

## OurSpace: exploring our cultures

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Secondary English trainee teachers at the University of East London were asked in October 2009 to represent their 'culture' in some way using four PowerPoint slides. This article describes some of the presentations and discusses what is involved in the process of working out a personal cultural identity. It refers to the notion that 'culture is ordinary' and suggests that managing the tension between inducting students into established 'traditional' culture, on the one hand, and enabling them to make their own individual meanings, on the other, is at the heart of every teacher's work.

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### Introduction

For the past few years I have been asking my English trainees to think about their culture in some way. One year, I had this memorable response: 'I'm white and I'm English so I don't have a culture.' This was said out of a sense of self-effacing modesty, almost apologetically, not dismissively. The implication of this statement is that culture is somehow outside one, 'other', something (interesting) that some other people have. When I invited the trainee whom I have quoted above to reflect on his culture, he perhaps saw it as an invitation to reveal that he was, in fact, fluent in Urdu or Kiswahili or Turkish, because his grandmother... An invitation, in other words, to be exotic – 'originating in a foreign country, especially one in the tropics; having a strange or bizarre allure, beauty or quality' (*Collins English Dictionary*). And because he felt ordinary and did not feel himself to be exotic, he made the response that he did.

One of the things that I wanted to address with my trainees is the idea that 'Culture is ordinary', as the title of a seminal essay by Raymond Williams has it (Williams 1958). Further, I wanted to explore with them how they might go about 'making a space' for children's own cultures within their classrooms by beginning to examine their own 'cultures'. The immediate stimulus for this was an article by Ken Jones: 'Room of one's own - making space for English' (Jones 2002). In that article, Jones described a project in which he was then engaged, looking at 'the production of school English' by English teachers. The initial investigation of the way in which English was 'enacted' or 'realised' in the classroom in the day-to-day work of teachers had led him and his fellow researchers to consider two related issues. One set of questions concerned English teachers' 'professional space' and the extent to which their partial autonomy had been diminished by Government policy. A second question concerned the space for students' own cultures and how these connect to wider social movements. After discussing the Jones article, I asked my PGCE students, in October 2009, to make four PowerPoint slides, representing their 'culture' in some way and to present this on a specific day. I made notes as I listened to the various presentations and, a long time after, I asked them to think back to their presentations and respond to two questions:

1. What did you think you were being asked to do? What sort of things did you decide to focus on?
2. What did you think happened after you had heard and seen each other's presentations? In what ways, if any, did your views of your own culture, your colleagues' culture and your perception of the tutor group as a whole change?

This was not designed in advance as a piece of research, but seeing the presentations one after the other, with their spoken commentaries, was fascinating and had a powerful effect on us all. All the presentations were listened to with rapt attention. There were differences in the formality with which they were presented, some were more tightly structured than others but this was a collective experience that absorbed everyone. It seems invidious, therefore, to choose specific examples, but I do this merely in order to illustrate some of the aspects of this collective experience which I found interesting.

### Working out a cultural identity

Several people say at the outset that they have not thought of themselves as having any particular culture. Nick says, 'My culture is non-existent because Essex...' He leaves his sentence trailing to good-humoured laughter, but he is only half-joking, I think. John-Paul's opening slide states, 'I have never really thought of myself as having a culture but I suppose that I do'. Allison has found the task easier because she is from the USA and over here her difference is constantly reinforced:

In my experience, stepping out from your perceived culture and encountering the outside makes you appreciate the depth of your own culture. For instance, growing up in a largely Jewish area, I never thought there was anything special or different about being Jewish; I never thought about the culture tied to it... until I went to university in Baltimore, where very few people ever met anybody Jewish. Similarly, living in the UK has revealed my 'American-ness' to me.

In other words, she defines herself through difference. Coming up against otherness invokes a kind of reflective self-consciousness. John-Paul's presentation is similar to Allison's in showing an encounter, albeit much longer, between the cultures of two countries.

