

Module 1 - Worldview and Mindset

Defining Culture

Whatever you do, or wherever you go, or whatever you take part in will, in some way, reflect your own understanding of and position in culture. And that's really the point. You are beginning thinking about what you do outside of class because it is what you do outside the class that informs your position inside the classroom. In other words, what you already know about life and culture and writing is just as important as what it is you will learn about life and culture and writing throughout this class. Certainly, you will gain knowledge and information and develop as a writer throughout the process of this course but you will bring what you know to this class and your research and writing in very important and interesting ways. That is why throughout this text, you will continually reflect on who you are, what you like, what you do, and what you think. It is through this process of reflection that you become even better able to learn something new.

So, what comes to mind when you think about culture? Where do you think culture is located? What does it include? Is culture inside you, or is it a part of the land, the country to which it seems connected? Begin with this larger question: As far as you understand it, what is culture? You may be working through this in class, or at home. Regardless, put your fingers to keyboard or pen to paper and write down some sort of response to this query.

Once you have something on paper, read the two following definitions of culture. The first was written by a sociologist, the second by an anthropologist:

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life--the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning--the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.

Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" 1958

Culture involves at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. Thus, mental processes, beliefs, knowledge, and values are parts of culture. Culture also has several properties: it is shared, learned, symbolic, transmitted cross-generationally, adaptive, and integrated.

John H. Bodley, Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System, 3rd ed. 1999

In the first quotation, Williams works to erase any possible divisions between arbitrary levels of culture. That is, he stresses, "culture is ordinary;" it is not limited

to the high culture associated with museums, plays and other specific artistic endeavors. It is in “every society and in every mind.” What this means to you is that you need not make value judgments with respect to culture. Culture is located wherever you may be; it is ordinary, as well as extraordinary; it is popular as well as privileged. It is television, music, fast food; it is homework, video games, and your mom’s home cooking. It is the stores in which you work, and the parks in which you play. It is everywhere you may be and everything you may do or say.

But Williams’ all-inclusive definition is only so helpful. Knowing that culture is in “every society and every mind,” may not help you understand what culture is all about. While Williams’ definition serves to draw inclusive boundaries for locating culture, Bodley helps us to understand how we might identify culture in our own lives. He explains that culture is what people think (their beliefs), what people do (their behaviors), what people produce and use (their material products and artifacts). In addition, culture is “learned, symbolic, transmitted cross-generationally, adaptive, and integrated.” In other words, culture is acquired, not organic. You learn what you believe is right and wrong, you learn rules and patterns of “correct” behavior, and you learn how to use objects in a certain way from other members of your culture. You do not already know, by some natural, or genetic, or biological determinant, these patterns of behaviors, these parameters of culture.

Though both these definitions help us to identify some particular elements of culture, the definition provided by Clifford Geertz in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures* brings it all together. After explaining about shared systems of meaning that bind members of a culture together, Geertz finally says that, in the end, we can only understand culture as the “total way of life” of a people. It is, at once, simple, and complicated. This definition encompasses the ideas of Williams and Bodley, but the interpretation—the personal translation of the definition—is left up to you. Go back now to the bit of writing you have regarding your own definition of culture. Given the ideas that Williams, Bodley, and Geertz present, how might you revise or add to what you wrote. Consider these questions to help you with this process:

1. How would you, in examining your own life, define culture?
2. What makes up your “total way of life”?
3. What do you do? Where do you go? How do you live? With whom do you live? To whom do you feel connected?
4. How do you think? In what do you believe? How do you define what is right, good, valuable, and important?
5. What influences your understanding of the world?
6. How do you dress? What movies do you watch? What do you do for fun?
7. What do you eat? When? Where?

The purpose of the exercise is to establish a starting place for your understanding of culture as you enter this class. You might save this bit of writing until the end as a place to begin final reflection, or you might choose to continually revise what you wrote all semester.

Even as you to begin thinking about culture from a personal point of view, make sure you think about this localized perspective with respect to larger cultural beliefs, values and norms. A person's relationship with culture is complex because it is at once personal (local) and political (global). No one lives in a vacuum and every cultural reality has localized, as well as more globalized components. Obviously, your family is a sub-culture in itself, one that exerts influence over you. But you also share some aspects of culture with other members of the community in the city or town in which you were raised. As a citizen of that city or town, you share a culture with other members of that particular region, county, or state. By the same token, you may have come to the United States from another country, and regardless of whether you came here weeks, months, or even years ago, there is no doubt that your cultural reality—your personal perspective—now differs greatly from anyone in your family, or even your hometown, who has never been to the United States. The point is that cultures cross with each other. You are, at once, a part of many different cultures, coming into contact with other people who may or may not share your cultural perspectives. This not only makes the definition of culture complicated, it often makes life complicated as well.

Exploring Worldview and Mindset

As you work to define culture for yourself, you will also need to explore who you are and how you see the world. Are you a male, Thai, international student who is into hip-hop and anime? An American, second-generation Puerto Rican woman, who really enjoys drag racing? Are you a non-traditional student, parent of three who works full-time and enjoys kayaking on weekends? A female 18 year-old of mixed western-European heritage, soccer player and classical pianist from the suburbs of a large city? Most likely, you won't be able to fully answer "yes" to any of these questions. These profiles are made up as a way of illustrating how different and complex—how individual—we all really are. These specific combinations of labels do not reflect any particular person; they are not meant to embarrass anyone, or even suggest that such individuals actually exist (although there may indeed be folks who recognize themselves in parts of these descriptions). Instead, these questions introduce the idea that, regardless of who you are, when you begin to define culture for yourself, a definition based upon what you understand as your own "total way of life," you have to consider that the elements of your culture—your family life, your job, your income, what you do, say and eat—all affect how you look at the world.

