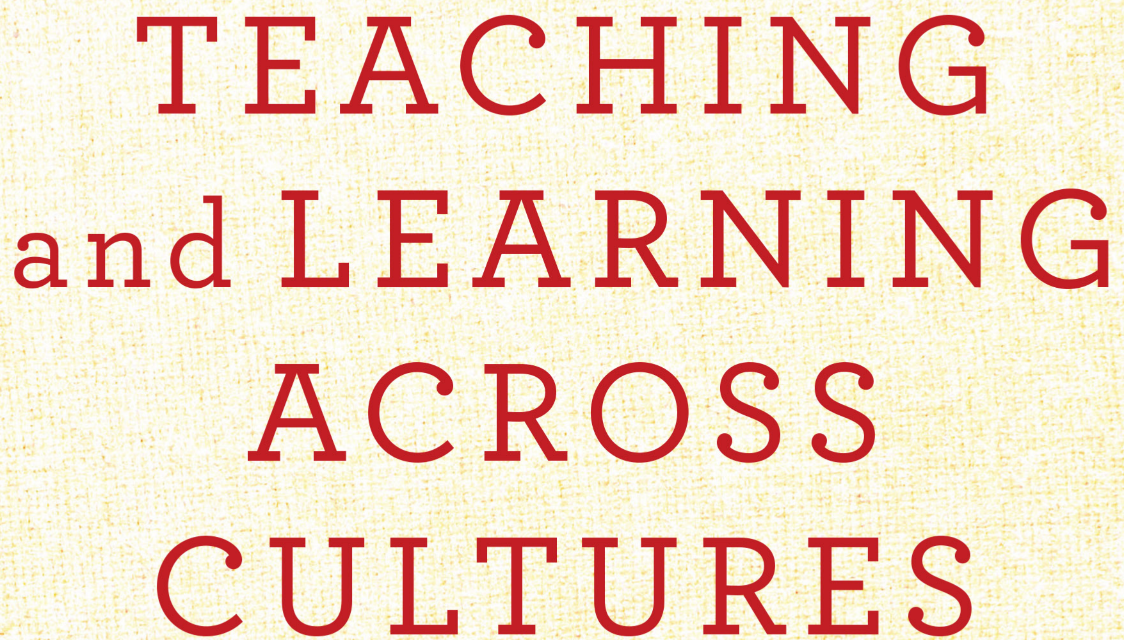
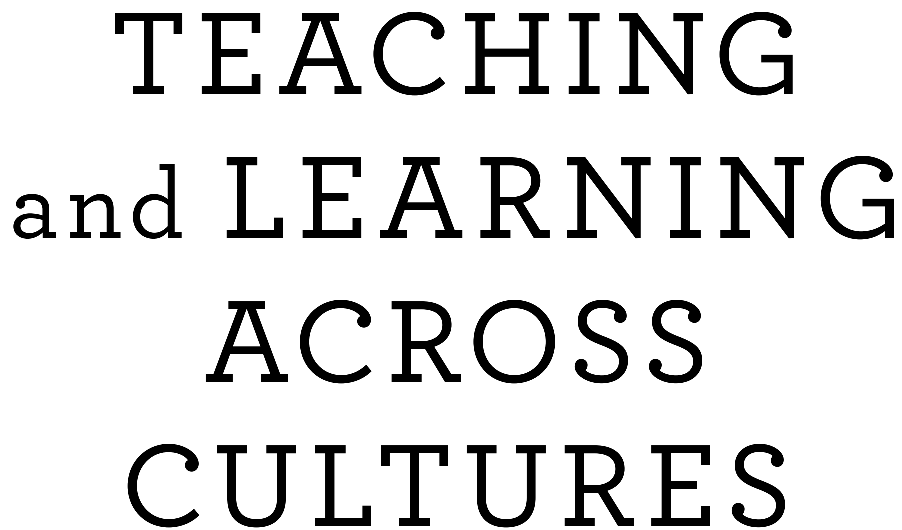


A Guide to Theory and Practice

CRAIG OTT



TEACHING and LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES

A Guide to Theory and Practice

CRAIG OTT

BakerAcademic
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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1

Understanding the Challenge

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

- Who Is the Cross-Cultural Teacher?
- The Challenges of Teaching across Cultures
- What Does It Mean to Teach and Learn?
- Culture and the Content of Teaching
- Meeting the Challenge
- About This Book

The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I* tells the nineteenth-century story of British schoolteacher Anna Leonowens, who becomes governess to the children of King Mongkut of Siam. One of the musical's best-known songs is "Getting to Know You," which describes not only how she has become a student of her students, but how—as the lyrics go—she is "getting to feel free and easy, . . . getting to know what to say," and ultimately feeling "bright and breezy." Though highly romanticized, this captures in many ways the ideal attitude of every cross-cultural teacher: willingness to be a learner, striving to like and understand the students, and working toward a relationship that is honest, open, and relaxed. The teacher with the right attitude will truly be personally enriched by the experience.

But such an attitude and commitment are only the starting points for cross-cultural effectiveness as a teacher. Other challenges will abound that can sour that "bright and breezy" spirit. Here's a sampling:

- "My students just want me to tell them all the answers. They don't think for themselves."
- "I arrived and there was no PowerPoint projector. But it wouldn't have mattered since there were constant power outages."
- "Students complained bitterly when I assigned them even the simplest homework."
- "As a woman teacher, the boys showed me no respect and ignored my instructions."

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- "They are great at memorizing large amounts of material, but don't seem to have critical reasoning skills."
- "I tried to develop personal friendships with some of my students. They nod and smile, but remain cool and distant."
- "Plagiarism is rampant, and I don't know what to do about it."
- "My contract stated that I would teach three hours per day, but when I arrived, my schedule included five hours per day."
- "I thought I could teach by using the lecture notes I had from seminary, but quickly had to scrap that idea, because students found my material too abstract and irrelevant."
- "When students write papers, they just seem to ramble and not come to the point. There is no clear thesis, no logical argument, and no compelling conclusion."

Jude Carroll describes these most common sources of misunderstanding and frustration for cross-cultural teachers in higher education: "(1) relations between teachers and students; (2) teaching methods (how they work and how they support learning); (3) assessment; (4) academic writing; and (5) academic/critical reading" (2015, 32). The list could go on.

Much of this book is devoted to addressing these and other issues, especially as they relate to student preferences and expectations. This chapter will define what is meant by *cross-cultural teaching*. Then, after describing some of the most common challenges and frustrations cross-cultural teachers encounter, we consider what is necessary to face the challenge and become more effective. Because there are differing understandings of what it even means to teach and learn, we will examine these basic concepts. Even the content of our teaching, especially theological teaching, must take culture into consideration; therefore, we briefly consider the importance of contextualization. Finally, an overview of the structure of this book will be provided.

