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## **Analyzing and Understanding Cultural Differences: Experiences from Education in Library and Information Studies**

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### **Abstract**

*In the paper the need to understand cultural differences is discussed. The authors show how cultural differences can be analyzed. They also describe how cultural information was exchanged and analyzed during the library and information*

*studies course that was taught via the Internet simultaneously in Finland and North Carolina. In addition, the authors discuss how libraries could use experiences of the common class when they act in a multicultural environment.*

*In the paper, culture is defined to be a framework to our lives, something which affects our values, attitudes and behavior. In analyzing and understanding cultural differences it is important to pay attention to how members of various cultures see it) the nature of people, ii) a person's relationship to the external environment, iii) the person's relationship to other people, iv) the primary mode of the activity, v) people's orientation to space, and vi) the person's temporal orientation. These dimensions will be explained in the paper. In addition, the authors pay attention to language and communication styles as a dimension of cultural differences.*

*The paper describes differences in cultures of Finns, Sami People, North Carolinians and Cherokee Indians. Sami People and Cherokee Indians were chosen to represent minor cultures in Finland and North Carolina. An interesting similarities can be found on the one hand between major cultures (Finland and North Carolina), and on the other hand between minor cultures (Sami and Cherokees).*

*The authors propose that there are a few lessons learnt in the common class which can be useful also for libraries and librarians serving multicultural populations. They are: i) to understand people's behavior as a reflection of their cultural background, ii) to understand of differences in language and communication styles between cultures, iii) to understand that collaboration across cultural boundaries and sharing cultural information occur together, and iv) to take advantage from the Internet in crossing cultural boundaries but not to forget that people have various attitudes toward the Internet and therefore some clients continue to prefer books and face-to-face interaction with library professionals. The authors emphasize that cross-cultural communication and collaboration does not occur effectively without understanding other cultures.*

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## **Paper**

### **Introduction**

The need to understand cultural differences is obvious today. Many societies are multicultural, and many people and organizations collaborate across geographic and cultural boundaries. Although it is typical for people to see themselves as unique (Reed 1986, 1) and to be somewhat parochial, parochialism is not a good strategy for the future. According to Adler (1997, 10) "parochialism means viewing the world solely through one's own eyes and perspective. A person with a

parochial perspective neither recognizes other people's different ways of living and working nor appreciates that such differences have serious consequences."

Today we live in a world that is somehow smaller than it is used to be. New communication technology (e.g. email and the WWW) has made it easier to a certain extent to cross previous boundaries and communicate across time and space. However, the new technology does not necessarily make it easier to collaborate and communicate interculturallly. To effectively collaborate and communicate we have to share meanings. This often requires that we understand cultural differences and share cultural information.

The purpose of the article is to discuss how culture and cultural differences can be analyzed and understood. We describe how cultural information was exchanged and analyzed during library and information studies course that was taught simultaneously in Oulu, Finland, and in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the USA, in the spring semester 1997. In addition, we discuss how libraries could use our experiences when acting in a multicultural environment.

Our common course explored human information behavior in the context of collaboration. The course also provided students the opportunity to collaborate with fellow students from another country and culture. Many class sessions included small group exercises in which students from Oulu and Chapel Hill collaborated to discuss and complete the exercises. This collaboration was supported by Internet-based videoconferencing technology; students were able to see others and talk to others in a real-time connection although physically there was an ocean between them. (For more information about the course, see Iivonen & Sonnenwald, 1997, and Sonnenwald et al., 1998).

The core assignment in the course included papers and presentations written and produced together by Finnish and American partners. One such team (Parma & Poole-Kober) focused on the role cultural information may play in the context of collaboration. In particular they analyzed the cultures of Finns, Sami People, North Carolinians and Cherokee Indians. Sami People and Cherokee Indians were chosen to represent minor cultures within the major Finnish and North Carolinian cultures. Using a framework to explore these cultures led to insights with respect to the importance of analyzing and understanding cultural differences when collaborating across boundaries.

