With an increasingly international student body in universities all over the world, there is growing contact between teachers and students from different cultures. This chapter brings cultural issues to a more conscious and explicit level so they may be examined in the light of teacher authenticity.

Cultural Dimensions of Authenticity in Teaching

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The phenomenon of modern man has become wholly appearance; he is not visible in what he represents but rather concealed by it.

—Nietzsche (1873/1997), Untimely Meditations

In this chapter, I weave some important considerations of the cultural dimensions of authenticity into an integrated approach to various aspects of authentic teaching in higher and adult education. I attempt to bring implicit, assumptive, and embedded cultural issues to a more conscious and explicit level. Rapidly evolving technologies that act as globalizing agents help to shrink the world, bring far to near, and create new challenges for today’s teachers and learners. Compressed into smaller, nonhomogeneous groups, the changing prioritization of our values often points to the need for reflection and cross-examination on who we are as an authentic person and teacher, what teaching and learning mean, how we communicate with and understand each other, what makes our lives and work meaningful for ourselves and others, and why.

I first discuss some perceptions of authenticity in a number of cultures. I then examine the values that are behind perceptions of authenticity in teaching. I use the key concepts highlighted by Cranton and Carusetta (2004)—self, other, relationship, context, and living a critical life—as a framework for my discussion. In preparation for writing this
chapter, I interviewed fifteen individuals from China who were studying as graduate students in U.S. universities. I quote from their comments throughout the chapter. Although discussing the dimensions of authenticity in various cultures, I am aware that I may be interpreted differently from what I intend and might promote further stereotyping of people from other cultures. I would like to emphasize the complexity of the issue rather than categorize fast-changing Chinese and American value systems.

Perceptions of Authenticity in Cultures and Contexts

A behavior that is perceived as authentic in one culture may not be perceived so in another. For instance, standing or speaking up for oneself is considered authentic in one culture, but it may be seen as egotistical or shameful in another. Holding back one’s own thoughts to avoid temporary conflict or for the benefit of a community is considered gracious and altruistic in one culture, but cowardly or even deceitful in another.

The subtle clues of our intentions and actions are sometimes misinterpreted because the variety of customs, beliefs, and privacy concerns lead us to judge or misjudge the other’s authenticity. For instance, it is common practice in China that when a patient is diagnosed with a terminal disease the doctor will discuss the death with the patient’s family but not with the patient himself or herself. The rationale may be that the dying patient can live more happily (and longer) without knowing about his or her impending death, and that the focus of attention is on life rather than the possibility of death. In the United States, doctors do inform their patients of their situation. However, it is not that one culture values honesty and the other not. In the United States, people usually respond to “How are you?” with “I’m fine” (whether they are fine or not) because “How are you?” is merely a greeting rather than a question to be answered. In China, when people are asked a similar question, they may spend quite some time explaining why they are fine or not. Just responding with “I’m fine” may be interpreted as impolite or dishonest. We not only disclose or guard information on the basis of cultural norms but also according to what privacy means to us. In China, asking someone’s salary is a common conversation topic; in the United States, people do not ask others how much they make unless they are close friends.

Our interpretation of authenticity is based on our values and cultural expectations. We have frames of reference or habits of mind (Mezirow, 1991) about authenticity. In other words, authenticity is a relative term. Do I share the values of my community? Or to what extent am I compliant, reflective, critical, or rebellious about those values? An individual can be a member of several communities simultaneously: a family, a workplace, a nation. The micro value systems for each community can differ.
Self, Other, and Relationship in Authentic Teaching

Teaching is a communicative act. To teach means that one is to contact, connect, and build a relationship with another person or group of people. Being aware of oneself and being aware of others are both important in a relationship, yet the emphasis on one over the other affects priorities in our value systems, which can dramatically change how we see and act in the world.

Awareness of Self and Others. Here are two quotes, from an interviewee who praised one professor as authentic and criticized another as inauthentic in a Chinese college setting:

Martin, who taught my senior year in college, is a teacher I recall as an authentic teacher. He demonstrated a strong desire to learn about the students and their culture by courageously challenging the institutional rules and authority that set boundaries for foreigners not to cross. For example, he wanted to eat together the same food with students in their dining hall. It threatened the policy of face saving and “privacy” protection of the local authorities. . . . He eventually managed to eat with students but not for long. He also worked hard to introduce American literature and lives to us students—some of the books he gave us to read are even controversial in his own culture—it showed both his courage to work for the benefit of his students’ learning by taking risks and also his belief of being an educator. . . .

A contrasting example was another young professor teaching us drama in our postgraduate program. He came to classroom without teaching anything useful or substantial and turned students into remembering some terminologies that we did not understand for the final exam. He purchased and wore silk Chinese traditional clothes to make him look like he likes the culture he was teaching within and had a well-known affair with an undergraduate young girl in the university and had a lot of controversies with the university authority. Although he successfully put on a play he worked hard to create for the entire university to view, he was not an authentic teacher to his students or the department he worked for.

