

Cultural Autobiography

Instructor: Maria Timmons Flores

Description: This personal narrative will explore your own personal history, including the formation of your identity, beliefs and perspectives on education. Who we are as individuals, dramatically affects how we teach and how we interact with others. The purpose of this narrative is to heighten your awareness of your cultural identity as a step in better understanding students who come from different backgrounds. As you look at your life and begin to articulate your beliefs about education, consider your experiences through a *cultural - historical lens*. The assumption underlying this assignment is that things don't simply happen to us, we are active in interpreting and assigning meaning to experiences in our lives. These experiences in turn influence the way we see the world and what we value. Focus your narrative on the aspects of your experience including individual, interpersonal, and cultural influences, which lead to your current interest in teaching English Language learners.

A Cultural Historical Lens

Multiple Levels of Cultural Influence: Vygotsky believed that we learn and develop within specific cultural contexts. In any given context, many levels of cultural influence play out at once. I think of these as concentric circles beginning with the *individual*, in interaction with *others*, and within the cultural *institutions*, *communities*, and *shared culture* of that specific time. All these influences come into play as we actively construct our understanding of the situation. For the purposes of this paper, consider these levels of culture as they have influenced your learning and development.

Individual: What are your innate capacities including strengths, challenges, learning preferences, personality traits, etc.? How have these influenced you?

Interaction with significant others: Who are the family, friends, and concerned others who have influenced you most? How have they influenced you?

Institutions: What formal or informal social organizations have you participated in and how have they influenced you (consider: schools, churches, sports, clubs, gangs, etc.)?

Community: Within a broader society, we all have groups of people with whom we associate. This level may include aspects of ethnicity, socio - economic status, gender, religious affiliations, beliefs or perspectives, regional issues.

Culture: This is the broadest level of Culture that looks at issues as they may be collectively viewed. Although many would argue that this is still a construction of reality based on the view of the narrator, this is what we probably would refer to as "common culture." For example, many believe that the election of an African American president indicates that as a culture, the US has moved beyond racism. Others would select other evidence, such as the number of African American men in prison, to illustrate that racism continues to be prevalent. Both of these are Cultural constructions that influence individuals.

Historical Influences: According to Vygotsky, learning is both developmental and ongoing, building on itself. Each of the levels listed above has a history; the moment we live in has evolved out of a specific place and time. Learning is also recursive, for as we make meaning of a given situation this meaning then has an influence on our thinking overtime. In the simplest terms, how I see the world is a product of where I came from and the times I lived through.

Qualities of Narrative

Selection: We have all lived long and rich lives to date, so this autobiography cannot be comprehensive. What you choose to include in your autobiography are the events and experiences that help you understand the choices you have made and the beliefs you hold. I am the only one who will read your paper but we will discuss aspects of them in class. **Please share only what you feel comfortable sharing!** In the following (condensed) example, I highlight the various strands of my experience that inspire my commitment to issues of equity....

My mother’s version of Catholicism included a heavy dose of social responsibility. This may have pushed me earlier into social work or education, but being a bit rebellious by nature, I took my own path getting there. Through a few painful cross-cultural experiences, I learned just how subjective my view was and how it could blind me to the way others saw the world. Because of this, I continuously put myself into situations where people could help me gain a richer understanding of the world. My work with kids who grew up in poverty helped me understand that life had many injustices and that I had grown up in a life of privilege. Working with kids in gangs, I understood how rational choices in certain contexts could seem crazy when looking from the outside. My work in schools and community agencies made me realize that even with the best of intentions, sometimes individuals and certainly institutions do things that harm children rather than help them. Growing up, I was influenced on a Cultural level by a history I lived through as a child: of activism, including the civil rights movement of the sixties, protests against the Viet Nam war, and the increased awareness of environmental issues in the seventies. I knew the world could be a harsh place and believed that I could have a role in making it better through education and action. These are a few of the influences that have inspired my work around issues of equity.

Coherence: What I am looking for in your autobiography is a coherent narrative. Is it clear how the various aspects of your life have come together to bring you to where you are right now? Do you offer enough description to allow me to understand what happened, what the experience meant to you, and how it has influenced you?

Cultural Autobiography – Second Language Acquisition 2009

Name: _____

Points (of 150) _____

Assessment Criteria	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Exemplary
Description of life events.	Does not provide enough depth to understand the significance of or	Level of detail allows the reader to follow the author’s line of	Provides an instructive & insightful story. Provides a history	Author’s voice is powerful. Goes beyond what is obvious, lays

	relationship between events.	thought with some guidance.	and context to understand events.	groundwork for a deep understanding by the reader.
Explanation that assigns meaning to life events.	A story with limited interpretation of life events. Does not move beyond what happened to what events mean.	Shows movement towards understanding how life events provide meaning.	A nuanced & insightful interpretation of the significance of events.	A powerful analysis of the significance of life events. Allows generalization to others' lives and learning.
Application to identity, beliefs, motivations.	Linkages between life events, and motivations, identity & belief are unclear.	Linkages between life events and beliefs are present but inconsistent or incomplete.	Clear links between life events, meanings assigned and how these lead to motivations, identity.	Life events linked to identity, motivations & world view in insightful, creative ways
Cultural Historical Influences on Identity & Learning.	References to culture are absent or lack integration.	Aspects of culture are included but lack explanation of how context influences individual development.	Includes multiple levels of cultural influence and speaks to how these influences interact in shaping identity and belief.	Presentation of multiple levels of cultural influence indicates awareness of personal identity, multiple perspectives, critical issues, and/or possible biases.