### **What is culture?**

Culture has been studied and defined in many ways by multiple scholars representing various disciplines. Adler (1997, 15) has synthesized many definitions of culture. She says that culture is:

· Something that is shared by all or almost all members of some social group. · Something that the older members of the group try to pass on to the younger members. · Something (as in the case of morals, laws and customs) that shapes behavior, or... structures one's perception of the world.

Culture is more than arts, it is a framework to our lives. It affects our values, attitudes and behavior. On the other hand we are actors in our culture and affect it. According to Levo-Henriksson (1994), culture covers the everyday way of life as well as myths and value systems of society. Roos (1986) sees culture as a system of lifestyles and as a common dominator for lifestyles. Lifestyle reveals culture that is large and stiff wholeness, uniform, regular and like-minded in our lives. Lifestyles are a possible way to outline one's life within the framework of culture.

According to Adler (1997, 15-16), culture, values, attitudes and behaviors in a society influence each other. Values can be defined as factors that are explicitly or implicitly desirable and that affect our decisions. Values do not need to be conscious, they can be also unconscious. The values we have are based on our culture. Attitudes express values and get us to act or to react in a certain way toward something. Attitudes are always there when people act even if they do not see them. There is no action without attitudes. Behavior can be described to be any form of human action. The behavior of individuals and groups influence the society's culture. There is no culture in the society without people's behavior.

### **Examples of cultures: Finland and North Carolina**

Finland is located in the Northern part of Europe. The Finnish culture has been influenced by the Swedish-Nordic, eastern European-Baltic and southern cultures, mainly the German, and most recently the Anglo-Saxon culture (Levo-Henriksson, 1994.) On the one hand, the Finnish culture can be described as rather homogenous; although there are regions with their own dialects and characteristics, they are strongly part of the main culture. On the other hand, there are also features of a multicultural society in Finland. There is a unique culture of Sami people in the northern part of Finland. Today there live also many people, e.g. refugees, who have immigrated from other countries including Somalia, Vietnam, Russia, former Yugoslavia, etc.

Sami people live in the northern part of Finland, and also in northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Russia. This area is called Lapland or Sami. Today, in Finland there are about 6,400 Sami people. The Sami lifestyle is often a mixture of nature's seasonal cycles, traditions, and modern times. (Aikio et al., 1994.) Because Sami people have lived as a minority in four countries, the Sami language has not been approved for use in schools until recently.

North Carolina is located on the east coast of the United States of America, to the north of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, and to the south of Virginia and

Washington DC. North Carolina was discovered, explored, named, and settled by Englishmen. Powell (as cited in Crow and Tise, 1979) says: "North Carolina is the only one of the United States that can claim an Elizabethan background." For a long time African-Americans and other Americans lived segregated lives in North Carolina. Following the civil rights movement in the 1960s and passage of the Civil Rights laws by the U.S. Congress, legal segregation ended in North Carolina. Today, people work, play, and go to school together. Although there are still some scattered problems, generally racial groups associate peacefully.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians lives rather isolated in the western reaches of the North Carolina mountains on the largest organized Indian reservation east of Wisconsin. Snowbird Cherokees live in isolated community fifty miles from the main reservation (Neely, 1991.) The mountains were a hideout for the Indians who refused to leave the great Smokies during the Indian removals in 1838 in what has become known as the Trail of Tears. Today there are nearly 11,000 tribal members on the reservation (see Cherokee... in <http://www.cherokee-nc.com/>) and hundreds more living in mountain communities outside the reservation. The Cherokee Indians are taking pride in their heritage and again learning to speak and write their own language. The Cherokee Indian alphabet was invented by Sequoyah, the only man in the history of mankind who invented a complete alphabet without being able to read or write any other language (Underwood, 1961)

### **Cultural differences: An analytic framework**

Adler (1997) gives six dimensions that we can use to analyze cultural differences. She pays attention to the understanding of the nature of people; a person's relationship to the external environment; the person's relationship to other people; the primary mode of the activity; people's orientation to space; and the person's temporal orientation.