Who Is the Cross-Cultural Teacher?

Teaching is one of the wonderful ways in which people invest in the lives of others. This may occur in a school, vocational training, adult continuing education, an English as a second language (ESL) class, individual mentoring, or a spiritual formation relationship. Today, more than ever, teachers, trainers, pastors, and people who have never formally taught before are traveling abroad to teach people of another culture. The low cost of airfare, the ease of international communication via the internet, and globalization

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in general have opened up to thousands of people opportunities for international teaching. International migration has also brought literally millions of people from the most diverse cultures into our schools and churches at home. Thus, the challenges of cross-cultural teaching are present nearly everywhere.

Today there are worldwide an estimated 420,000 Christian missionaries, of whom a high percentage are involved in some form of teaching, be it in formal schools and seminaries, or in the context of church and development work (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020). Each year from America alone approximately 1.6 million people serve on international short-term mission assignments lasting from a few days to a few years (Wuthnow 2009, 170–71), and over 20 percent of these are explicitly in teaching roles of some kind (Priest 2010, 99). By one estimate there are some 250,000 native English speakers teaching ESL in some 40,000 schools and language institutes.[1] Annually the Fulbright Scholar Program sponsors some 1,200 US scholars and 900 visiting scholars who lecture internationally.[2] The list could go on documenting the growing number of persons involved in some form of teaching across cultures, all facing to a greater or lesser extent the kinds of challenges described above in bridging the cultural gap between teacher and learner.

Today, schoolteachers, professors, community workers, and pastors are increasingly involved in teaching ethnically or culturally diverse learners like never before. With increasing immigration and cultural diversity, schools have wrestled with the challenges of teaching in a classroom of learners from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, varying levels of English skills, and little or no familiarity with the expectations of school or university study in the US. There is a large literature devoted to teaching in the multicultural classroom. A teacher from an affluent suburb who teaches ethnic minority students in the inner city will encounter many of the cross-cultural challenges described in this volume.

Although teachers everywhere can benefit from insights discussed here, primarily in view is the teacher who has traveled to another country or location to teach students of a single culture significantly different from her own: for example, an American[3] science teacher teaching Chinese students in Beijing, a

1. John Bentley, "How Large Is the Job Market for English Teachers Abroad?," International TEFL Academy, last updated February 24, 2020, www.internationalteflacademy.com/blog/how-large-is-the-job-market-for-english-teachers-abroad.

2. United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed November 5, 2020, https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/frequently-asked-questions.

3. Although the Americas include Central, South, and North America, for simplicity, this text uses the terms "America" and "American" to refer to the United States and its population.

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German teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia, or a Korean missionary teaching at a theological seminary in Chile. Our term *cross-cultural teacher* is not to be confused with a *cross-cultural trainer*, whose task is to help people (usually of his own culture) develop intercultural competency in preparation for an international assignment.

Most examples in this volume will be taken from formal teaching in schools. In non-formal teaching, such as seminars or workshops, similar cultural dynamics and challenges are at play, though the teacher may have a different role or status. The cross-cultural teacher may also be an after-school tutor, a church Sunday school teacher, a community health worker, a trainer for a corporation, an athletic coach, or in any other number of contexts in which teaching, in the broadest sense, is the task. The teaching assignment may be relatively long-term—as for a professor, development worker, or missionary teacher whose assignment lasts months or years—or for a relatively short period of time, such as for a visiting lecturer or short-term missionary whose teaching assignment lasts only a week or two.

The Challenges of Teaching across Cultures

Teachers tend to teach others in the same manner by which they were taught, and if they do change their teaching methods, it will be in ways that feel most natural to them. Teaching methods, expectations about relationships between teachers and learners, the institutional parameters of teaching, and even the physical conditions of teaching are all influenced by culture. Thus, teaching that comes naturally and is effective in one's home culture can become like the proverbial square peg trying to fit in a round hole when it is attempted in another culture. Or to switch metaphors, sometimes the cultural gap can be measured in millimeters and be easily bridged, but in other cases the gap resembles the Grand Canyon. Bridging the chasm seems daunting if not impossible!

The opening paragraphs of this chapter listed typical frustrations that teachers regularly experience due to culture conflict. Later chapters of this book will explore in detail the various dimensions of how culture influences teaching and learning, and the reasons behind those conflicts. Strategies will be proposed for reducing frustration and increasing teaching effectiveness. But first we will describe briefly just some of the challenges that a cross-cultural teacher commonly encounters, as a heads-up regarding some of the largest stumbling stones. These illustrate why effective teaching across cultures doesn't come naturally, and why the cross-cultural teacher needs not only pedagogical preparation but also personal preparation to meet the challenge.

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Conflicting Expectations

At the root of much frustration experienced by cross-cultural teachers and learners are conflicting expectations. Culture defines appropriate ways for people to interact, how learning institutions function, and what it even means to learn. Culture therefore shapes the expectations that both teacher and learner bring to the teaching-learning experience. When a teacher and learners come from different cultures, divergent expectations and ensuing frustration or conflict are preprogrammed. The disconnect can relate to course content, teaching methods, roles, scheduling—nearly every aspect of teaching. For example, the teacher may plan for students to engage in lengthy class discussions, but learners desire formal lectures. Over twenty years ago, a comparative study of teaching in various countries concluded, "To put it simply, we were amazed at how much teaching varies across cultures and how little it varied within cultures" (Stigler and Hiebert 1999, 11). Despite globalization, the challenges persist today. This means that teaching expectations that are considered normal in one culture may well be in conflict with the expectations of other cultures. "Teaching is a cultural activity. We learn how to teach indirectly through years of participation in classroom life, and we are largely unaware of some of the most widespread attributes of teaching in our own culture" (11). When such firm but subconscious expectations are in conflict with the firm and subconscious expectations of a cross-cultural teacher, conflict and frustration are preprogrammed.

Often poor advance communication is also a source of conflicting expectations. Especially for short-term assignments, cross-cultural teachers depend on receiving accurate information about their students, teaching responsibilities, and classroom conditions. However, that information may be inadequate and come late or not at all. The teacher may arrive only to find that the number of teaching hours has changed, textbooks aren't available, power outages make use of electronic media impossible, class size is not as expected, or students do not possess the academic background or skills to perform as planned. One teacher arrived at a college in Nepal having prepared to teach an intensive one-week English course. Upon arrival he was informed that he would be teaching a theology course instead!

