



Learning in Contemporary Culture

Series Editor: John Sharp

Will Curtis and Alice Pettigrew



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Introduction

It is a central contention of this book that learning is, and always has been, a cultural activity. What, where, how and why we learn are each influenced by the cultural contexts in which all learning encounters take place.

Our book recognises that ‘culture’ itself is a slippery and contested concept. Often when the word is used, it seems to imply that ‘cultures’ are discretely bounded individual entities: that there is a patchwork quilt of different ‘ways of life’ that could be mapped to coincide with territories – nations, regions and/or cities – in geographical space. We think that this understanding is problematic. ‘Culture’ – in terms of shared norms, values, languages, tastes or beliefs – can operate on a variety of different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradicting scales.

The boundaries between one culture and another are seldom very clear. Throughout this book, the framework of the British nation is often identified or implied; however, it could be argued that many of the phenomena discussed here are characteristic of wider trends across Europe for example, or common to many ‘Western’ societies, if not extending right across the globe. Others might in fact relate primarily to specific regions within the British nation, or only to urban areas, or to particular communities within the population as a whole.

It is equally problematic to conceive of cultures as fixed and static over time. For culture is not only active and dynamic but impacted upon by wider social, economic and political change. We suggest that in recent years such change has been particularly dramatic, and contemporary culture offers challenges to and opportunities for learning that are altogether new. When we talk of ‘contemporary culture’, on one level we are referring very simply to the period we are currently living through. However, we also want to argue that in some respects, recent decades represent a significant break from the past. Important recent change includes:

- rapid and increasing technological innovation;
- dramatic and extensive economic and industrial restructuring;
- changes to the structure of both the labour market and ‘traditional’ family relations;
- the movement of people, goods and ideas further and faster than ever before;
- the ascendancy of an economic and political system known as neoliberal capitalism;
- a loss of confidence in both moral and scientific certainties following twentieth-century atrocities such as the use of the atom bomb and the Nazi death camps of the Holocaust.

We do not want to present an ahistorical perspective and are interested in the relationships – continuities and disjunctures – between the present period and the past. In particular, we recognise the importance of historical periods known as ‘the Enlightenment’ and later ‘modernity’. These played a crucial role in framing dominant contemporary perspectives on what learning is, what learning is for, and how, when and where learning should take place. We argue that it was a consequence of modernity that ‘learning’ became narrowly conceived as something that only formal schools and trained teachers can or should facilitate. We believe that in contemporary culture, a broader conception of learning is not only possible but necessary, and are concerned to ask, what kind of learning and learners does the twenty-first century require?

The structure of the book

There are a number of central themes that run throughout the book. In some sense, these are the learning outcomes of the book as a whole. After reading it, you should be able to:

- uncover distinctive characteristics of contemporary culture;
- recognise that a culture characterised by freedom, complexity and fluidity contains enduring power inequalities;
- outline and assess the opportunities and threats to learning that result from these characteristics;
- make sense of learning as a cultural activity;
- understand the relationship between culture, learning, community and nation;
- identify the forms of learning encounters that are most appropriate within contemporary culture.

Chapter one sets the scene by unpacking some familiar understandings of the concept of culture, and describes the ways in which learning is best characterised as a cultural activity. It attempts to identify key features of contemporary (British) culture and draws attention to the opportunities and obstacles these present for learning in the present day.

Chapters two to six make use of five different disciplinary perspectives on education. Chapter two offers an historical overview examining the role of learning and innovation in creating cultural communities and instigating cultural change. It demonstrates how Enlightenment thinking, industrialisation and the advent of the modern nation-state gave rise to centrally controlled, institutionalised systems of education: how scientific enquiry, rationality and progress became the driving forces of change; how teaching was professionalised; and how learning became an activity restricted to formalised times, places and activities.