John-Paul shows us images, among others, of a churchyard, the H Blocks, Patrick Kavanagh, place names and book titles in Gaelic, a game of hurling, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *The Hobbit*, Seamus Heaney, Marilyn Monroe reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the CND logo. His final slide,

titled 'A "complicated relationship" with British culture', is particularly interesting. The BBC logo, covers of books by Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton are juxtaposed with a Gaelic football player, a bowler hat (the headgear of Orangemen) painted with the colours of the Union flag, and a photograph of a man protesting at Croke Park about 'foreign' games being played there. John-Paul points to this last picture and explains that Croke Park is the home of Irish sports, such as hurling and Gaelic football, as opposed to British and other 'foreign' sports, such as rugby and association football, which are normally played at Lansdowne Road. While the Lansdowne Road stadium was being rebuilt, rugby and football were played in the interim at Croke Park, which gave rise to protests. 'The eagle-eyed among you will have noticed', John-Paul says with wry humour, 'that the man holding the placard "No to foreign games" is wearing a Celtic football shirt.' A complicated relationship with British culture, as he puts it, which gives insight into the complex association that an English person may also have with British culture.

Matthew's presentation, like many others, is organised according to places, people and passions. Images of Mull, Winchester, the Cotswolds and so on are succeeded by pictures of various doctors, missionaries, bishops and administrators, and the flags of the countries in which they served: Egypt, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigeria, Tanzania. 'They served Britain abroad'. His passions include music from 'dead white European males' like Thomas Tallis and Richard Wagner, jazz, literary touchstones (not all dead, he notes) and art. In his final slide he asks the question 'Must these be mine?' 'These' are: greed, under a picture of Margaret Thatcher; the Iraq war, under a picture of Tony Blair; utter crassness above which is the front cover of some mindless celebrity magazine; the *Daily Mail's* masthead, representing 'middle England'; a photo of rioting football supporters and a picture of someone sunbathing, above the caption 'The English abroad'; and the BNP logo (crossed out).

In the spoken commentary to accompany his slides, Matthew articulates this ambivalence. There is much about his cultural heritage and his family's traditions of which he feels justly proud. He is happy to be an Englishman whose family 'have

served Britain abroad'. At the same time, to see himself as British is to be lumbered with a particular kind of 'cultural baggage' which he reviles but feels he cannot escape.

John-Paul comments sympathetically:

*I was particularly moved by the presentations that dealt with the difficulties faced by white English people in identifying a culture not tainted by jingoistic nationalism. It was a key moment in the group in that it helped us all to bond and resulted in an unspoken sense that we had collaborated on something special and unique.*

What all the presentations, of which these are a representative sample, have in common is that each person is having to think of themselves as a cultural being, to specify a cultural identity and to find a way of structuring and representing this to themselves and to others in sound and images. This is a kind of autobiography, a process of self-definition, and the power of it lies in the fact that each person is starting, as it were, from within rather than attempting to conform to some externally imposed label. This is truly inclusive, therefore, because everyone has something to say about the particular mix of influences that have helped make them who they are. We surprised each other both in finding out things about each other but also in seeing unexpected things we have in common. For this was also a collective enterprise. These multiple self-definitions helped define the group as a whole and changed its sense of itself as a group. And in so doing, this led to a kind of reconfiguration of the boundaries in the group.

'Culture is ordinary'. Williams argues that a culture has two aspects: 'the known meanings and directions which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested' (Williams 1958: 54). In other words, culture is both traditional and creative. The tension between these aspects is, in a very profound sense, at the heart of every teacher's work. A curriculum (and for the past 20 years a centralised, 'National Curriculum') purports, through the various subjects, to present established knowledge – 'the known meanings and directions' - what has been discovered or invented by those who have gone

before. At the same time, if a teacher is to meet the needs of her or his particular students, learning in a particular context, s/he has to enable them to make their individual meanings and to develop in them the belief that they are capable of discovering and inventing new things. Culture, then, is not just something that is handed down but is also made.

## References

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