Steven T. Simpson describes how Western ESL teachers have misinterpreted China's invitation to come teach English as a desire for them to contribute pedagogical expertise and methodology. The Chinese, however, were more interested in these teachers' linguistic and cultural expertise to enrich their English ability. "When these two expectations are in conflict, the potential results are frustration and accusations of wrongful treatment, ignorance, and laziness of both sides, by both sides" (2008, 382). The effective cross-cultural teacher must learn to adjust expectations and negotiate such conflicts.

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False Perception of Teaching Effectiveness and Learner Response

Even when teachers feel that they have been effective, their perceptions often don't reflect reality. One experienced English teacher from Canada described his first day of teaching in China this way:

> My students smiled and laughed continually. What a relief! They must have understood and thoroughly enjoyed the story, I thought. . . . My illusion that the students had at least a rudimentary grasp of the story was shattered that evening as I read their journals. Student after student, with the best spelling and grammar they could manage, thanked me for being their teacher, declared how much they appreciated my easygoing manner, and then, as politely as possible, proceeded to inform me that they understood nothing of the entire first day. (Squire 2007, 531)

Enthusiastic praise from learners or organizers may politely mask underlying problems. David Livermore (2004) compared, for example, the experience of

TABLE 1.1

Perceptions of American Pastors Teaching Abroad

American Pastors' Perceptions of Their Teaching	National Partners' Perceptions of the American Pastors' Teaching
"They're so hungry for the training we offer." "They listened so intently. They just hung on every word."	"You conclude that you're communicating effectively because we're paying attention when we're actually just intrigued by watching your foreign behavior." "It was a nice day but I don't think what they taught would ever work here. But if it makes them feel like they can help us in ways beyond supporting our ministry financially, we're willing to listen to their ideas."
"Teach biblical principles. Those are always the same." "Just teach the principles" without illustrations since they know that cultures differ.	"You describe a different Jesus than the one we know." Without illustrations, the national pastors complained they were given purely abstract information with no help in implementation.
"We have so much. They have so little."	"You call us backward. . . . You underestimate the effectiveness of our local church leaders."

Source: Summarized from Livermore 2004.

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Americans teaching internationally with the experience of their students and discovered major disconnects, as illustrated in table 1.1.

Initial student enthusiasm about expatriate teachers can also be short-lived. Curiosity about meeting a foreigner or fascination with new teaching methods can fade quickly. A study of Chinese student satisfaction with expatriate English professors illustrates the point. First-year students were generally enthusiastic about their expatriate teachers. But by the fourth year their enthusiasm had melted away, and responses became generally negative (M. Li 2002; see table 1.2).

Teaching international students in one's own country can be just as challenging as teaching abroad. For example, in a study of 129 ethnic minority students in Montreal, the researcher found that "a majority felt that the teaching style of their teachers was not a match with their individual learning styles and a majority saw this as a reflection of cultural values" (Kandarakis 1996). This was believed to have compromised minority student performance.

Encountering Stereotypes and Prejudice

The potential for stereotyping exists across the board: the cross-cultural teacher faces the temptation to stereotype her students (discussed in the next

TABLE 1.2

Chinese Student Satisfaction with Expatriate English Professors

Chinese student views	Percent who agree: Year 1	Percent who agree: Year 4
I prefer Chinese teachers' teaching.	31%	79%
Expatriate teachers' teaching is disappointing.	2%	56%
I can learn more in Chinese teachers' classes than in expatriate teachers' classes.	48%	92%
Expatriate teachers' teaching cannot match my expectations.	14%	74%
Expatriate teachers' techniques do not match my needs.	13%	71%
Chinese teachers adopt better teaching techniques than expatriate teachers.	3.2%	44.3%
Chinese teaching methods suit me better than the methods introduced by expatriate teachers.	26.9%	62.9%
Expatriate teachers do not know what our learning needs and expectations are.	32.7%	79%
Few expatriate teachers have lived up to our expectations.	38.4%	82.2%

Source: M. Li 2002, 14. Used by permission.

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chapter), and her students are likely to stereotype *her* according to unflattering national caricatures or on the basis of various prejudices. This has a dampening effect on teacher credibility and teacher-learner relationships, and can distort seemingly objective teaching content. Americans may be stereotyped as arrogant, materialistic, immoral, and obese (to mention just a few). For example, a study of five thousand college students in eleven nations indicated perceptions of Americans as competent, but cold and arrogant. They regarded Americans with a mix of admiration and contempt. Furthermore, the United States was perceived as seeking dominance over other nations (Glick et al. 2006). Female teachers may encounter the stereotype that American women are sexually promiscuous, and they may experience sexual harassment (Rawlins 2012).

Self-perception often diverges dramatically from the stereotypical perceptions of others. This is illustrated in a study of national stereotypes involving twelve thousand Europeans in ten nations. The quality that Germans most often used to describe themselves was dutiful/diligent; 23 percent of Germans mentioned it. But only 4.3 percent of non-German Europeans attributed that quality to Germans. A quality non-Germans mentioned twice as frequently to describe Germans was militaristic/warlike, at 8.8 percent, but very few Germans—a miniscule 0.2 percent—used it to describe themselves.[4] This illustrates not only how self-perceptions can diverge from the perceptions of others but also the stubborn persistence of negative national stereotypes.

In addition to racial, national, and ethnic stereotypes, the cross-cultural teacher may encounter gender and age prejudices. One study involving one hundred university students in Tehran found a bias against female teachers and a preference for male teachers (Nemati and Kaivanpanah 2013). In many male-dominant cultures, men or even boys may feel that they have nothing to learn from women. An unmarried woman may be viewed as a social misfit, or perhaps of questionable character: "What's wrong with her that she is not married?" In other cultures age is an important factor for teacher credibility. If a cultural belief is that knowledge and wisdom come only with age, older persons feel they have nothing to learn from younger persons. One veteran missionary in an East Asian country reported how she received little respect as a teacher until her hair began to turn grey, at which point student response to her changed noticeably. The cross-cultural teacher can be blindsided by any number of unanticipated prejudices or stereotypes that undermine her credibility and effectiveness.

Stereotypes and prejudice will also be encountered by the increasing number of teachers and missionaries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America who travel abroad. In ethnically diverse countries such as Nigeria or India, a teacher

4. Study conducted by GfK Marktforschung in 2006, cited at http://www.bpb.de/lernen/grafstat/projekt-integration/134668/m-03-06-was-ist-typisch-deutsch.