Making use of a philosophical perspective, the third chapter explores how these values and strategies fit within contemporary culture. The certainty and homogeneity of modernity are, to some extent, replaced by complexity, fragmentation and doubt. Three Enlightenment ideals – universal knowledge, objective morality and legitimate authority – are examined within the cultural settings of the present day. All three are now open to contestation, resulting in both new sources of conflict and new possibilities.

Chapter four approaches these contemporary concerns from a psychological perspective. In recent years a number of influential psychologists have acknowledged that learning is a social and cultural activity. Their theorisations demonstrate how the cultural context in which learning takes place has a considerable bearing on the experiences of the learner. Drawing on social constructivist and ‘learning to learn’ literature, the chapter asks what types of educational experiences and activities are most effective in preparing young people for the complexity and unpredictability typical of contemporary culture.

Relationships between national government and formal systems of learning are examined in Chapter five. Using examples drawn from three recent policy initiatives, the chapter identifies competing governmental agendas for education and discusses the competing cultures of learning that policy can help to create. It suggests that, in line with contemporary culture in general, recent policy direction in Britain is beset with contradiction and simultaneously offers both obstacles and opportunities.

The focus of Chapter six is the ‘micro-level’ interactions that take place between staff and students in schools. It is framed by theoretical understandings drawn from sociology and emphasises the role of schools in (re)producing differences between students, exploring the relationships between formal education and persistent social inequalities. With reference to

gender, race and ethnicity and socio-economic class, it reminds us that official classroom cultures are not the only set of expectations that young people have to negotiate in constructing their (learner) identities.

Chapter seven takes a slightly different approach to the previous chapters in examining how the concept of culture itself has been used and understood in British educational practice and policy. It builds on arguments developed throughout the book and asks what forms of knowledge – and of learning – are needed to equip students for contemporary *multicultural* citizenship.

The final chapter looks to alternative sites of learning. Using the critiques of formal schooling originating from the ‘unschoolers’ and ‘deschoolers’, it indicates that radically different cultures of learning exist in society today. It shows how the philosophies of Neill and Freire and the approaches to schooling of Steiner and Montessori provide a more human-centred perspective on learning, in contrast to formal schooling. It recognises that there are overlaps between these cultures of learning, especially in a climate where community relations and e-learning are increasingly mainstream preoccupations. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the lessons formal education might take from these alternatives.

There are practical, critical thinking and reflective task boxes within the book. Figure icons within the boxes indicate whether the task is designed as a group project or a task to be worked through on your own.

Reflective Task



Thinking about how culture shapes your own learning identity

Read about the following ‘characters of studentship’. They are taken from an ethnographic study of A level students (Curtis, 2008) but you should find them useful in considering your own higher education learning identity. They are the cultural sites that shape learning – both facilitating and limiting it. They will help you to think about how your own learning identity is influenced by the classroom cultures you participate in.

- *Pilgrimage*: the pilgrim views their education as a journey toward specified goals. While those goals are increasingly likely to change, the pilgrim wants to feel that they have direction, that they are moving forward. They ask questions like, ‘How will this help me reach my goals?’.
- *Romanticism*: for the romantic, learning is associated with personal development. They want to feel that they are being given opportunities to grow and to be challenged and stimulated. Motivated by a ‘love of learning’, they seek the rich and deep learning experiences that are currently inhibited by content- and assessment-heavy curriculum. They ask, ‘Can I go and explore this on my own?’.
- *Tourism*: the tourist continuously seeks new and different learning experiences, needing to keep moving and ‘travel light’. Schooling is a passing visit for them, where they want the freedom to try new things, to engage with new ideas and to meet new people. They ask, ‘Is this new and exciting?’. Permanence and constraint are to be avoided.
- *Consumerism*: consumers want to ‘shop around’ and get the best service they can. They are concerned with high standards and with the quality of the learning opportunities they are being provided with. They ask, ‘What am I getting from this?’. If they are not satisfied with the answer, they will complain or leave.