These dimensions are used to explore differences in cultures of Finns, Sami People, North Carolinians and Cherokee Indians, and to develop an understanding about cultures. In addition, we pay attention to language and communication styles as a dimension of cultural differences.

### **What is the nature of people?**

There are differences in cultures with respect to beliefs about the nature of people, that is, people may be seen as good or evil or both. Although it is rather usual, at least in western societies, to see people as a mixture of good and evil, it is also rather usual for people to fear the unknown. Thus, people may assume foreigners (who are unknown to them) to be evil people. (Adler, 1997.)

Finnish people are supposed to be modest and not talk about themselves. This aspect of the culture is illustrated by the Finnish saying "Modesty makes beautiful". If a Finn is praised a lot, he becomes suspicious and cautious. Emotions run deep in a Finn and do not often come out. Negative emotions are expressed more often than positive ones. It is accepted to feel negatively; when you expect the worse, you cannot be disappointed. (Keltinkangas-Järvinen, 1996.)

In Sami culture individuals are seen as a mixture of good and evil. Myths and shamanism is an important part of Sami culture. (Pentikäinen, 1995.)

North Carolinians are very religious. They have developed fierce loyalties to family, their land, and church. Of course there are differences between people and regions but usually North Carolinians take pride of something simply because it represents North Carolina (Roberts, 1973).

Cherokee Indians are also very religious. Outsiders have known Cherokees as warlords of the southern mountains but among themselves they were Principal People. In history Cherokees warred on their neighbors. However, when the white men arrived, the Cherokee began to make treaties with them. (Norman, 1995.)

### **What is a person's relationship to the external environment?**

There are differences in cultures with respect to people's relationships to the external environment. In some cultures people dominate over their environment. In some cultures people can live in harmony with their environment and do not see any real separation between people and nature. In other cultures people are subjugated by the environment and people accept the inevitable forces of nature (Adler, 1997.) Cultures obviously differ today widely in how they value their technological environment and the role of information technology.

The old Finnish saying "If God is willing and the weather permits", illustrates the Finns' relationship to the environment and nature. In Finland, the climate has set rules to sources of livelihood. When agriculture was the main industry, people's lives were a struggle against weather conditions. Today many persons' livelihoods today still depend on forestry and paper industries. Although Finns try to dominate nature, they also know that forces of nature are too powerful to be completely dominated by them. Today Finns value information technology and believe it to help them in the Information society (On the Road, 1997.)

Sami people want to live in harmony with the nature. Their way of life does not deprecate or destroy the nature. The Sami people believe the stories that

there are earth spirits living underground, so people should not pour hot water on the ground in order not to disturb there earth spirits (Aikio et al., 1996). According to Sami culture there are also other kinds of spirits living in nature, and nature itself should be considered holy.

North Carolinians have tried to find a balance between agriculture and industry. They have also made many efforts to protect nature already for a long time. Around 1885, North Carolina established soil conservation in North Carolina; and in 1911 the state acquired the headwaters of certain rivers to protect the drinking water. On several occasions, the people have acted in accordance with the state's long-standing respect for nature and the environment. Information technology has an important role in North Carolina as in everywhere in the United States as a part of National Information Infrastructure.

Historically, the Cherokee have lived off the land. The women gathered fruits and berries, and the men herded bison for meat. The women also started agriculture when they learnt to till the soil and plant the best seeds for the crop yield. As the Cherokees began to settle into camp sites, they located their villages on the banks of good-size stream that had good fish and fresh water. Cherokees had mystical ceremonies. For example, the Cherokees celebrated the planting of the corn; the first roasting ear time; and the full ripe time of the corn. (Underwood, 1961).