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may encounter prejudices from students of another ethnic group without even leaving their own country. This can block student receptivity and hinder the ability to teach and develop trusting relationships. On the other hand, cross-cultural teachers are in a unique position to help learners overcome such stereotypical thinking and attitudes. This will, however, demand considerable awareness, patience, humility, and skill on the part of the teacher.

Resistance to Change

North Americans especially value creativity and welcome innovation. When entering a teaching situation where common teaching methods or curriculum appear outdated or inappropriate, the expatriate teacher may attempt to introduce new methods and ideas. This can prove frustrating when working in a culture that values tradition. In some cultures, an attempt to change the status quo is interpreted as a criticism of leadership whereby leaders stand to lose face. When new ideas are introduced they may be received with polite, affirming nods in formal meetings, only to be ignored when it comes to implementation. Sidebar 1.1 illustrates one expatriate teacher's experience in this regard.

SIDEBAR 1.1

Introducing Change

A teacher in North Africa describes her experience in attempting to apply principles learned in a course on teaching across cultures:

> As in the past two years, the board members of our training program expressed again the wish to see the instruction better adapted to the students and make it more practical. The general observation was that instruction was not making a practical difference and was to some extent over the heads of the students. So far we hadn't succeeded in implementing change so that the students would benefit more.
>
> This summer I was able to apply what I had learned in the course on teaching across cultures. At first I encountered little understanding for my proposals and it took a considerable amount of convincing. I was rather surprised that even experienced teachers had little appreciation for the different learning preferences of the students. We finally agreed to reduce the theory by a third so as to employ more time with group projects and practical exercises. These were topics that were not very relevant for the students since they would only be important in the distant future.
>
> There will be an orientation offered for the teachers whereby they will receive a template for their lesson plans as well as specific ideas how they can make their instruction more practical. Now we are simply hoping that at least a few of the teachers will welcome the new ideas and seriously consider implementing them.

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Of course, it should be kept in mind that newcomers are rarely in a position to accurately assess a situation and identify what change is really necessary. One can easily overlook the fact that methods effective in one context are not necessarily effective in another, and there may be very good reasons why seemingly inappropriate methods are employed. The ability to accurately assess a situation comes only with extended experience and insight into the culture and history of the people or institution. Expatriates must earn the right to be heard by demonstrating humility, being a team player, and demonstrating effectiveness in practice. Even when one has made an accurate assessment of needed change, the process of implementing that change can be complex and bewildering. Different cultures have different approaches to decision-making that must be learned and respected.

Language Barriers

Cross-cultural teaching often entails overcoming a linguistic barrier. The teacher may be teaching in a language that is not her mother tongue, the students may be learning in a language that is not their mother tongue, or teaching may occur through an interpreter. If the teacher is teaching in a language that is not her mother tongue, preparation will likely take longer. Finding the appropriate vocabulary, following discussions, and locating textbooks and resources can all be formidable challenges. Unless the teacher's language proficiency is exceptionally strong, her teaching of complex material may lack depth and precision.

If the students are learning in a language that is not their native tongue, their language skills and vocabulary may not be adequate for the subject matter. The teacher may need to speak slowly and spend time explaining technical vocabulary or idioms. Students may find reading assignments tedious and time-consuming. Students' verbal skills may be so poor that the teacher has difficulty understanding class discussions or presentations. Students may be reluctant to participate in class discussions because they lack confidence in their language ability. Unless the cross-cultural teacher is a language instructor, she will probably not have the time or expertise to help students improve their language proficiency. This presents a particular challenge in higher education because proficiency in the language of instruction is so important to classroom interaction, written assignments, and understanding academic texts.

Teaching through an interpreter presents its own set of challenges, such as having materials translated in advance, the competency of the translator, and time lost through sequential translation. Chapter 11 will include an extensive discussion of teaching and learning in a foreign language.

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Physical and Emotional Stress

The international sojourner often teaches under physical conditions that add an extra layer of stress and difficulty to the teaching task. Crossing international time zones can create jet lag and sleep problems. Extreme climates, such as tropical heat and humidity, can drain energy. Strange foods can cause digestive problems. Noise, air pollution, uncomfortable beds, traffic, security concerns, and a host of other conditions can make the assignment taxing.

The long-term sojourner will face the additional challenges of culture shock and learning to live in a strange culture. Continually having to interpret others' behavior and discern appropriate conduct, all while struggling to understand why everything is so different, can create enormous emotional stress at the personal level as well as in family and other relationships. If the teacher is working in an isolated location where there is little contact with other expatriates, he may feel that he has no one with whom he can talk, share frustrations, or seek counsel. But the sojourner who perseveres will have the advantage of developing deeper relationships with people of the host culture and may gain a deeper appreciation for that culture. How to develop intercultural competency will be addressed in chapter 2.

What Does It Mean to Teach and Learn?

One of the most fundamental challenges that a cross-cultural teacher may face relates to the most basic questions she may not think to ask. Our culturally colored glasses influence the very definitions of what we mean when we speak of teaching and learning. Consider how you answer the following questions:

- Has one really learned if one can only recall information? Or must one be able to use or apply that information?
- Is learning primarily about information *at all*, or is learning more about skill or wisdom?
- Is learning more an active process of the learner discovering knowledge, or more a passive experience of the learner receiving authoritative knowledge?
- What role do intuition, the transcendent, or meditation play in learning, if any?
- How do passing examinations and other requirements of formal education relate to being a productive and successful human being?

Answers to these questions do more than just reveal how a teacher (or learner) understands the goal of education: they will determine the teaching methods

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that teacher will adopt to achieve that goal. Some of these questions that relate to worldview will be discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

Western versus Non-Western Understandings

Whenever we attempt to speak of differences between social groupings of people, language becomes difficult. Should we speak of race, or ethnicity, or age, or education, or nationality? Each term has its own advantages and disadvantages, and deciding upon the appropriate terminology is the subject of much debate in academic circles. Words matter: they can shed light or foster harmful stereotypes and prejudices. There is no consensus about the best way to discuss human difference. In this volume a variety of terms and categories will be used, and a prominent one is the distinction between Western and non-Western cultures. This is admittedly imprecise and problematic. Globalization and human migration have made the term *Western* somewhat misleading. So let me clarify how I will use the term. By *Western* I do not refer primarily to geography (e.g., Europe, North America, Australia, etc.) nor only to people of European descent with light skin color. Rather, I use the term to describe cultural ideals rooted in European social and intellectual traditions. This would include, among other features, the legacy of the Enlightenment and—important to our subject—educational institutions and traditions. The Enlightenment describes the philosophical and cultural movement originating in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that defined knowledge in terms of that which is rational or demonstrable by empirical, scientific method. The autonomy of the individual in self-determination and the discernment of truth was elevated over tradition, religion, and other authorities.[5] These ideas have since evolved, and one can no longer speak of a cohesive Western worldview, but these elements are nevertheless present.

