

## Application of Transcultural Themes in International Classrooms

Steven R. Van Hook, PhD  
University of California at Santa Barbara  
Extension Language and Culture Program

January 30, 2007

### Introduction

Teachers in international classrooms are frequently unable to accommodate the clash of cultural variations among a growing diversity of international students (e.g., Adam, 2003; Pinheiro, 2001). A study of multinational students (Van Hook, 2005) sought to identify transcultural themes and images that might enhance the educational experience of instructors and international students, as each of them interacts with other nationalities in the classroom. A secondary question that follows the research is how might these culturally transcendent themes and images be applied to course design, applicable in traditional and online international settings?

The study findings indicated that certain themes and images may indeed evoke a positive transcultural resonance in an international classroom (Van Hook, 2005). These identified themes and images included babies, animals, relationships, sports, self image, and life cycles. The findings also indicated other themes and images may evoke a negative dissonance or a neutral reaction, including religion, sex, humor, and nationalism. This article further considers the implications of those findings, and also considers how the transculturally resonant themes and images might be applied to the design of a course for international students in global economics.

### Implications of the Study

The transcultural themes and images identified above might be applied to diverse international settings as well as classrooms, whether in business meetings, organizational gatherings, diplomatic summits, educational seminars, and so on. These transcultural tools may be deployed by speakers, in setting décor and design, multimedia presentations, and such that may incorporate transcultural themes and images to create a greater sense of mutuality and common ground. Such an ability to find common terms and reference points, even in an attenuate form, is crucial in a globalizing world where we “increasingly have no choice but to engage in multinational cooperative endeavors” (Keohane, 2001, p. 187).

### Educational Applications

Global postsecondary education enrollments increased from 6.5 million in 1950 to 88.2 million in 1997, and are forecasted to reach 160 million by 2025 (Irvine, 2003). However, this demand for global higher education comes at a time when teachers skilled with global cultural competence are so few (ACE, 2002). In that vein, research findings are considered below in how they might apply to the design of a transculturally effective international course in global economics.

The question now addressed is how might the themes and images considered in this study be best applied toward an improved positive resonance across cultural diversities in international classrooms? The following sections consider possible applications of the positively resonant themes and images that may better empower

international educators, to help improve common ground and positive interactions among students of diverse nationalities and cultures.

These applications could apply in the face-to-face classroom experience, or in the increasingly rich online environment uniting students around the world in a common virtual classroom. With the rapid hardware and software breakthroughs, newer information technology may soon provide human interaction in a high-definition and three-dimensional telepresence, allowing for distance education comparable to and even exceeding a traditional classroom experience (Duderstadt, 2000; Bok, 2003).

Given the increasing numbers of international students within traditional and customized programs as institutions seek to expand their enrollments beyond national borders, curricula and pedagogies may need to be adapted to accommodate a wider array of cultural and linguistic differences (OECD, 2003). By applying the resonant themes and images identified in the study, international students might benefit in a number of ways, including an increased comfort level in a strange environment. An international environment that provides a familiar ambience through transcultural themes and images may not only reduce the pangs of isolation, but might also help improve bonding between students as they are able to better relate to each other through common ground on an individual basis, and as they also enhance their integration within the entire class by finding common group reference points (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000).

## Classroom Examples

How might the findings of transculturally positive resonant themes and images be applied to an undergraduate level course—in this exemplified case, a course in global economics—serving a classroom populated by international students? That question may be considered by demonstrating possible applications of themes and images as they might be employed to illustrate key economic concepts within classroom lectures and discussions, engaging multimedia tools such as offered through PowerPoint presentations.

Wilson (2001) observed there is simply not enough time in the highly diverse classroom “to bring forward examples that appeal to everyone’s interest and draw on everyone’s experiences” (p. 206). This limitation may be mitigated through the use of a technology-enhanced environment, offering interactive resources online, as well as multimedia presentations within the classroom, allowing for better incorporation of transculturally resonant themes and images. Meyer (2002) found that meaningful learning can be assisted through the use of images when students find a cognitive engagement through a combination of *verbal* and *pictorial* processes. Verbal modes of instruction include words spoken through lecture and discussion, while pictorial modes employ the use of “static graphics (such as photographs, illustrations, figures, and charts) and dynamic graphics (such as animation and video)” (pp. 61-62).

Some media formats for the projection of themes and images may prove more effective than others. Among the flaws in solely relying on still photographs to convey cross-cultural thematic experiences is that people insulated from the global economy may be unused to photographs, while others may give a different meaning

to the pictures according to their biographies (Loizos, 2002, p. 96). However, this shortcoming may be mitigated in the classroom by also employing richer video presentations (p. 103).

