most eloquent description of linguistic relativity is found in Edward Sapir’s classic essay “The Grammarian and His Language,” in which he presents how different languages express the English utterance “the stone falls.” Moving from languages relatively close to our own—such as French or German—and expanding out into Russian, Chinese, and some Native American languages, he arrives at Nootka, a language of the northwestern coast of North America. Here he shows us a radically different way of representing experience, where direction is marked separately, as opposed to being incorporated into the verb, while what we think of as the noun is part of the verb itself.

Having provided a Nootka utterance that is the general equivalent of “the stone falls,” he proceeds to offer another gloss for the Nootka version: “It stones down.” This second version, which is not a well-formed utterance in ordinary English, preserves more of what Sapir calls the “form-feeling” of the very different language in question. The linguistic moral of the story is that translation is possible, including translation that accurately conveys the sense of the original utterance—although what is idiomatic in one language may require a special, non-idiomatic paraphrase in the other.

In addition to helping us think about relativism, the field of linguistics can also help us think about the respective advantages of a shared culture, on the one hand, and the benefits of crossing cultural boundaries on the other. Speakers of a common language can engage in the kind of sophisticated, multilayered communication that is possible when a great deal of shared knowledge can be presupposed, providing the context for allusion, ellipsis, metaphor, and wordplay, among a host of other linguistic resources. Encounters between speakers of different languages, on the other hand, have to pass through an awkward and frustrating stage of linguistic impoverishment, which we call “pidginization.”

It is certainly easier and more rewarding in the short run to stay with familiar forms of communication. This can be especially so for members of a highly educated speech community. To be sure, though, many conversations among “in-groups” occur in the ordinary course of life. In New York, for example, they might take the following form:

Gorgeous!
Thanks.
Where?
Bergdorf’s.
In Maine, we might hear something like this:
Saw Sally.
Ayeh.
New porch.
Ayeh.

A large amount of background information can be presumed in such conversations between familiars. Moreover, repetition is the essence of long-term relationships. Yet we readily acknowledge the intellectual limitations of our daily repetitive, ritualized forms of conversation, as comforting and basic to the human condition as they may be. Indeed, even the most sophisticated forms of in-group discourse impose firm limits on our imagination and knowledge. And thus higher education involves going beyond them.

**Implications for the Liberal Arts Curriculum**

In terms of a liberal arts curriculum, I believe we must find the right way to combine the benefits of a shared culture with the necessity of preparing our students to travel across cultural boundaries. Programs for first-year students and majors may offer the best possibilities to build a base of common knowledge upon which fuller and richer communication can be built.

First-year programs could include some components that are shared either by all students in the class or at least by significant subgroups. They should give students the wherewithal to have interesting discussions and arguments about topics of depth and significance. Students majoring in the same field should come to constitute a sophisticated intellectual community. This is most likely to occur today with majors in the natural sciences. The social sciences and humanities, on the other hand, are more hit or miss.

The experience of a shared culture is also central to student life issues at our colleges and universities. When students belonging to groups that historically have been underrepresented in the academy form their own in-groups, they do so not only to be able to relax, be comfortable, or enhance their self-esteem, but also so that they can engage in the rewarding type of communication described above.

But birds of a feather cannot spend all of their time flocking together. If they do, their educational experience will suffer. As Diane Ravitch noted in a recent special issue of *Daedalus*, a multiculturalism that separates us rather than brings us together will simply end up reinforcing the stereotypes we hold about others in the absence of true knowledge. As educators, we should find the balance between understanding the need for students to feel accepted and comfortable and the need to break down the barriers between student groups. Separate cultural groups should be told clearly why they are being supported and be funded based to a large degree upon the extent of the outreach efforts they engage in.

Today’s students appear to be local in their thinking; for example, they tend to focus on interpersonal relationships and often are very involved in community activities. A worthy goal of a liberal education is to help students to think in larger geopolitical terms and to cross the bridge from civic to political engagement. With regard to faculty, in some ways the best approach may be to urge them to think more locally. Generally, the strongest colleges and universities are those where the faculty has a fierce sense of institutional loyalty and all are working toward achieving the institution’s mission—regardless of the level of their scholarly involvement with others in their field. Encouraging the breakdown of some of the barriers between disciplines on campus can help build a greater sense of community and loyalty among the faculty.

As for the curriculum, much has been written about the danger of balkanization as African American, Asian American, and Latino studies programs have been established, largely in the context of pressure from students belonging to these groups. The positive side of this curricular development is one that we must understand and defend, however, since it is central to the aims of education: namely, that all of our students—not just some of them—...
learn to locate themselves in history.

Curricular programs such as African American, Asian American, and Latino studies are best viewed as area studies programs, along with others that have been in the curriculum longer. They should be judged by the same academic standards too. Unless they attract and serve a broad range of students from a variety of backgrounds, as any area studies program should, they are failing in their job. The general rubric of “ethnic studies,” which we see in some institutions and which reflects our folk use of the term, should be avoided. The notion that some people are ethnic and others are not is, anthropologically speaking, a useful idea. Indeed, it is a mirror image reversal of the pre-Boasian “culture” concept, which designated something that the ones on the top have and the ones on the bottom lack. From either direction, the view is intellectually unhelpful, not to mention morally and politically regressive.

Conclusion

The purpose of cross-cultural study, as generally described in anthropology, is to make the strange familiar and also to make the familiar strange. This latter exercise leads to moments of great disorientation and moments of profound, unexpected recognition. Since our own deepest assumptions are held unconsciously, we can come to see them consciously for the first time after a troubling journey away from them. On the other hand, just as all cultural traditions are heterogeneous and complex, containing within them conflicts and contradictions, so different cultural traditions have significant points of attachment that serve as bridges between them. When we cross such a bridge, we wander into familiar territory. For example, when Christians or Jews encounter so-called fundamentalism in Islam, they should be reminded of parallels closer to home—while also remaining alert to the differences.

The feeling of being alien to the society in which one lives is a condition that, in fact, comes naturally to a large part of the world’s population in these times. Our students must be prepared to live in a world of displacement; indeed, many of them already do live in such a world. Edward Said, in his essay “Reflections on Exile,” wrote about the pleasure of “acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be.” Note that Said says “acting as if” rather than “being” at home. In fact, there is no place—there should be no place—where one is naively, uncritically at home. Said places himself with Theodor Adorno, who said “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s own home.” We pursue a liberal education so that we can dwell in a place—not always a comfortable place—where people from vastly diverse backgrounds are able to converse and argue across the boundaries of culture and history, with one another and with us.

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