As a result of colonialism and globalization, features of Western culture have been exported, adopted, and adapted in many parts of the world, especially in higher education. Thus, we must be cautious about dichotomizing too much between Western and non-Western understandings. Influence has moved in the reverse direction, from non-Western contexts to the West. Nevertheless, Sharan B. Merriam's observation is no doubt correct: "Embedded in [the Western paradigm of learning] are the cultural values of privileging the *individual* learner over the collective, and promoting *autonomy* and *independence* of thought and action over community and interdependence" (2007, 1). In the 1970s, self-directed learning became almost educational

5. Although many aspects of these Enlightenment convictions have been questioned in academia, for example by postmodernism, at the popular level they are still for the most part tacitly assumed in Western culture.

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orthodoxy (e.g., C. Rogers 1969; Knowles 1970). Self-realization also took priority over community responsibility. Although such views have since moderated, in the West it is still generally believed that the best way for students to learn is for them to discover for themselves, to ask questions, to experiment, to explore, and to process information; this is called a *constructivist view* of knowledge and learning. In most Western education, a high value is placed on learners developing critical and analytical skills, being willing to challenge ideas, and arriving at their own conclusions. Creative thinking is rewarded, innovation is seen as the way to progress, and tradition is regarded as quaint but unreliable. The scientific method is the path to discovery of new knowledge. Abstract conceptualization is understood as the way to solve complex problems. Even postmodern jabs have not fully dethroned the Enlightenment ideal: public truth is verifiable, objective, scientific, and rational; personal truth is private, subjective, and not verifiable. In the United States the relationship of religion and education is ambivalent at best, hostile at worst. Even private religious schools and colleges often struggle with the integration of faith and learning.

To state, perhaps, the obvious, many societies simply disagree. Knowledge in some cultures is vouchsafed in time-tested tradition or in the wisdom of elders. It would be arrogant for a young person to question authority, much less to become the creator of new knowledge. Religion may play an integral role in knowing, and is indeed hardly separable from life in general. Information, truth, and wisdom are to be received as communicated by an authoritative teacher, not discovered by the student. Authors such as Sanjay Seth in *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (2007) challenge Western epistemology and reject Western axiomatic and universal modes of learning. Colonial powers sought to replace indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies with Western approaches, which have been widely adopted and adapted. But Seth suggests they are inadequate in non-Western contexts. Christina Paschyn warns that academics working in institutions outside the US and Europe "must be careful not to impose the same cultural ignorance, misconceptions, and false sense of superiority when teaching students of non-Western backgrounds" (2014, 224). Such critiques are highly controversial but point to fundamental tensions in pedagogy and epistemology.

In Islamic societies life is ideally to be guided by the Qur'an as the authoritative revelation of God's will. The very word *Islam* means "submission"—particularly submission to the will of Allah. This sets the tone for life and learning: the teacher is to be revered as one following in the footsteps of the prophet Muhammad. The famous Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazzali named imitation, logical reasoning, contemplation, and/or intuition as methods of learning (Kamis and Muhammad 2007, 30–31).

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Perhaps the most extreme contrast to the Western educational tradition is found in traditional oral societies with little formal schooling and low literacy rates. There, learning is largely a matter of observation and imitation of daily tasks or occupational skills—how to hunt, cook, build a house, tend cattle, and so on—with little verbal explanation. Asking questions is neither welcomed nor necessary. In an oral culture, information, values, and traditions are communicated through storytelling, proverbs, drama, rituals, initiation rites, and the like. Botswanan Gabo Ntseane claims that "in the African context characterized by an oral instead of book-reading culture you don't pass useful information through books because learning simply will not happen" (2007, 114). Written communication allows information to be abstracted and disseminated; it is open to critical analysis; and it is separated from the author and context of its origin. Oral communication, on the other hand, is highly personal, communal, and contextual, and it is linked to the authority of the storyteller. The introduction of literacy into oral societies has many profound implications (Ong 1982, 77–113). Western-style schooling that encourages learners, especially children and youth, to ask questions is liable to be viewed as a threat to established authority and tradition, not to mention an embarrassment if elders cannot answer the questions. Even when oral societies become highly educated, features of orality persist.

Much, of course, depends on the desired learning objectives. Educational traditions and philosophies internationally also have much in common, particularly where forms of Western higher education have been adopted. Every educational tradition has its limitations, whether it is the need for oral cultures to become literate and think more abstractly in order to participate in the modern world, or Western pedagogy's failure to emphasize wisdom and communal responsibility or to give place to religion. This brief discussion serves simply to highlight that one challenge a cross-cultural teacher faces may be rooted in different answers to the most fundamental questions a teacher can ask: What constitutes knowledge? What does it mean to teach and learn? We will return to these questions in chapter 7.

The first few things the long-term cross-cultural teacher will want to do are to explore local understandings of teaching and learning, identify areas of potential conflict, and in conversation with local partners discuss strategies for cooperation that honors the values and convictions of all involved. Cross-cultural teachers should consciously examine their own philosophy of education while being slow to criticize others. (See sidebar 1.2 for helpful resources.)

We shall return in later chapters to many of these concepts and explore in more detail their cultural roots and how they play out in concrete teaching situations.

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SIDEBAR 1.2

Resources for Developing a Christian Philosophy of Education in Cultural Perspective

Abdi, Ali A., and Dip Kapoor, eds. *Global Perspectives on Adult Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Anthony, Michael, and Warren S. Benson. *Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education: Principles for the Twenty-First Century*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003.

Knight, George R. *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*. 4th ed. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2006.

Merriam, Sharan B., and Associates, eds. *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing*. Melbourne, FL: Krieger, 2007.

Spears, Paul D., and Stephen R. Loomis. *Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009.

Formal, Informal, and Non-formal Learning

When speaking of what it means to learn, the distinction between formal, informal, and non-formal approaches to learning is important to keep in mind. Each approach has its own objectives, context, and methods. Though this typology was first developed in the 1970s, all three have been around much longer, are present in most societies, and share many commonalities across cultures.

Formal learning occurs in an institutional context such as a school or university, and usually has the goal of developing productive members of society, often with a professional qualification. Especially for children, socialization and impartation of national values are major objectives. Formal learning includes standardized curricula, learning assessed by exams or student assignments, and public recognition of successful completion by the granting of a certificate or diploma. Teachers must meet defined formal qualifications. Often the institutions themselves must meet the standards of accreditation agencies or school boards, and fulfill government regulations.