### **What is the person's relationship to other people?**

There are differences in cultures with respect to how people see a person's relationship to other people. In some cultures, people are individualists and use personal characteristics and achievements to define themselves and value individual welfare. In other cultures people are group-oriented and define themselves as members of groups, which can be clans or communities. In these cultures people consider common goals and the group's welfare most important (Adler, 1997.)

Traditionally, especially in the eastern part of Finland collectivism has been strong. People had to work together as a family and with neighbors (Siikala, 1996.) Today urbanization has broken the sense of collectivism. As people moved to cities, mostly in the 60's and 70's, they tried to continue the habit of joint activities. After the first years it decreased to a minimum (Kortteinen, 1982.) Today collectivism has changed to individualism.

Sami people are group-oriented; families and communality are strong. A family spirit has an important role in the education of children. Sami people are also seen as withdrawn and silent people who do not necessarily want to

approach an outsider and who often fear and escape people who are unknown to them (Itkonen, 1984.)

On the one hand, North Carolinians have sought to impose order and predictability by developing fierce loyalties to family, church, and local community (Crow and Tise, 1979.) Among North Carolinians there is a strong feeling of kinship. On the other hand, North Carolinians can be seen also as individualists. They object to being told by anyone what to do or not to do (Powell, 1988). They are generous and eager to be helpful, but they also expect in turn favors, not words, for thanks (Roberts, 1973.)

Cherokee Indians are group-oriented. Their social structure includes seven clans. The Cherokees held others in respect, especially the women, who had as much to say about the tribe as anyone and who participated in various types of ceremonies (Underwood, 1961).

### **What is the primary mode of the activity?**

There are differences in cultures with respect to the primary mode of activity. Some cultures stress doing, or action, and achieving outcomes. The members of the culture are do-ers, who want to achieve the most in life. The other cultures stress being and suppose that people, events and ideas flow spontaneously. The members of the culture are be-ers, who want to experience life. The do-er is more active, and the be-er is more passive (Adler, 1997.)

One of the most important value in the Finnish culture is the appreciation of work. A person is respected if s/he is a hard worker, a do-er. Work is the measure of success and basis of self-esteem (Kortteinen, 1992.) Today in Finland there is high unemployment. Because work is such an important value in the Finnish culture, this has meant that many people have lost faith in the future.

Also Sami people are always doing, but they have no hurry. Life goes on, and days are filled with everyday tasks. Sami people just want to live happily. Because Sami people do not aim to collect wealth, the others can see them as lazy. However, if the help is needed, Sami people will work hard to be able to help (Fellman, 1980). Today many activities of Sami people are connected to tourism.

North Carolinians believe in work. Many counties in North Carolina are experiencing rapid economic growth while others are experiencing a lack of employment opportunities. Many of the mountain folks continue to make their livelihood from the land. If the children of farmers go to college and receive a degree, they rarely return to home (Roberts, 1973).



Historically, the Cherokee Indians believed in work and provided for their families by hunting, fishing, and simply gardening. Today, for the Cherokee, the primary industry is the tourism. In the Ocanaluftee Indian village there is the Indian Museum (Cherokee, 1997). After the tourist seasons end there is a lack of employment opportunities (Norman, 1995).

### **How do people see space?**

There are differences in cultures with respect to people's idea from physical space. Various cultures have different opinions whether the space should be seen public or private (Adler, 1997.)

Both private and public spaces are important for Finns. On the one hand, home is a private place, where Finns can be safe and do what and how they want to do. The respect of owning land has been strong. On the other hand, it is important for Finns to be able to wander in forests and go for fishing to lakes. The law gives every man's rights to everybody to use forests and lakes without ownership.

Space is public in Sami culture. People have rights to the land but they do not have to own it. Understanding land and space as private is not known by Sami people traditionally.