Several values undergird the appreciation for the first professor, who was seen as taking risks in order to know and teach his students; trusting his students’ intelligence by introducing controversy even from within his own culture; and setting a good model by being an altruistic, caring, and trusting educator.

Similar values also contribute to the criticism of the second professor, who was seen as being interested in his own benefit but not caring about his students. He passed on information that was not understood. Having an affair with a student not only broke a rule but also upset members of a culture in which such behavior was considered immoral. Wearing silk Chinese
clothes was perceived as being ostentatious rather than demonstrating an interest in getting to know the people.

Yet observing the situation as an outsider, one can also interpret the second professor’s behavior as authentic from his perspective: he taught his subject area in the way he knew best, worked hard to do what he considered a contribution to the school by putting on a successful play, and showed his interest in the people by wearing traditional Chinese clothes. Although he might be consistent and authentic in his own beliefs and behaviors, he was judged harshly by his Chinese students as an inauthentic teacher. In a culture where altruism is highly regarded and a teacher is expected to set the example, the judgment can be instantaneous and harsh.

This raises a series of questions. Who judges authenticity? Who can? Was the second professor authentic if he saw himself as such but his students did not? It is obvious in the case of the second professor that his actions undermined his students’ trust in him. When the learner does not understand the teacher, or when the connections between the subject matter and what is taught are unclear, the learner starts to question the teacher’s credibility and motives. Given this, how can the teacher and the student build trust and achieve mutually shared understanding? How can both the teacher and the student take on the responsibility to help one another understand nuances of values, question seemingly authentic or unauthentic behaviors, and challenge actions and judgments on the basis of their own values? Inclusive change and transformation start with awareness of and consideration for the impact of the context, and they continue with sustained dialogue and interaction between the teacher and the student in the process of unpacking the issues and assumptions.

Traditional Chinese values emphasize humility and altruistic behavior. Two famous Chinese sayings come to mind: “a hero is silent about his glories” and “a good wine is known in all corners” (meaning that if it’s a good deed, it will eventually be recognized). Children are taught to put the common good first and self second. Related to this issue, there is an emphasis on respecting other people (especially elders and teachers) and their opinions and knowledge. Chinese tradition since ancient times, including the three major ancient philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, all emphasize harmony and holism (Allen, Hu, and Bahr, 2005; Tzu, 2003). When a conflict arises, it is one’s responsibility to listen to others’ perspectives and modify one’s own view to reach a balanced resolution to the conflict. There is strong emphasis on taking the middle path, assuming a position of balance and peace, while not dwelling on who is right or wrong, or who is better.

My experience in the United States sometimes presents an opposite expectation. I am reminded constantly that I should speak up for myself and tell people what I do; otherwise, no one will know what I do and thus the value of my work will go unappreciated. Presenting oneself and arguing for one’s ideas and achievements are important skills to master in the American
culture. If one does not do so, one is seen as less confident, competent, or capable (and somewhat disabled). This phenomenon is to a degree related to traditional American culture as a capitalistic society, in which prevail a spirit of presentation, commercialization, and the enduring pursuit of individual success. Crouch (2001) points out, “Ours is a technological era that often defines itself and achieves commercial success by continuing to do a better job at making the unreal seem true” (p. 3). To achieve recognition, wealth, and success, an individual is urged to constantly originate and promote ideas and products (Bellah, 1985).

As a result, values, which are deeply rooted in the culture and social construction of societies, set the foundation for differing points of view. The Chinese emphasis on moderation, balance, and humility can present a state that is hierarchical, authoritative, cowardly, and oppressive. Balance can bury and even twist an individual’s originality, creativity, and authenticity. In contrast, the American emphasis on individualism, competition, and commercialization can also blur the line between reality and fabrication. Neither the Chinese nor the American way, if uncritically embraced, is authentic. The values and expectations imposed on individuals from both cultures shape people who conform to certain ways of being, to repress who they are or to present themselves differently from who they are. The authentic being is concealed in order to achieve a socially expected image or persona; consequently, the gap of understanding between people grows.

This gap is reflected in teaching and learning expectations. It is not uncommon to see Chinese students remaining quiet in the classroom. Sometimes such quietness is interpreted as lack of skills, or not having original, independent, or critical thoughts of one’s own. A professor once mentioned to me a paradox he saw in many Asian students (especially female) in being responsive yet risk taking. He observed that on the one hand it is courageous for students to leave their home and study alone in another culture; on the other hand, it seems difficult for the same students to take risks and be responsible for their own learning. The students seem to agree easily (and responsively) to what a professor says but seldom express what they think themselves; nor do they make claims of what they want to do with their learning.