Informal learning occurs in the context of the home or community in the course of child rearing and daily social intercourse. There are no classrooms, defined curricula, exams, or formal structures. The objectives include enculturation, socialization, acquisition of life skills, character development, and often personal guidance or development. Most of what we know comes by informal means: how to talk, how to tie our shoes, table manners, cultural norms, and so on. As we have seen above, in traditional, nonindustrial societies vocational skills are often imparted informally. Play is an expression of

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informal learning. Personal mentoring or counseling might also be considered as types of informal learning.

Non-formal learning occurs in the context of semi-structured, more flexible settings such as workshops, professional or adult continuing education programs, religious institutions (e.g., church, synagogue, or mosque), community development projects, and the like. There are rarely any exams or formal assessment of learning. The objectives are narrowly defined and may address immediate needs (e.g., alleviation of poverty, learning a foreign language), professional advancement, personal interest, spiritual formation, or entertainment. Personal betterment or social change is often in view. Non-formal programs typically arise from grassroots needs and interests, as opposed to formal learning, which tends to be "top-down" and serve larger societal, institutional, or political concerns.

These categories are not hard and fast, though each comes with its own set of objectives, expectations, and rules (whether implicit or explicit). Again, the cross-cultural teacher must familiarize herself with these various forms as they are found in the host culture, and more particularly how they apply to the specific context of her teaching.

Institutional Standards and Procedures

Most teaching occurs in some institutional context, be it the family, a church, a school, a workshop, or a business. Each such institution forms a subculture with its own social norms, rules, standards, and expectations. In some ways the subculture conforms to the standards of the larger culture, and in some ways not. (As we shall see in the next chapter, this is one of the problematic aspects of relying upon studies that attempt to describe a national culture.) Hence, the cross-cultural teacher encounters the challenge not only of teaching students of another culture but also of working in a strange institutional environment. One might assume that as the level of formal education moves upward from elementary to secondary to tertiary, the cultural differences will gradually disappear. Internationally, there is some convergence in forms, structure, and content of higher education (Brock and Alexiadou 2013, 46–53); however, many significant differences remain. Learning assessment (e.g., testing, grading), expectations for student workloads, accrediting standards, teachers' or professors' interaction with students, and innumerable other differences will be encountered. A professor may also be frustrated by students who come to class unprepared, who lack motivation, or who are regularly absent from lectures.

Cross-cultural teachers encounter institutional procedures and standards that are not only unfamiliar but may seem unethical. This can especially be the case in terms of an institution's unwritten internal culture. Should students be

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admitted to a study program solely on the basis of academic qualifications, or do family relations, social standing, financial ability, or other factors enter into consideration? How does one deal with students found cheating or plagiarizing? Can diplomas or degrees be granted to students who have clearly not performed up to minimal passing standards? Such questions and many more can create no end of consternation for cross-cultural teachers who have strong convictions about such matters and are unable to see the issue from the perspective of the host.

Culture and the Content of Teaching

One final challenge must be addressed, and that is the matter of content. We tend to think that culturally adapting our teaching has primarily to do with teaching methods, or perhaps roles of teacher and student, but not the content. However, the cultural perspective of the teacher profoundly influences how subject matter is structured, taught, analyzed, and evaluated. For example, teaching history is more than mere dates and facts. (Yes, in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue—but is Columbus a hero or a villain?) Even within Western academia, debates simmer about standards for writing history and how various biases and perspectives deeply influence the telling of the story (e.g., Cheney 1994; 2015; Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn 2000). The same might be said of a host of other disciplines. The challenge is only exacerbated when moving across cultures and encountering cultural stereotypes and popular postcolonial rhetoric. Differing standards for argumentation, valid evidence, plausibility, and credibility add to the confusion.

Teaching theology presents its own unique twist. Many cross-cultural teachers are long- or short-term missionaries teaching in schools, seminaries, or church education programs. Because the content of their teaching is related to the Bible and theology, they desire to be faithful to their message. They may equate their teaching outlines, doctrinal formulations, and eschatological charts with orthodoxy, and any tinkering with them may seem tantamount to heresy. Christians rightly believe that God's truth is equally true in any culture. So far so good. However, a naive and overly rigid approach can lead to theological myopia at best, or biblical irrelevance at worst, by failing to address culturally specific challenges and provide biblically and culturally compelling answers. Ultimately this fails to help Christians live as faithful followers of Christ in the face of challenges in their given context. While creeds or catechisms may indeed be equally *true* everywhere, they may not be equally *relevant* everywhere, and they are certainly not exhaustive—they don't say all that can or needs to be said.

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Much of Western theology has developed in terms of abstract and analytical categories employing a strict linear logic (a matter we will return to in chap. 5). Non-Western Christians sometimes find this approach too rigid and artificial. In the words of Peter S. C. Chang (1984), Western theology is like "steak, potatoes, and peas" (neatly separate on the plate), while Asian theology is more like "chop suey" (mixed together). Both can be equally nutritious but not equally tasty to the consumer. Should theology be explicated in distinct analytic categories, or more holistically? However, "steak, potatoes, and peas" have dominated international theological menu. Chang argues that nonlinear theological discourse may be more accurately understood by nonlinear thinkers. (See also sidebar 6.4 on p. 130.) The story in sidebar 1.3 illustrates what can happen when a teacher naively attempts to import his favorite course material and underestimates the size of the cultural gap that is to be bridged.

We are speaking here of the need for *contextualization*. While some readers may associate this term with "compromise," in reality appropriate

SIDEBAR 1.3

A Hard-Learned Lesson

After returning to the US from teaching a course at a seminary in Southeast Asia, I was approached by a bright American student about to graduate with an advanced theological degree. He was headed to teach for several years at the very school where I had just been and was eager to hear about the students and the local situation. After a few minutes of conversation, he went on to describe with unbridled enthusiasm the textbooks he was intending to use there to teach systematic theology. I knew these texts to be of a particularly opaque philosophical nature, difficult for most American students to understand and utterly irrelevant, if not incomprehensible, to the students he would soon be teaching. When I inquired if he had taken any courses on contextual theology or intercultural communication, he confidently replied that such preparation was superfluous since his wife was a native of that very country to which he was headed. At the suggestion that he might consider leaving those texts at home and developing a more relevant approach for his future students, perhaps adopting locally written textbooks, his countenance fell and our conversation soon ended. Needless to say, it came as little surprise to later discover that his teaching assignment at that school was prematurely terminated and he, with his wife, was soon back in the US. This was a painful lesson on not underestimating the challenge of cross-cultural ministry, the dangers of overconfidence, and the need for contextualization of instruction.