North Carolinians obtain deeds to their property and can sell it. Rural North Carolinians enjoy the open spaces of farms and rural countryside. For the heavily populated areas many North Carolinians take great pride in ownership of houses. However, many developers are required to leave open green spaces for recreation and parkways in new developments; most towns and cities have community parks and green ways for public walking and biking.

Cherokees living on the Reservation only have possessory rights to the tracts. They cannot sell any part of the land on the reservation without the permission of the Cherokee council and the president of the United States. Cherokees living in remote villages and isolated communities in the mountain counties can own and resell their property. The Cherokee Indians continue to appreciate the big outdoors by running campgrounds for tourists, operating parks and trails, and fishing.

### **What is a person's temporal orientation?**

There are differences in cultures with respect to a person's temporal orientation; a culture may be oriented to the past, the present, or the future. In past-oriented cultures, the customs and traditions have a strong role as the wisdom of society. Innovations and change are justified according to past

experience. Future-oriented societies pay less attention to the past and focus on the future. Innovations and changes are justified according to future benefits. They have a very long-term time horizon. Present-oriented cultures have a short-term time horizon and they focus on the benefits possible in a near future.

The temporal orientation in Finland has been traditionally in the past. Finns have used to explain many things according to the past and the history of Finland under Swedish and Russian rules. Nowadays the orientation is, however, more in the future. Today, Finland is known as a high-technology society looking at the next millennium.

Sami people's temporal orientation is in the past and traditions have a strong role in their everyday life. Their lives have also been bound to seasonal cycles. Sami people believe very strongly in life after death. They do not have to do anything special in their lives because life goes on.

North Carolinians have an Elizabethan background which strongly emphasizes history. They put much emphasis on historical preservation with many towns and cities establishing historic districts highly regulated. On the other hand, the school system places more emphasis on the recent past and present (Crow and Tise, 1979). Today North Carolinians are looking forward to the twenty-first century "with eager expectations" (Powell, 1988).

The Cherokee's culture is past-oriented. As Norman (1995) says: "Remembrance weighs heavily on the mind of the Cherokee" when they try to affirm their cultural identity. The Cherokee know where they came from and they do not want to forget it. Although the Cherokees are traditionalists, there have been cultural changes and adaptation to a modern society for survival.

### **Comparison of people's beliefs and orientation**

An interesting finding on the basis of the project group's (Parma & Poole-Kober) work is that there are similarities on the one hand between major cultures (Finland and North Carolina), and on the other hand between minor cultures (Sami and Cherokees). Actually there seems to be more similarities between major cultures or between minor cultures in two countries than between major and minor cultures in one country.

In Finland and North Carolina both major cultures have tried to find a good relationship with the nature and external environment. They try both to control and protect nature. Both major cultures also trust the technological environment, especially information technology, which is seen as an

important factor on the road to the information society. People in both major cultures are today somehow individualistic although the tradition of collectivism and kinship with other people can also be found in their history. The work is very highly appreciated both in Finland and North Carolina. The private and public aspects to the space can be found in both cultures. In addition both Finland and North Carolina are today more present and future-oriented than past-oriented.

Similarities between Sami and Cherokee cultures also exist. In both cultures nature has an important role and people respect it. Both cultures are clearly group-oriented; families, clans and communities are more important than individuals. Sami people and Cherokees on the reservation do not own land but have only rights to it. Both minor cultures are also more past than future-oriented: their own history and traditions play an important role in their everyday life.

### **Differences in language and communication styles**

Although Adler (1997) does not mention language and communication styles as a dimension of cultural differences, it is obvious that they are one major way in which cultures and groups within major cultures vary (Gudykunst, 1986; Tannen, 1990). Although people may be able to speak the same language they could understand and interpret words differently, because the same words may mean different things to various persons. There are differences in shading and nuance of words (Reed, 1986).

Differences in language and communication styles became evident to our class during the course. The course was organized in English, which was the native language of the students in Chapel Hill, but a foreign language to the students in Oulu. This was not, however, a big problem in the class. Students were able to communicate and collaborate in English. Finns have become used to using a foreign language when collaborating with others.

