

## CULTURE: A DEFINITION AND BRIEF OVERVIEW

(Donna Rea and Cathy Kea, 2009, p.4)

“If you don't manage diversity. it will manage you.”

—L.R. Meriwether (1993)

---

An underlying premise of this work is that miscommunication, cultural clashes, and disharmony stem largely from differences in culture. A second premise is that *all* students, not just culturally different students, should be exposed to a curriculum that is rich in diversity rather than ethnocentric or Eurocentric (Banks, 2006: Ford & Harris, 1999).

*We define culture as the beliefs, attitudes, values, habits, customs, and traditions shared by a group of people. We are not born with an innate culture: culture is learned or acquired. And culture has a significant influence on world views and behaviors (Hall, 1989: Hofstede, 2001). (Whereas culture is relative to) socioeconomic status, race, language, age, gender, region, or some other attribute.*

We recognize that cultural differences are not responsible for all clashes between people and groups: individual differences also contribute to misunderstanding and miscommunication, Figure I illustrates this point. The *universal* circle indicates that all humans have some commonalities; we are more alike than different- For instance, all humans eat, sleep, breathe, and bleed. All humans have a language or method of communication, seek shelter, rear children, and have a need for safety.

When speaking of *cultural* practices, however, some of these universals must be qualified. This is where group differences come into play: What and how people eat, sleep, bring up children, communicate, and express emotions vary across cultures.

Finally, the *individual* circle reflects that no two people, even from the same culture (and family), will be identical, because of personality, interests, different experiences, and so on. Just as important, individual or personal influences can override the cultural influence. If all behaviors, values, and beliefs were placed along a continuum, those related to culture would fall in the middle; between universal and personal (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1:  
UNIVERSAL => CULTURAL <= INDIVIDUAL