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contextualization leads to greater biblical faithfulness. Darrell Whiteman (1997) describes these three purposes of contextualization:

1. "To communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture." (2)
2. "To offend—but only for the right reasons, not the wrong ones." (3)
3. "To develop contextualized expressions of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God." (4)

It would, of course, be foolishness to omit from theological teaching the accumulated theological insights and wisdom that the church has acquired over the centuries. But all too often, the content of theological teaching in non-Western contexts is adopted from Western curricula, textbooks, or classes with only minimal adaptations. While that may be a reasonable starting point, alone it is usually inadequate to address the most pressing questions that students face in their daily lives. Different challenges arise in different cultural settings, and the cross-cultural teacher must help students address those challenges on the basis of biblical teaching and wisdom. The teacher may not have encountered many of those questions in classes or textbooks at home, and thus those questions may not show up in the teacher's course outline or imported curriculum. Here are a few actual examples:

- Can a Christian parent curse a rebellious and disrespectful child? (asked in Taiwan)
- Are all dreams a message from God? If not, how do we know the difference? If some dreams are from God, how do we interpret them? (asked in Kenya)
- How do I honor my parents and ancestors without participating in ceremonies that seem to worship them? What is the difference between worshiping and honoring? (asked in Japan)
- If a Christian woman is kidnapped and then forcibly wed to a Muslim man, should that woman be considered married in the eyes of God? (asked in Kazakhstan)
- Of the two major Bible translations into Mongolian, one uses the name *Burhan*, which can have Buddhist connotations; the other uses

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> the name *Yertzuntsuiin Ezen*, which has more folk religious connotations. Which is best? (asked in Mongolia)

The Bible speaks much about blessings and curses, dreams from God, honoring parents, avoiding idolatry, the character of marriage, and the nature of God. Yet one would search Western theology books in vain for answers to these culturally specific questions.

An unprepared cross-cultural teacher can be quickly overwhelmed by such questions and feel inadequate to address them. And that may be good! The cultural outsider is rarely in a position to discern the nuances of language, the meanings behind certain symbols or practices, and the social implications of changing traditions. For this reason it is important not only to adapt teaching content to address such issues but also to actively involve local leaders and learners in discovering solutions.

Even though contemporary cultures differ greatly from the world of the Bible, we can find biblical principles that help address such issues. Paul G. Hiebert's (1987) "critical contextualization" model is perhaps the most helpful and widely used methodology for carefully assessing and biblically contextualizing traditional practices. Contextualization is a complex undertaking that demands both theological expertise and cultural insight. Globalization has further complicated the task (Ott 2015). Sidebar 1.4 provides a list of some of the most helpful literature on the topic of contextualization with which every cross-cultural theological teacher should become familiar.

Meeting the Challenge

This rather daunting list of challenges is not intended to scare readers away from a cross-cultural teaching assignment. The challenges are not insurmountable, but they must be faced with open eyes. Advance preparation can go a long way to sensitize teachers to the issues and equip them with strategies to deal with those issues proactively and constructively. That is the primary purpose of this book. In the course of these pages we'll discuss many more challenges that stretch the patience of teachers and learners. Whether these are related to pedagogical preferences and expectations, language, understandings of learning, or teaching content, cross-cultural teachers may react in a variety of ways. Jude Carroll (2015, 19–21) describes four possible responses: *denial, deficit, expecting students to adjust,* and *shared responsibility for adjustment and adaptation*. Let's look at these more closely.

Denial occurs when teachers simply recognize no real differences between cultures regarding the way a subject is to be taught. "Mathematics is mathematics wherever you teach it." "God's truth is the same everywhere." This

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overlooks the reality that even when the subject content is the same across cultures, many other factors—such as the way the content is communicated, the social relations between teacher and students, and work expectations—are different, and complicate the total instructional experience negatively, impacting learning.

The *deficit* response places the burden of learning solely upon the students. "They have poor work habits." "Their previous education didn't prepare them well enough." Difficulties in student learning are not the teacher's fault. Carroll comments, "Those who follow a 'students as problems' approach seem

SIDEBAR 1.4

Resources on Biblical Contextualization

Dowsett, Rose, ed. *Global Mission: Reflections and Case Studies in Contextualization for the Whole Church*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2011.

Numerous case studies illustrate how Christians have responded to various specific contextual challenges from around the world.

Flemming, Dean. *Contextualization in the New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005.

Shows how the entire New Testament engages culture and derives biblical principles for contextualization.

Hiebert, Paul G. "Critical Contextualization." In *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 75–92. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

Presents a four-step process for biblically evaluating cultural practices and formulating contextualized responses.

Moreau, A. Scott. *Contextualization in World Missions*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012.

Provides a comprehensive overview of models and methods of contextualization.

Moreau, A. Scott. *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.

Examines contextualization in terms of its social, mythic, ethical, artistic, ritual, experiential, and doctrinal dimensions.

Ott, Craig. "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century." *Missiology* 43, no. 1 (January 2015): 43–58.

Considers the additional challenges that globalization presents.

Tennent, Timothy C. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Examines traditional theological domains such as bibliology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and so on but engages non-Western conversation partners and employs non-Western categories.

Whiteman, Darrell L. "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 1 (January 1997): 2–7.

A concise, classic statement on the nature and task of contextualization.

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to assume that they themselves are good teachers—that it is just that they are faced with the wrong students" (2015, 19). A teacher's stereotypes or prejudices about students can further aggravate the situation. However, especially a teacher who has sojourned to teach in the context of another culture will have to take a more pragmatic approach and deal with the realities of the situation. Sidebar 1.3 describes a good example of what can happen to the teacher unwilling to adapt.

Expecting students to adjust typically assumes several things: (1) that adjustment of the student to the teacher is the right and necessary strategy, (2) that students are able to make the adjustment, and (3) that the teacher bears little if any responsibility to help the student change. While it will be necessary for an international student to adjust to the expectations of the host institution, it is less clear to what extent students should have to adapt to a cross-cultural teacher who has entered their native culture and institutional context. The general expectation in that case is that the teacher must adapt, not the learners. However, as we shall later see, there are situations where exposing students to unfamiliar pedagogies will enhance their learning and development. To whatever extent students are expected to adapt, it is normally a slow process that will be greatly aided by a patient teacher willing to coach students along the way.