In the class we were able to learn that there are differences in spoken and unspoken languages between Finns and North Carolinians. Finns are known as silent people. They do not usually use small talk. In Finland it is desirable to keep silent and not to speak too much (Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985.) Instead, the silent language is not common to most North Carolinians. They tend to speak to almost everyone they meet and make small talk. Saville-Troike (1985) points out that there are different norms of appropriateness for speaking and remaining silent, which can cause misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985, p. 199) describe the role of talk and silence: "Cross-cultural differences in the uses of talk and silence clearly exists". Americans ask questions and force others to talk to fill up interactional silence, because silence is not tolerated socially. In many

cases, the function of talk among Americans is not in transference of information or messages, but in the avoidance of silence."

During our videoconferences both Finnish and American students participated and discussed in a very active way and Finnish and American students in the project groups contacted each other regularly. However we were able to get some evidence of the silent Finns in a very interesting way. We had a common electronic discussion board where various topics were discussed. Some messages sent to the discussion board were course-related topics, e.g. ideas for projects and information about useful links. Many messages which were posted to the discussion board were, however, interpersonal communication, or small talk, about various topics like Valentine's Day, President Clinton's visit to Helsinki etc. Students in Chapel Hill were more eager to send messages to the discussion board than students in Oulu. A total of 128 messages were posted to the discussion board during the semester, 80 messages were sent by students in Chapel Hill and only 12 by students in Oulu. 36 messages were posted by instructors. We suppose that small talk is difficult for Finns also in electronically.

## **Discussion**

There were a few lessons learned in the class which can be useful for libraries and librarians serving multicultural populations. First, people's behavior reflects their cultural background. This happens also in libraries. Therefore we have to be aware about cultural differences related to a person's relationship to other people, orientation to time and space, etc. When librarians try to learn to know their clients - as they should - we suggest, they also try to learn to know their clients' culture. This may give them the analytical framework to understand their clients' behavior and needs.

Second, we learned that there are differences in language and communication styles between cultures. Library services are based very heavily on language and communication. When librarians act in a multicultural environment differences in language and communication styles may cause misunderstanding and even lead to bad service. Good communication skills can, however, be learned. We suggest that these skills should be taught to librarians, as they should also be taught to other professionals working in the service sector.

Third, we learned in our course that the project that focused on sharing cultural information interested many students. This project was discussed by the students more than other projects. This is easy to understand. Every student worked with a partner from another country. To the students, Finland and North Carolina were not mere foreign countries on the other side of the globe but the countries where their partners lived. The students really wanted to learn about the cultures of their classmates. Collaborative work seems to generate interest in other cultures. We

suggest that collaboration across cultural boundaries and sharing cultural information occur together. It happened in our course, it works in IFLA, and it could work also in a library practice. Libraries in multicultural environments could proactively support collaboration across members of different cultures by getting people together and providing information about their cultures.

Fourth, we learned that new information and communications technology will make other cultures closer to us and offer possibilities to overcome cultural boundaries. However, cultural attitudes toward technology may influence people's beliefs and use of the technology. For example, students in Finland rated some applications more highly than their classmates in North Carolina (see more in Sonnenwald et al., 1998). The Internet and Internet-based services are available for public use in many libraries world-wide. On the one hand, we can see this as a benefit, e.g., in public libraries the Internet can facilitate an access to information about other cultures that would not otherwise be possible. On the other hand, we have to understand that clients' attitudes toward the Internet and their abilities to use it will vary. We have and will continue to have clients who appreciate books and face-to-face interaction with library professionals.

Today we live in the world where there is a need for collaboration across cultural boundaries both internationally and internally within countries. Cross-cultural collaboration may be facilitated through an understanding of others' cultures. In our class we learned that cultural differences are not necessarily disadvantages but can be enriching and provide many benefits. This framework may be applicable to library education, library research and library work.

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