As an Asian female student, I shall reply from my own perspective as to why I seldom speak up in the classroom setting: (1) I’m used to listening rather than speaking, thanks to my past school experiences; (2) I’m more interested in hearing what the professor and colleagues have to say than expressing my own views; (3) I like to be thoughtful in what I say so that I don’t waste others’ time; (4) I want to make sure I really understand what I hear before responding or making judgments; (5) I tend to give the benefit of doubt to another’s opinion, so I naturally hold back my critique; (6) I do not like to go to extremes and prefer to take a balanced approach to the issue at hand; and (7) I don’t want to be confrontational with my colleagues unless it is absolutely necessary.
It is easy to notice from this list that the issue is likely related to habits of mind or cultural norms. If a balanced approach is taken and more attention is paid to what others think, a person is nearly invisible and her voice is often inaudible.

With these different and dynamic frameworks, the questions remain: How does a teacher relate to a student authentically? How does a teacher see beyond his or her own frame of reference, and understand the issue underneath the silence of a student from another culture? How does a teacher recognize capability and talent in the quiet student, give the student similar challenges and opportunities, and encourage independent thinking and risk taking in learning?

Pursuing answers to these questions requires a continual effort to examine, understand, challenge, and reexamine the changing self, others, and contexts. Hansen (2001) recommended “tenacious humility” as a stance with which teachers (and students) might strive to approach their work. Making oneself a better person and teacher and promoting the same in one’s students, Hansen says, is an ongoing journey: “Tenacious humility creates conditions for teacher learning, for a ‘deeper knowledge’ of the ‘necessities’ entailed in ‘good practice’” (p. 172). Following this line of thinking, I discuss two important aspects of authenticity in teaching: the influence of context and living a critical life.

The Influence of Context on Authenticity in Teaching

Many factors—for instance, culture, class, gender, age, generation, background, profession, and race—shape a context. We judge (or misjudge) a person’s authenticity on the basis of what we think is socially appropriate behavior. One interviewee offered two incidents to describe moments when she felt authentic and inauthentic while studying in an American university:

[I feel a strong moment of authenticity] when I come to appreciate the fact that as an international student, I am creating a new self identify by staying longer in another culture, but in a marginalized way. A moment of authenticity is to be truthful to the fact of this marginality: yes, this is the way I live, being marginalized or not. I come to appreciate that my values and how I view the world are products of this unique marginality, the reality of my world that I cannot escape. . . .

An occasion when I felt forced into unauthentic behavior is when I was caught in having to speak strongly for the traits of my native people or country in their defense when those traits were challenged by ignorance of their context and complicated reality. I was made to think it was unauthentic because on those occasions, I would tend to defend for the traits, both the good and bad parts—that is, a desire to put them in the best light, while I was aware this was not entirely true. . . .
It is not a simple coincidence that a sense of situated existence vividly came through these two incidents. Discussions of authenticity often appear in works associated with the existentialist philosophy of writers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre (Kaufmann, 1972), and Maxine Greene (1988). For these writers, the conscious self is seen as coming to terms with being in a material world and with encountering external forces and influences quite different from itself; authenticity is one way in which the self acts and changes in response to these pressures.

These descriptions illustrate the influence of one’s contextual reality. For the person I interviewed, there were at least three contexts working simultaneously: (1) the context of her growing up in China, (2) the context of the American graduate school she attended, and (3) the dynamic context of herself in her marginalized yet transforming reality. She not only struggled internally and made difficult decisions between the conflicting values that she had become acquainted with but also fought against and compromised with external expectations, prejudices, and pressures put on her in the physical context.

With the increasingly international makeup of the student body in universities all over the world, there is more frequent contact between people of contrasting cultures and consequently more opportunities for understanding as well as misunderstanding of one another. A crisis emerges when one relocates from a culture that has traditionally been concerned with “moral considerations of the consequences of social interactions . . . and has extended greater respect to the ‘common good’ and/or ‘group benefit’” (Gu and Zhu, 2000, p. 13) to a culture whose underlying premise is to think for and advance oneself (Bellah, 1985). The individual suddenly experiences an ontological breakdown that is based on personally assumed responsibility. A similar crisis exists for someone going in the opposite direction, as in the case of the drama professor who was criticized as being inauthentic and self-serving.

The student example is unique in that she is an international student and thus possibly encounters additional obstacles; yet the sense of powerlessness and feeling of being excluded or marginalized exist in all students (and teachers) at all levels. In the adult education literature, it is a tradition to focus on empowerment of students. However, a teacher needs to know the source of powerlessness in order to empower or help students find their power, if we believe that power is prevalent and in the hands of every individual (Foucault, 1980).