The transcultural themes and images presented within the international classroom through lecture, discussion, readings, and rich media might help enhance classroom resonance, and develop a learning context for international students—a contextual relevance they may share with other nationalities. The presentation of themes and images within the learning examples described below might serve to evoke the resonance of commonly shared reactions, as well as place the themes and images within greater social and human contexts.

The following examples consider possible methods to promote learning in an international classroom, and the means to apply the transculturally resonant themes and images identified in this study as supported through multimedia presentations. The thematic groupings of the considered examples include positively resonant themes of babies, animals, relationships, sports, self image, and life cycles. Water, while difficult to specify as an isolated theme or image, nonetheless appears to have common appeal among the international students. Though not further considered in the examples below, water may yet serve as a transcultural tool among international students within a greater context of possible group interactions involving water-related activities such as get-acquainted excursions with a boat trip or a picnic on the shore.

## *Babies*

Components of a course in global economics might address the social and economic costs of war, slave labor, trafficking in women and children, and so on. The International Labor Organization (1997) reports that 250 million children around the world who should be in school are at work instead, many in conditions of slavery in mines, factories, and plantations. As demonstrated in Figure 1, issues regarding human rights and social justice may make a deeper and more resonant impression on the students if presented within the context of the impact on babies and young children, as in the illustrated case of the affects of warfare on children in Palestine and Iraq. Another application of this theme may be to consider the health services provided by nations in terms of infant mortality rates. Yet another economic concept may be illustrated through this applied theme: studies have found that the level of child spankings correlates to income levels, as higher income parents may be better placed to inflict financial rather than physical punishments.



*Figure 1.* Young children depicting social and economic costs of war.

## *Animals*

Students are frequently reluctant participants in a required course on economics. The economic concepts may be bewilderingly theoretical and difficult to apply to familiar circumstances. The explanation and comparison of economic systems such as capitalism, socialism, and communism may be assisted by employing the transculturally resonant application of animals, such as the family cow in the often-quoted cow's guide to economic systems (Figure 2). The economic dynamics of technological development might also be affectively illustrated with the resonant assistance of cows: Prior to refrigeration, the only way to keep milk fresh at home was inside the cow. This meant twice daily milking (early morning and late afternoon). This in turn impacted the daily social and economic life cycle of the family. Once we had refrigeration, we could just go out and buy a half gallon of milk from ever-larger dairy farms, where each cow in the herd represented one family that no longer had to have a cow, freeing up human and natural resources for other avenues of personal and societal development.

### Cows' Guide to Economic Systems

---

- SOCIALISM - you have two cows. The government takes them and puts them in a barn with everyone else's cows. The government gives you as much milk as you need.
- COMMUNISM - you have two cows. Your neighbors help you take care of them. You all share the milk.
- CAPITALISM – you have two cows. You sell one and buy a bull.



*Figure 2.* Cows help to demonstrate economic systems.

## Relationships

The economic cycle might be considered through a relationship perspective on analysis of the cyclically graphic *sigmoid curve*. It illustrates the story of economic cycles or a corporation's rise and fall. It may even chart the course of love and relationships. Relationships may start slowly, experimentally, and clumsily; reach romantic peaks, and then—without proper care and attention—the relationship cycle may terminally wane. Furthermore, employing the relationship theme to help demonstrate John Nash's theory of equilibrium, international students may benefit by a video clip from the popular movie *A Beautiful Mind* (Figure 3) calling into question a fundamental principle of Adam Smith that the driver of individual self-interest serves the common good. The clip portrays young men in a bar competing for the attentions of a young beautiful woman, ultimately tripping over each other as well as alienating the other young women in the room. The clip illustrates a proposed mixed of strategies, where the best interests of the individual are served when also considering the good of the group.



Figure 3. Film clip demonstrates John Nash's theory of equilibrium.

## Sports

As illustrated in the study, the theme of sports may evoke a spirit of camaraderie in the classroom—a common bond even in the competitive atmosphere of sports. The principle of mixed cooperative and competitive economic drivers may be resonantly demonstrated through example of the Daytona 500 (Figure 4), where a racecar driver must attract a *drafting* partner in ever-shifting patterns of cooperation and competition among rivals. The resonant sports theme may also help illustrate the economic principle of *Ricardo's law of comparative advantage*. The principle is based on Adam Smith's concept of specialization of labor, such as may be found in the various specialized positions on teams in baseball, basketball, football, soccer, and so on. Ricardo observed that a socioeconomic system will benefit if all members do what they do best, and society will sacrifice less to the opportunity costs of people doing what they do not do as well.

