Introduction

> Culture is communication and communication is culture.
>
> (Hall, 1984, p. 169)

Culture Myths is intended for all educators who work with culturally and linguistically diverse students of any age and at any level. The intention of the title is to convey the idea that one group of people holds culturally derived beliefs and makes assumptions about another group of people who holds diverse beliefs and assumptions; each group's assumptions are formed in different cultural contexts.

This book does not teach U.S. values, beliefs, and norms. Rather, it seeks to develop readers' appreciation for and deeper understanding of what culture is and how culture impacts how we think and behave, particularly as it relates to teaching and learning. The book's focus is on some of the more common myths about culture that U.S. educators encounter routinely, what the research tells us about these myths, and what we can do to address them.

We live in an increasingly global society where we encounter and interact with members of different cultures on a daily basis. Cultural differences are what lie at the heart of the tendency to evaluate members of other cultures negatively (Peeples, Hall, & Seiter, 2012). One goal of this book is to develop cross-cultural awareness to minimize this tendency, or at the very least, encourage readers to recognize this very real predisposition to frame judgments of others through our own cultural lens or cultural assumptions. Cultural assumptions can be thought of as a type of *implicit bias*, a term often used when discussing race and gender to refer to the unconscious attitudes, stereotypes, and preconceptions that influence interpretations of, behaviors toward, and decisions about those who are different than ourselves (Banaji & Greenwald,

2013). Implicit bias is most likely an evolutionary artifact of safety needs and appears to be rooted in a basic human tendency to see people in terms of groups—that is, "us versus them" or "in-group versus out-group" (Cikara & Van Bevel, 2014). This tendency, however, can be overcome through deliberate reflection, exploration, and examination (Yudkin et al., 2016).

This book does not propose to judge or change, but to create and develop an understanding of how complex the idea of "culture" truly is. It is designed to help readers observe, evaluate, and appreciate cultural differences in values, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and worldviews by focusing on underlying and mostly invisible reasons for these differences. By developing an awareness of our own cultural assumptions, we can better overcome cultural barriers and stumbling blocks to communication and understanding, both in the classroom and in the world outside the classroom.

Fundamental to developing cross-cultural awareness is learning about and understanding one's own culture, values, and beliefs and how they impact one's worldview, identity, and behaviors. We don't necessarily know our own culture by simply being a member of a culture, as illustrated in this parable told by David Foster Wallace (2005):

> There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

Although misunderstandings across cultures cannot be avoided completely, we can learn to appreciate that there are differences and learn how to evaluate whether misunderstandings and miscommunications are based on cultural differences rather than personality

(Lanteigne, 2007). In so doing, we can learn to differentiate between what is "rude" and "inappropriate" and what may be culturally different ways of thinking or doing something. Learning to understand how and why cultures differ is very much a consciousness-raising endeavor. We cannot understand everything, yet we also do not only want to focus on cultural dos and taboos. By learning to observe and evaluate the words, behaviors, and actions of members of other cultures and one's own, we become aware of the role of culture in our lives. In so doing, however, we must strike a balance between minimizing cultural differences and assuming similarities across cultures versus exoticizing other cultures or accentuating surface dissimilarities. We must also realize that no culture is homogeneous or static and that culture consists of practices and processes that vary according to contexts and change over time.

Culture is more than a collection of readily observable facts or a menu of "dos and taboos in Country X or Country Y." A popular classroom activity is to use culture quizzes or lists from the internet. Although many of these culture quizzes or lists purport to reveal cultural differences and promote cultural understanding, they only superficially address what culture is and how it impacts our behaviors and worldviews. And, at worst, these types of culture quizzes or lists perpetuate implicit biases and stereotypes. Therefore, I caution readers to examine culture quizzes or lists carefully before using them as a teaching tool.

Introducing Key Concepts

Several key concepts, often referred to as *cultural constructs*, will be referred to throughout the book. Brief descriptions are given here, but more extensive explanations and examples appear in the chapter in which they are first introduced so that readers can better explore how these concepts underlie diverse attitudes and behaviors.

- **culture**

In *Culture Myths*, *culture* is used to mean identifiable cognitive patterns of behavior, including the shared practices, customs, values, beliefs, norms, experiences, and worldviews that a group of people use for understanding and engaging with the world around them (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2014; Nasir & Hand, 2006). This definition focuses on underlying and less apparent elements of culture rather than on the more visible ones of language, food, music, art, and dress that are often the more commonly understood examples of "culture" in mainstream society. See Myth 1.