In order to facilitate conscious consideration of your cultural beliefs and values, as well as those of others, this module presents the terms **worldview** and **mindset**. The definition of worldview may be at once obvious and simple: your view of the world. However, the term mindset also refers to your perspective on reality. Both terms include ideas such as notions of perspective, cultural interpretation, beliefs, inclination, and state of mind. Though you may find that the words worldview and mindset are often used interchangeably, there is a critical difference between these

two terms that can help you think about the influences of cultures and communities in your life.

- In general, think of a worldview as something that members of a culture or subculture can all share. It is a perspective that links folks together.
- Mindset is the set of personal experiences through which your worldview is filtered -- the perspective that distinguishes individuals from one another.

To get at some of the cultural influences on your own worldview, consider your initial responses to the following questions and after those initial responses, interrogate what your answers reveal about your relationships to various cultural groups. Ask yourself in what ways those groups might inform your values, the expectations and hopes you have for yourself and others, the judgments you make, and the way you see the world. Which of your responses are fluid or overlapping? It is also interesting to keep in mind how your responses to these questions highlight where you fit in the hierarchy of power and privilege in our society:

- What is your nationality?
- What shared mythologies provide the underpinning for a sense of nationality? (i.e. do you consider yourself American? What does that mean – how does the mythology of democracy, freedom, and equality inform your worldview?)
- Do you identify with a specific region or state in your country or part of the world? Are you rural? urban? suburban?
- What languages do you speak? How does that identify you to others?
- Are you a member of a particular racial or ethnic group? How do you know?
- To which cultures or subcultures would you say you belong?
- Do you practice a religion or were you raised with certain religious beliefs? This is an important question even if you have distanced yourself from the religion in which you were raised.
- Do you belong to or identify with a particular political party?
- What the level of education of your parents? What are your expectations for your own level of education?
- How do you define your gender?
- What is your age group or generation?
- How would you define social class or income level?
- What are the things – activities and beliefs—that you find “normal” in life?

These are the kinds of questions that might lead you to consider points of comparison, regardless of your specific life experiences, that help you to identify common (or distinctive) worldviews among the members of your class, and even other people you have never met.

However, worldview isn't the only means by which the individual comes to understand reality. While worldview clearly refers to a shared perspective among individuals, mindset concerns an individual perception. In as much as the beliefs and mythologies presented through a shared worldview may predispose people to certain beliefs, it is the mindset that greatly determines how individuals will

interpret the worldview. It is through individual mindsets that people may come to assign positive and negative attributes and understandings to people, places, things and actions.

The point is that while worldview may set people up for prejudice and discrimination, it is important to realize that the translation from worldview to mindset is not direct. Your worldview is, to use a metaphor, sifted, funneled and reduced into your own personal mindset. How does this happen? Well, the funneling occurs as a result of each person's specific environmental factors and personal experience. Where and how you grew up, who influenced you, and what happened to you all comes together in the sifting process and translates the worldview that you may share with others into your own personal mindset. It is through an examination of the individual mindset that people can address and deal with the ways in which beliefs can become detrimental to individuals and society: racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, just to name a few.

As a means of beginning to examine your own mindset “funnel,” ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the critical moments, events, and experiences in your life that shaped and impacted you?
- What are the stories you tell about your life? What are the moments in which you experienced shifts in your thinking, or new/deeper understandings, or changed and challenged ideas, or moments of decision?
- What are the stories you tell about the other members of your family? What do these stories suggest about how you and your family defines culture, expresses your values?
- What are the stories other people tell about you?
- How are your personal stories connected with a larger worldview?

Coming to understand your own personal mindset, in the larger context of a worldview, will allow you to make more conscious, ethical decisions with respect to how you interact with others, with respect to how you think, what you say and do, and how you choose to represent your thoughts and ideas as a writer. Because what people say and do is often connected to a larger ideology—system of thought and belief—it is important to become aware of how their behaviors, words and actions link them with particular ideologies. Try to see your mindset in terms of a larger worldview, but rather than perceiving the worldview as “right,” question the worldview and examine it for inconsistencies, for imperfections, for conflicts and hypocrisy. In examining the mythologies of your mindset you may be better able to address your own relationship with that worldview. As a result of this kind of questioning, you may leave this class with a different understanding and perception of the world, but such a shift is not a requirement. What is required is that you give your beliefs and understandings serious attention as you prepare to and eventually engage in writing about culture.

Ethical and Methodological Considerations: The Responsibility of Writing Culture

In 1986, anthropologists James Clifford and George E. Marcus published a collection of essays called Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Culture. This work can be seen as the reason why ethnography as a practice has found its way into writing classrooms in the first place. In this work, Clifford and Marcus deal with a crisis in the field of anthropology, namely, that a once assumed premise regarding the scientific integrity of ethnographic research (participant observation research; the systematic keeping and analysis of fieldnotes) begins to crumble as we realize the art involved in the actual writing of the ethnography (literary considerations regarding the creation of a text). In other words, what happens is that our modernistic assumptions concerning the location and totality of truth gives way to an understanding of "partial truths" as scholars come to observe a post-modern condition. As you read this text and work on your project, consider these larger ethical questions:

- Why is it important to consider not only what you might have observed, but HOW you wrote about what you observed?
- How are values revealed in writing?
- Why is the consideration of how you describe someone or something an ethical matter?
- What do you think was the reaction when writing understood as science—anthropology--was beginning to be looked at as literature?
- What does your worldview and mindset have to do with ethnographic writing?