- In aerodynamically intense stock-car races like the Daytona 500, the drivers form into multi-car draft lines to gain extra speed. A driver who does not enter a draft line (slipstream) will lose. Once in a line, a driver must attract a drafting partner in order to break out and try to get further ahead. Thus the effort to win leads to ever-shifting patterns of cooperation and competition among rivals. This provides a curious laboratory for several social science theories:



(1) complexity theory, since the racers self-organize into structures that oscillate between order and chaos; (2) social network analysis, since draft lines are line networks whose organization depends on a driver's social capital as well as his human capital; and (3) game theory, since racers face a "prisoner's dilemma" in seeking drafting partners who will not defect and leave them stranded. Perhaps draft lines and related "bump and run" tactics amount to a little-recognized dynamic of everyday life, including in structures evolving on the Internet. (Social Science at 190 MPH)

Figure 4. Daytona 500 demonstrates complexity theory and social networking.

## *Self Image*

The study indicated a transcultural interest in the lifestyles and ways of other nations and cultures, and cultural subgroups as well. This resonant theme may be effectively employed as the global economics course considers related issues of business ethics, various perspectives on wealth and value, as well as differing takes on the context of human socioeconomic interaction. This might be illustrated by considering the Masai concept of value and beauty in others (Figure 5); an inspiring perspective from one of the world's poorest peoples, yet with a rich philosophy of life. International students have responded well to presentations on the self-image of other nations, in particular a presentation on flags and patriotic anthems as the national symbols of different lands. Another seemingly well received presentation has considered college students' cultural view on the concept of *freedom*, as surveyed among college students in a diverse selection of nations.

### The Masai Aesthetic

*Clamor* – July/August 2002



“The Masai typically think about attractiveness in terms of both physical attributes and character traits alike.”  
*Robert Biswis-Diener*

“In the Masai language, the word for physical appearance (which roughly translates as a person's "goodness") can also be used to describe their morality.”



“When I asked the Masai about what constitutes a perfectly good-looking person, their answers frequently included friendly, well respected, disciplined, and brave.”



Figure 5. Masai perspective on beauty.

### *Life cycles*

Both face-to-face and online classroom discussions may be useful to address greater economic and social issues impacting the students' daily life. Discussion topics such as unemployment, military spending, education funding, health care support, family planning, and so on may be better facilitated by employing transculturally resonant life cycle themes, and how those topics impact the daily and lifelong course of the students' lives. One student participating in the study observed, "My career, my life, babies—I think a lot about those things" (Van Hook, 2005, p. 103). As illustrated in Figure 6, these discussions might be facilitated with topical and thematic discussion questions. These topics may be made more relevant by citing developments and data during class sessions that project social and economic trends over the next 20 or so years, which are some of the most important years in the students' professional and personal growth.

---

**Unemployment rate:** Is it high or low in your country? Does the government provide unemployment insurance? What does someone in your country do when they lose a job?

**Military:** Is service mandatory in your country? Do they offer benefits and incentives for service? Is military spending a big part of your economy?

**Education:** Who pays the largest part for education in your country, private or public funds? Who should pay? Is there financial aid? How important is education to economic development?

**Health care:** How much does a visit to the doctor cost? A stay in the hospital? Who pays: private or government funds? Who should pay? Do you have private insurance companies? Is health care regulated? Should it be?

**Family planning:** What is happening with the birth rate in your country? Are people getting married later? Do you think the current state of the economy in your country is helping or hurting families? How? Has this impacted your own plans for marriage and a family?

---

*Figure 6.* Sample life cycle topics in classroom discussions.

### Suggestions for Further Study

The possibilities of transcultural learning may be further realized by additional research into assessing the effectiveness of applied resonant themes and images in the classroom, including measures of any increased levels of student engagement, interaction, and satisfaction in courses where transcultural themes have been applied. Further beneficial research may also be conducted into additional themes and images that might be transculturally resonant. This research might be conducted by applying similar methods as employed in the referenced study to a broader range of international courses in the humanities such as literature, music, art, history, sociology, religions, and so on. Supplementary studies may find other and even better educational contexts, forms of media, and pedagogical methods for incorporating transcultural themes and images into the international classroom. It may be that longer portrayal of transcultural themes and images may prove more or less effective in evoking resonance, than the short commercial clips employed in the referenced study (Van Hook, 2005).