- **collectivism / individualism**

Collectivism and *individualism* are broad terms that describe how members of cultures understand who they are in relationship to others. In *collectivistic* cultures, people primarily see themselves as part of an interconnecting, mutually dependent web of relationships or groups. In these cultures, people's actions and behaviors transpire and are evaluated within a context of how they will affect other members in this web, or the group, and the needs and wants of a person will often be subsumed to those of the group. In *individualistic* cultures, people primarily consider themselves to be independent units, and individual wants and desires dominate their conduct and choices. See Myth 2.

- **face**

Some readers may be familiar with this term and the concept it represents; *face* is how people maintain their dignity, self-esteem, and/or reputation in public contexts. While this definition is a good starting point, in Asian cultures, *face* is a concept that takes on a much deeper and more central role than it does in the Western world. When a person is embarrassed or shamed in front of others, from the Asian perspective, it reflects not only on that one individual, but also on every member of the larger group that that

person identifies with—whether that group is the family, a kinship group, a country, or something else. Thus, the avoidance of behaviors and language that could potentially threaten both others and one's own face is considered essential. See Myth 2.

● **American**

In accordance with everyday usage, in this book I use the term *American* to refer specifically to the people who were born and live in the United States and to examples and information specific to the United States of America. Nevertheless, I am aware that all people from Central and South America are also Americans.

Organization of the Book

This book follows others in the University of Michigan Press series on myths on language learning and teaching. It also builds on my book, co-authored with Ann Wintergerst, *Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom, Second Edition*. This book examines seven myths related to culture that affect teaching in the U.S. classroom. Readers should note that the content of each chapter connects to and intersects with information in other chapters—that is, the myths are not "mutually exclusive" because culture is complex and multifaceted. The aim is for readers to find connections and discover cultural patterns of other cultures and their own in order to develop cross-cultural awareness. The myths related to culture in the classroom are:

> **Myth 1: We are all human beings, so how different can we really be?**
>
> **Myth 2: The goal of education is to develop each individual's potential.**
>
> **Myth 3: Focusing on conversational skills in the classroom is overrated.**
>
> **Myth 4: Not looking at the teacher shows disrespect.**

> **Myth 5: How something is said is not as important as what is said.**
>
> **Myth 6: Everyone knows what a good instructional environment is.**
>
> **Myth 7: By the time students get to middle or high school, they know how to be a student.**

Like the other books in the University of Michigan Press Myths series, I have adopted the same organization. Each chapter begins with stories or anecdotes from the real world to introduce the myth. This is followed by a look at some research that examines pertinent research related to the myth. The last section in each chapter offers suggestions on what teachers can do to promote cultural awareness related to the myth that is the focus of that chapter. The suggestions are based on the premise that teachers need to incorporate activities that actively engage learners in analyzing, interpreting, and reflecting on different elements of culture. In so doing, we develop an understanding of the *why* of culture and cultural differences—that is, the underlying reasons for such differences. The references for all chapters can be found at the end of the book.

A Note about Myths That Didn't Make It Into the Book

In preparing to write this book, I queried many colleagues and teachers as to what they thought were common cross-cultural myths. Many of their suggested myths, as valuable as they were, did not make it into this book. Generally, these suggestions fell into two categories. First, myths that could not be addressed because of a lack of sound or extensive research. For example, the myth "Immigrant parents don't care about education so they don't get involved in their children's schools" was mentioned several times.

While this is an important myth that deserves to be dispelled, it is not a chapter in its own right. For those interested in pursuing this myth, there is extensive research on the value of immigrant parental involvement in schools, reasons why immigrant parents might not participate, as well as evidence-based suggestions on how to encourage immigrant parental involvement (see, for example, Ordoñez-Jasis et al., 2016; Uy, 2015).

The second category of myths that did not make it into this book were those that have been extensively dealt with elsewhere. For instance, I received numerous suggestions for myths concerning second language writing. A single chapter would not have done any of these myths justice. Furthermore, there is an extensive body of research spanning more than five decades examining non-native speakers and the development of second language writing skills: see Casanave (2017) for a review and *Writing Myths* (Reid et al., 2008).

One more topic I would like mention is myths related to time. While there is an abundance of material on cross-cultural understandings of time, there are few research-based connections between time and school. After discussions with my editor and comments from outside reviewers, I made the decision to not include any myths related to the concept of time and to instead focus on integrating cross-cultural conceptualizations of time and teaching and learning into other myths where they best applied.