

# Preface

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In *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), Bill Moyers asks anthropologist Joseph Campbell to explain the striking similarities that exist in the stories, folk tales, and myths that are shared by cultures that are “far, far apart.” Campbell responds:

One explanation is that the human psyche is essentially the same all over the world. The psyche is the inward experience of the human body, which is essentially the same in all human beings, the same organs, the same instincts, the same impulses, the same conflicts, the same fears. Out of this common ground have come what Jung has called the archetypes. . . . All over the world and at different times of human history, these archetypes . . . have appeared in different costumes. The differences in the costumes are the results of environmental and historical conditions. (51-52)

It is helpful to perceive in the behavior and traditions of people from other cultures certain universal strivings. There is no denying, however, that the superficial manifestation of these impulses—or “costumes,” to use Joseph Campbell’s metaphor—can hoist up formidable obstacles to tapping into those reassuring, resonating universals. Just ask those who have a modicum of cross-cultural experience. They will recount episodes of bewilderment and frustration, hilarity and wonder, brought on by the flawed assumption of sameness or the ignorance of difference. Information appears to help. Even tidbits of information that capture the essence of cultural differences can have a profound effect on our ability to adjust our expectations, emotional reactions, and coping strategies.

One summer when I was feeling particularly exasperated, I assigned my ESL students a role play. I had in my class a smattering of Latin American, East European, Korean, and Taiwanese students and a large cluster of young Japanese women. It was by far the least cohesive and most reticent group I had ever encountered. I believe they dreaded coming to class as much as I did. Attempting to address the growing affective malaise, I divided the group into cultural subsections and asked them to come to class the following day prepared to show us a typical classroom in their home cultures, complete with typical teacher behaviors, typical student behaviors, typical dress, and so on. The exercise transformed us all. Its success lay in the concrete, observable details, while the underlying values were left for us to contemplate or simply assimilate on our own. Readers will find vignettes such as this one in the “Personal Snapshot” segment of each chapter, and the voices heard may come from the authors themselves, from students, or from individuals who were interviewed during the preparation of this book.

*Understanding Your International Students* will help its readers to give more than a respectful nod to the notion of cultural differences. It cites

specific circumstances that may give rise to *culture bumps*, and it will deepen readers' capacity to address the significance of the cross-cultural discrepancies that they encounter. Moreover, it provides strategies for coping with cultural differences in the classroom. Each chapter closes with a "Problem/Solution" segment that provides the reader with classroom-based descriptions of specific problems, brief discussions about the root causes of the problems, and advice for how to address and possibly resolve the problems. Some of the problems presented are introduced in this segment for the first time in the chapter. Others represent a reiteration of a problem highlighted elsewhere in the chapter yet perceived to be sufficiently characteristic, complex, or downright daunting. As insights, questions, other problems, and possible solutions present themselves while reading or during the course of interacting with internationals, readers are encouraged to note them at the end of each chapter in the section called "My Observations."

This book addresses the educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of international students who today, in unprecedented numbers, are living and studying in English-speaking countries. Acknowledging that school, home, and language intersect in every student's life, the authors have treated each area, providing kernels of information that will be of use and interest to teachers, counselors, administrators, and service personnel who interact with students from abroad.

The benefits accruing to the aforementioned professionals will hopefully be transparent even before this book is read. The countless teachers at all levels of the educational system who encounter learners from one or more of the 16 countries described herein can use this volume as a tool to demystify student behaviors that are culture-based; to prepare lessons geared to the unique needs, expectations, or background of a given student; to quickly locate basic information about the educational setting from which a student comes; and to make use of the specific strategies presented in the "Problem/Solution" segment of each chapter. Even teachers who do not normally have nonnative English speakers in their classes will find this book of use and interest. With diversity virtually the issue of the day in education, teachers will find in this book a broad array of cultural facts, issues, anecdotes, and perceptions to launch an entire series of diversity units over the course of several years. Finally, teachers of teachers will regard this book as a handy reference and training manual in teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities throughout the country.

But the usefulness of *Understanding Your International Students* extends beyond the classroom. How much better could mental health counselors, academic advisors, administrative and clerical staff, and medical and security personnel at all levels of the educational system serve their nonnative English-speaking constituencies if they were equipped with this easily digestible compendium of cross-cultural insights?

No doubt, in-depth study of each culture we encounter would generate a superior, more profound understanding of cultural differences. Indeed, the

authors recognized and experienced the difficulty of describing a construct as complex as culture via brief expository paragraphs, and they tried mightily to avoid overgeneralization and underrepresentation as they conducted their research and compared and synthesized their findings. The result is a collection of perceptions and recurrent observations balanced by institutional data from official government sources. Although the book contains significant detail, it does not attempt to attain any other goal than to introduce the reader to the countries selected. It is intended to sensitize the reader to the myriad differences that exist among schools and students around the world, to pique his or her interest in deeper cultural exploration, and to provide encouragement and support for effective cross-cultural problem solving.

The authors began forming this book by consulting a publication called *Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange* released annually by the Institute of International Education. *Open Doors* provided data as to the countries of origin of foreign students studying in the United States and, more specifically, the numbers of students enrolled in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the United States. Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and Brazil, among other countries, figure strongly in the mix. Further research led us to expand our list to include learners of English in elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Haiti and Vietnam are not prominently represented in the university-level IEP rosters, but in such states as Florida and New York, the Haitian and Vietnamese student populations are of considerable size in K-12 settings. We also looked for emerging trends, such as the influx of East European students in the nation's public schools; thus, the chapters on Russia and Poland.

The authors—either in pairs or individually—then assumed responsibility for preparing their chapters by using the same, agreed-on strategy for collecting data. In addition to consulting country-specific books (academic and nonacademic), journal articles, government documents, encyclopedias, and on-line resources, authors conducted hours of interviews with representatives of their assigned countries. Fellow ESL and EFL teachers, both in the United States and abroad, also offered valuable information, insights, and anecdotes about the students, schools, and cultural settings with which they had grown familiar and by which they were fascinated.

Readers may notice that a handful of the chapters in this volume contain quite a bit more detail than the others. Specifically, Japan, Cuba, and Vietnam were targeted for more comprehensive treatment. Because Japan has been one of the largest and most consistent “exporters” of students to U.S. schools and because of the stature of Japan in the international arena, the authors believed that a particularly close look at the country, its schools, and its students would be both warranted and appreciated. Cuba and Vietnam represent a somewhat different perspective: we considered the inaccessibility of these settings to the majority of the book's readers. Unlike Taiwan or Saudi Arabia, Cuba and Vietnam do not receive significant numbers of foreign tourists or delegations of teachers. We hoped to offer information, observations, and insights that those working with international students might

otherwise find difficult to obtain. Information about five additional countries—Kuwait, Venezuela, Thailand, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates—has been placed on the University of Michigan Press website rather than in this book. Kuwait’s profile is remarkably similar to that of Saudi Arabia, which is included in this volume, and much of what we encountered in researching Venezuela is described in our chapter on Colombia. An abbreviated profile of Thailand gives Web users a glimpse of this fascinating culture. Regardless of the relative accessibility of information, we certainly learned much. We are delighted to share our discoveries with interested readers.