The feeling of being marginalized or alienated is not a place in which anyone wants to put himself or herself; but this is the first step in examining one’s familiar framework in order to learn and grow. Lifton (1993) articulated this well when he wrote: “Individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is something in them to alienate. That ‘something’ has to do with authenticity, with meanings and human associations that, over the course of a life, one experiences as genuine. The protean
quest, however flawed, enhances that authenticity” (p. 232). The situation may appear to be hopeless and the individual feels powerless, but there are unique opportunities given to the person (as someone from outside the culture) to positively influence the thoughts and actions of others. Unlike the fish, which is “the last to know she is in the water,” the outsider is able to see differences in values and actions that people from inside the culture may not be able to see.

In some professions, we are expected to carry with us a certain persona or professional code. The teacher as a professional is viewed as the “engineer” or “doctor” of the soul and is held to a higher standard than is the general public in many cultures. This high standard can entail having more knowledge, being more intelligent, being a better person, having the ability to inspire others, or showing tremendous courage. Good teachers are often depicted in the movies as heroes or heroines (Dalton, 1999). In many cases, these heroic teachers are misunderstood, act in opposition to a social norm, and are forced to leave the school where they teach (as in the films Conrack, 1974; Dead Poets Society, 1989; Educating Rita, 1983; and Mona Lisa Smiles, 2003). In other cases, these heroic teachers are finally recognized, accepted, and celebrated after struggling and finally saving the students and the school (Mr. Holland’s Opus, 1996; Lean on Me, 1989; Sister Act, 1992).

Where does a teacher’s personal authenticity fit in with these images, especially given that they are often in conflict with one another? Here, I discuss various aspects of living a critical life through a culture lens.

**Living a Critical Life**

We make decisions and judgments according to what we think is true and authentic. Interacting with others, we look for trends, search for patterns, and frequently check the motives of others, consciously or subconsciously. We may not necessarily look at our own underlying assumptions, many of which are part of our a priori knowledge or proprioception (Bohm, 1996). It is only through frequent dialogue that we discover our divergence and unearth each other’s presumptions. A critical life assumes a certain level of critical thought. Critical thought usually means both looking at the underlying assumptions that are present in any argument and going back to the original or basic requirements of a thing and its intended purpose. Culture and language are so closely intertwined that it is nearly impossible to extricate the underlying assumptions. Even within the same community, one person’s “inexpensive” is another person’s “cheap,” one person’s “hybrid” is another’s “aberration,” one person’s “willpower” is someone else’s “shameful egocentrism.” Being reflective of our own language is probably the most difficult but important task in a critical life.

Rousseau sees the problem of authenticity as that of the relationship between being and appearance (Heckle, 1991). An immediate paradox arises when we look at human beings as socially constructed individuals. An indi-
individual’s authentic being and ways of being are shaped by and evolving with natural and environmental forces as he or she relates to and negotiates in the world.

Being an authentic teacher implies one is to communicate and relate to students, be aware of students’ perceptions and perspectives, and be willing to be critical of and transform her own and the students’ values and actions. This is a process of becoming a responsible member of a society or culture. The dilemma emerges when the process of becoming an autonomous individual does not join the process of becoming a moral and responsible person in a far-from-perfect society. To be a moral and free person, Rousseau chose to “withdraw into himself and became a friendless wanderer because he felt that he alone was just, authentic, truly alive; that history and society would betray him if he abandoned his solitude” (Heckle, 1991, p. 7). An individual struggles between maintaining an authentic identity and developing it through internal reflection and external interaction with the world.

If we constantly change, no one knows who we are or what we stand for. A person is appraised as an authentic person only if he or she is consistently perceived as being so. It is not that the person does not make any mistakes; on the contrary, the person is seen as real and thus fallible. One interviewee well articulated what she sees as the drive for the growth of one’s authenticity: “Authenticity and personal growth are closely related. I believe that authenticity comes from people who purposefully make meaning from the lives we live, the work we do, and the people we meet in the reality of an unfair or not-at-all-perfect world. It comes with experience, especially the experience that has twists and turns that constantly push us for the question of the meaning and worth of existence. . . .

The complexity of the dynamics comes when we examine to what extent we still keep certain traits we are born with, and to what extent we are different as we grow, and why. Being authentic implies being simple and sophisticated, stable and resilient, independent and interdependent, moral and critical.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to help expose assumptions and perceptions we hold about authenticity in teaching across cultures. Culture and language hold the context for these assumptions, and they are often difficult to discover, especially if they have been seamlessly incorporated and unquestioned over hundreds or thousands of years. For people working continuously inside the same culture, many of these issues or questions may never arise. Because of different social constructs, individual authenticity is usually less easily perceived, understood, or shared, explicitly and implicitly outside a community, culture, or society than within. To achieve better understanding of one another across cultures, we need to step out of our culture and see from the other’s perspective. Once we start working cross-
culturally in a global environment, these differences are unmasked. This causes us to question who we are and what we are teaching and learning.

References

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