Perhaps transculturally resonant learning might best be achieved through field trips, interpersonal exchanges, and informal rather than formal instructional settings—for example, student-led discussion groups rather than instructor lectures. The efficacy of transcultural techniques may also be further assessed through applied situations and assignments, such as interactive discussion questions where students are given a range of topics to pick from and reply to, so researchers might seek which potentially transcultural themes may be particularly appealing and stimulate higher levels of discussion compared to less resonant themes.

### Significance of Transcultural Classrooms

The purpose of this article was to identify tools that may better empower international educators through the application of resonant themes and images in the classroom, to help improve common ground and positive interactions among students of diverse nationalities and cultures. A transcultural approach to international education may help address those concerns, as well as issues of greater social significance. As institutions improve the learning experience for international students, they may enhance their competitiveness in the global education marketplace (ACE, 2002). This is particularly true of American colleges and universities, which “cannot claim to have the best system of higher education in the world unless graduates can free themselves of ethnocentrism bred of ignorance and can navigate the difficult terrain of cultural complexity” (Engberg & Green, 2002, p. 7), such as may be assisted through the application of transcultural tools.

Beyond the academic and programmatic benefits that might be gained from enhanced transcultural learning, strained global relations call for more effective communications within other international settings as well. Many international students studying in the United States come from rather privileged backgrounds, and may eventually assume top leadership positions in their home countries. The international students participating in effectively designed transcultural learning programs may ultimately contribute improved cross-cultural leadership toward a less conflicted world.

The world is divided by as many as 6,000 different languages, with a small number of languages such as Arabic, Bengali, English, French, Hindi, Malay,

Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish serving to bridge our linguistic gulfs (Tucker, 1999). Likewise, transcultural themes may help to bridge our vast cultural differences.

Perhaps among the most valuable aspects of the potential in globally adaptive international higher education are the benefits to be gained in learning about world problems that transcend national boundaries, as students from differing nations and cultures better share their experiences and perspectives with one another. By such enhanced understanding, humanity may best discover solutions that tap the interconnectedness of global systems—be they cultural, ecological, economic, political, or technological (Tye, 2003). Ironically, it is through the effort to find transcultural common ground that we may connect and come to better appreciate our many varieties.

## REFERENCES

- ACE. (2002). *Beyond September 11: A comprehensive national policy on international education*. American Council on Education. Washington, DC.
- Adam, M. (2003, November). World climate demands global learning for all. *Education Digest*, 69(3), 25-31.
- Bok, D. (2003). *Universities in the marketplace: The commercialization of higher education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Duderstadt, J. J. (2000). *A university for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Engberg, D., & Green, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Promising practices: Spotlighting excellence in comprehensive internationalization*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- International Labor Organization. (1997). *Background document prepared for the Amsterdam child labor conference*. Retrieved October 19, 2005 from <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipecc/conf/amsterdam/background.htm>
- Irvine, M. (2003). The emerging global e-education industry. In E. Pittinsky (Ed.). *The wired tower: Perspectives on the impact of the internet on higher education* (pp. 65-109). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Keohane, N.O. (2001). The liberal arts and the role of elite higher education. In P. Altbach, P. Gumport, & D. Johnstone (Eds.). *In defense of American higher education* (pp. 181-201). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Loizos, P. (2002). Video, film and photographs as research documents. In M. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image, and sound* (pp. 93-107). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Meyer, R.E. (2002, Spring). Cognitive Theory and the design of multimedia instruction: An example of the two-way street between cognition and instruction. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*. 89, 55-72.
- OECD. (2003). *Education at a glance: OECD indicators 2003*. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Paris, France.
- Pinheiro, S. O. (2001). *Perceptions versus preferences: Adult international students' teaching-learning experiences in an American university*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED452785)

- Taylor, K., Marienau, C., & Fiddler, M. (2000). *Developing adult learners: Strategies for teachers and trainers*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
- Tucker, G.R. (1999, August). *A global perspective on bilingualism and bilingual education*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED435168)
- Tye, K.A. (2003, October). Global education as a worldwide movement. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 85(2), 165-169.
- Van Hook, S.R. (2005). *Themes and images that transcend cultural differences in international classrooms*. Doctoral dissertation, Walden University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED490740).
- Wilson, J. (2001). The technological revolution: Reflections on the proper role of technology in higher education. In P. Altbach, P. Gumport, & D. Johnstone (Eds.). *In defense of American higher education* (pp. 202-226). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.