To these negative responses might be added the temptation to attribute the difficulties or ineffectiveness of one's teaching to a problem with the local culture. "It is the culture's fault that the students don't, won't, or can't learn." While this may be a contributing factor, the real problem may be the incompetency of the teacher, which is entirely unrelated to culture. Regardless of where or in what culture a person teaches, there are no substitutes for good communication ability, a caring disposition, and basic pedagogical skills. To these, intercultural competency must be added when teaching across cultures. But without them, the best intercultural preparation will not make for good teaching.

This brings us to Carroll's ideal response: *shared responsibility for adjustment and adaptation*. Much of the rest of this book will address ways in which this can happen.

Pamela Gale George's research on American professors who have taught in cross-cultural contexts describes effective teachers as those who experienced and learned

- *to observe the cultures of their classrooms* and academic workplaces;
- *to modify the teaching methods*, hewed in American university tradition, to fit the new instructional demands;
- *to structure thoughtful learning environments* to maximize student comprehension and participation; and
- *to practice flexibility and patience* with their students and colleagues (George 1995, xi).

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All of these lessons emphasize the importance of the cross-cultural teacher being aware of the need to adapt—not assuming that learners would or should adjust to her. Culture matters, and if cultural differences are not managed well, learning will be hindered and relationships strained. This demands patience and flexibility on the part of both teacher and learner.

About This Book

This book will simply dip its toe in the vast ocean of literature and research on the subject. Whole shelves in libraries are filled with books on any given topic that is discussed here in only a few pages or paragraphs. The book can only scratch the surface of the countless rich insights that practitioners have gained on the ground by teaching across cultures. I offer here a modest, but comprehensive, survey of the challenges and approaches to teaching across cultures.

Overview of the Content

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with two fundamental issues that must be clarified prior to discussion of more specific dimensions of teaching across cultures. Chapter 2, "Culture and the Teaching Context," will look at the nature of culture and culture change, the dangers of stereotyping, and steps toward developing intercultural competency. Chapter 3, "Learning Styles, Teaching Styles, and Culture," takes up the popular but complex topic of learning styles, how they relate to culture, and the extent to which adaptation to learning style is advisable.

The remaining chapters describe five dimensions of how culture influences teaching and learning, and discuss implications for effective cross-cultural teaching.

- *The Cognitive Dimension*, the way that learners process information (chaps. 4–6).
- *The Worldview Dimension*, questions regarding the nature of learning, causality, epistemology, tradition, and worldview change (chaps. 7–8).
- *The Social Dimension* of teacher roles and relationships in terms of social status, authority, collectivism and individualism, shame and guilt, and other aspects of social interactions in teaching-learning relationships (chaps. 9–10).
- *The Media Dimension*, how various instructional modes and media are received or understood in different cultures, including online learning across cultures (chaps. 11–12).

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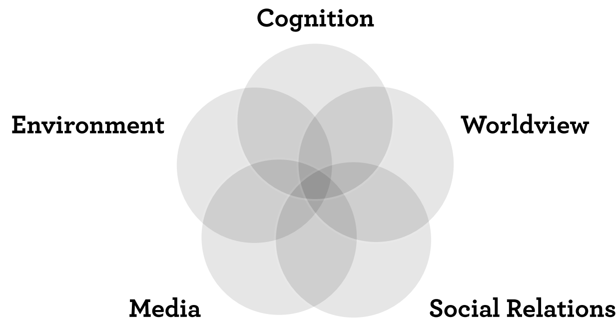
- *The Environmental Dimension*, the physical, institutional, and sociopolitical context of teaching in another culture (chap. 13).

FIGURE 1.1

Five dimensions of culture's influence on teaching and learning



These dimensions actually overlap and influence one another. They are considered here independently only for the sake of clarity. Each chapter includes sidebars with practical examples further illustrating the concepts. I hope that readers will not only find this discussion insightful and practical, but that they will also reflect personally on their own experiences as learners and teachers in light of their own culture and the culture of others.

To Keep in Mind while Reading This Book

There are two things that readers must keep in mind when reading this book if they are to benefit from it and not be misled by it instead! First, throughout this book there are examples and case studies from specific countries or ethnic groups. Readers may be tempted to say to themselves, "So *that's* how people learn in Kenya" (as an example). Resist this temptation! This by no means is an attempt to describe how all people in Kenya (or anywhere else) learn. Indeed, the example may even be an exception to the way most people learn in Kenya. (We will discuss the danger of stereotyping in chapter 2.) Recognizing the risk of such misunderstanding, I was tempted not to mention any country or ethnic group when giving examples, but that would have made for a very bland and abstract text. Specificity helps readers better visualize the dynamics that are at play, and better understand the broader principle or concept. In other words, readers need to focus on the principles, the dynamics, and how the example illustrates a concept, not on the specific country

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or people in the example. That said, all the specific examples, case studies, and illustrative quotations in this volume are from real-life experiences and are not made up. Those for which no source is cited are drawn from my own personal experience or from case studies written by my students.[6]

Second, some research cited in these pages was published fifteen or twenty years ago, or is even older. In the disciplines of social science, such dated research can be misleading because cultures and societies change so rapidly. I have chosen to cite some older studies not because they accurately describe the current situation in a given country or context but because they illustrate the fundamental nature of cultural differences that, although they may or may not still exist there, do exist elsewhere. For example, a study conducted fifteen years ago that compared German and Chinese college students may no longer reflect the nature of German and Chinese students today—but it may serve to illustrate cultural differences in other places. Even older studies can provide empirical evidence for the categories or concepts being presented and make clear that they are not hypothetical or merely anecdotal. Therefore, again, the reader should not focus on the specifics—in this example, German versus Chinese students—but rather on the dynamics, categories, and concepts being discussed and how they might be at play in other cultural contexts.

This means that readers should not look for formulas or checklists for teaching learners in a specific country or culture. Rather, seek to glean principles and tools that can be used and adapted for a variety of cultures. But learners in each local setting must be understood on their own terms and in their unique context, both as individuals and as members of a larger culture. This requires the cross-cultural teacher to enter each situation as a learner—a student of their students—not jumping too quickly to conclusions, but with patience and humility *getting to know them*. The cultural differences described in these pages are not boxes into which learners can be neatly categorized. Rather, I hope that the five dimensions of culture's influence on teaching and learning will provide teachers with tools to better understand their learners, appreciate them, and become more effective teachers helping learners reach their full potential.

6. Since 1997 I have regularly taught master's or doctoral-level courses on teaching and learning across cultures at the European School of Culture and Theology (Akademie für Weltmission) in Korntal, Germany, and at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois, USA. The majority of my students have lived and taught cross-culturally for many years, and they themselves come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their rich experience and insight provided many of the examples in this book. In some cases, examples are unattributed for reasons of security or confidentiality.

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