- *Reactionism*: the reactionary seeks certainty, especially when things seem uncertain. They dislike or fear innovation, risk, or alternative learning and teaching strategies. They ask teachers questions like, 'How do I write this in an exam?' or 'Why don't you just tell us the right answer?'.
- *Estrangement*: the stranger is detached and distant. They are not engaged with learning, are reluctant or unwilling to participate in group activities and want to be somewhere else. They ask questions like, 'Why am I here? Why am I so different from everyone else?' and 'What is the point of this?'.

Consider the extent to which your own learning identity is shaped by these characters of studentship.

- Which characters are you most/least aware of in your own learning identity?
- Do some impact on you more in some learning settings (depending on contexts such as the teacher, the group, classroom spaces, days and times of the week, tasks and activities)?
- What situations make you ask the types of questions that are typical of each character?
- Why do you think that is?
- Are you aware of other characters that are shaping your learning identity?

Chapter 1

Culture and learning

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- demonstrate that culture is a complicated concept with a variety of contested meanings and uses;
- distinguish between a number of features commonly used to identify and examine culture as a shared way of life, including beliefs, norms, tastes, values, roles, language and artefacts;
- recognise that learning is a cultural activity;
- understand some of the ways in which contemporary culture might offer both challenges to and opportunities for contemporary constructions of learning.

Chapter outline

‘Culture’ appears a very familiar term and yet it has been described by writer Raymond Williams as *one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language* (1983, page 87). This chapter examines where some of this complication lies, and outlines a number of possible interpretations and uses for the word. It builds upon the seemingly straightforward definition of culture as a ‘way of life’ with identifying markers such as beliefs, norms, tastes, values, roles, language and artefacts. Most significantly, culture should be understood in active rather than passive terms, as it takes a certain degree of action and intention to produce and reproduce meanings, understandings and expectations that are shared. From this perspective, the chapter asks, what shared meanings and collective understandings can be identified within Britain today? Where are they being made? Why? And by whom? Given the fluidity, speed of change and plurality of influences upon contemporary life, does it continue to make sense to talk about a single, shared, dominant culture at all?

The chapter outlines relationships between culture and learning and argues that how, where, what and why we learn can all be shaped, enabled and/or constrained by the cultural expectations that dominate. It also suggests that the distinctive characteristics of contemporary culture offer both opportunities and threats to learning.

Culture as a contested concept

Learning is a cultural activity. Learning encounters do not take place in a vacuum: teachers train to teach, students are enrolled in school, policy makers and professional experts design curricula and course materials. In each case, these encounters are influenced by wider shared expectations – of how a teacher should behave, of who should be at school and when, and of what sort of information a Year 9 history textbook should contain. Such expectations do not appear from nowhere, nor are they constant or consistent in different parts of the world or

over time. In fact, they are closely related to the cultural contexts in which all learning takes place. But what exactly does ‘cultural context’ mean here? And what specifically is implied by describing learning as a ‘cultural’ activity?

Reflective Task



Look at the following statements and consider the way that culture is being presented and understood. In each case, compile a list of characteristics, objects, or concepts that culture may be referring to. Can you think of any alternative words that could have been used? Do the replacement words make sense if used in all of the remaining statements? If not, why not? Can you think of any other examples of how the word ‘culture’ could be used?

Try to come up with your own dictionary-style definition for the term. Do the examples below help or hinder your task?

- *Among his colleagues at the university, Paul often felt uncultured by comparison.*
- *I don't like the way they treat girls and women, but I guess it's just to do with their culture.*
- *Come to our traditional Native American reserve for an authentic cultural experience.*
- *Police Chief attacks 'Asbo Culture' as crime rates soar.*
- *Increased funding required for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.*
- *Multicultural policy is failing our inner cities.*
- *Staffroom culture of silence to blame for increased bullying in schools.*

One of the reasons the word ‘culture’ is so complicated is that it is regularly used in a number of very different ways. Robert Bocock (1992) provides a useful history of the word.

Culture and ‘cultivation’: distinguishing ‘high’ from ‘low’

Bocock tells us that when it was first introduced to the English language, ‘culture’ referred to the cultivation of land to grow crops and rear livestock: think of the word ‘agriculture’ as it is used today. This meaning is no longer very common but its history is significant: here culture referred to a process of ‘taming’ and ‘domesticating’, turning unruly vegetation and wild animals into manageable farmland, cattle and pets. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this understanding had been extended to human beings. ‘Cultivation’ was now seen as something that could be applied to the human mind. ‘Culture’ began to reflect ‘refinement’ and ‘civility’.

However, eighteenth-century social commentators did not seem to think that *all* human minds could be ‘cultivated’ in the same way. Some minds were seen as more ‘refined’ than others; some tastes, activities and behaviours more ‘cultured’. Existing relationships of economic and political power were mapped onto and reflected through understandings of culture and cultural value here: it was the aristocratic elite who were first able to define what being ‘cultural’ meant. They did so narrowly in terms of those forms of artistic expression and intellectual scholarship that reflected their own interests and expertise. The lifestyles, loves and labours of the common man and woman were derided as ‘uncultured’ by comparison. In many respects, these distinctions endure today.

Some critics might argue that for something to be culturally worthwhile – to count as what might be termed ‘high’ culture – it must be difficult, not immediately easy to engage with, exclusive. More accessible things with wider appeal are designated ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture and scarcely awarded the same significance or respect. And there is an important educational implication of this. One of the roles of a national education system might be considered the transmission of knowledge about and appreciation of a people’s shared cultural heritage. But whose cultural output should be celebrated? Which paintings immortalised in art history textbooks and which novels included in course requirement reading lists? Is culture what you find in art galleries, theatres and opera houses – or is it found on street corners, in graffiti art, soap operas or gossip magazines?

Culture as a ‘distinct way of life’

Perhaps the most familiar understanding and use of culture that Bocock describes is the whole ‘way of life’ of a particular group. Sometimes culture is used to refer to behaviours shared by all of humankind, but when used by anthropologists and other social scientists, it more commonly focuses on differences between identifiable groups. This broad definition could include all intellectual, emotional and behavioural characteristics transmitted through social interaction. Of particular interest are *shared* understandings and ways of making sense of the world. When studying a culture from this perspective, a social scientist would traditionally look to identify a number of characteristic features.

Norms are the expectations for ‘normal’ behaviour. These might be formalised through law: in Britain for example, you can only be legally married to one person at a time. They might also be informal: although not spelled out anywhere, it is a norm today for people to have a series of faithful partners, known as ‘serial monogamy’.

Values are the underlying principles that norms are based upon: the ideals or morals that provide the foundation for society. Modern Western cultures tend to emphasise values such as individualism, secularism, justice, equality, freedom and democracy. The monogamous norms identified above are underpinned by values like faithfulness, loyalty and trust. The recent introduction of the ‘serial’ dimension of monogamy largely comes from the increasing significance of freedom as a core value of contemporary Western life. Again, a culture’s values may be made explicit, as in the French motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, or hidden from conscious view.

Beliefs are the propositions collectively held to be true. They might be concerned with knowledge (statements of fact) or with morality (statements of value). They are held to varying degrees.

- Absolute beliefs are the statements that we *know* are true: for example, that there are 31 days in January. The veracity of these claims is taken for granted. We do not question their accuracy: they are certain and we will refer to them as ‘knowledge’.
- Strong beliefs are the claims we are convinced by, but that are open to contest. While we are likely to be very attached to our strong beliefs, we can at least acknowledge that alternatives do exist.
- Weak beliefs are the claims that we are attracted to, but that we are not entirely married to. These are beliefs that are open to persuasion and can be abandoned without too much discomfort. For example, an individual might believe that nuclear power is dirty and dangerous, but be convinced otherwise by new scientific evidence, technological advances or economic necessity. However, for an environmental activist, an opposition to nuclear power may be one of their strongest beliefs.