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Achievement and its Cultural Effect on American Colleges Testing

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Introduction

“Close your books and keep your eyes on your paper” is a familiar utterance heard by American college students, probably more often than college students from other country. They possess tremendous amount of experience with testing due to the fact that throughout their lives they undergo numerous teacher-made and standardized tests that often determinate their future career and lives. They are evaluated through group and individual work, and qualitative, quantitative, summative and formative evaluations.

It was not until I worked at an elementary school in Georgia that I realized that American students sit for numerous tests and quizzes from the moment they are matriculated at kindergarten. This experience prompted me to write this ethnographic investigation into the relationship between American culture and testing in American colleges through the accounts of Craig, a fictitious name of an American student in a nursing program. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how Americans view achievement and its relation with testing and individualism.

The first part of this paper will provide the informant’s profile and a description of the relationship between the ethnographer and the informant. Then, we will provide evidences for the above cultural manifestations supported by examples provided by the informant and, finally, a discussion on the teaching implications: what a Brazilian teacher should be aware of when teaching in the U.S.



Informant's Profile

Craig is a 46-year-old nursing student at Clayton State, a community college south of Atlanta. Craig graduated in engineering from Georgia Tech, Atlanta, Georgia, in 1980 and in 1994 he completed his master's degree in counseling at Georgia State University. After 16 years working as an engineer for a major corporation, he was accepted into the nursing program and is now a full-time BSN (Bachelor of Science Nursing) student in his second year. He competed with several high school seniors with a ratio of 60 students per opening.

He was born in a middle-class family in the suburban Connecticut and went to a predominantly white school. His grades were outstanding until junior high school and dramatically dropped throughout high school and the first two years of college. During his Master's degree in counseling and presently in the nursing program his grades are A's.

Craig is my student's friend who happens to live in my neighborhood. I met him at his residence 4 times in order to gather ethnographic information. All the sessions were audio taped and noted.

The conversation between Craig and the ethnographer flowed smoothly from the beginning. During our interviews we did not worry about distractions, since Craig is single and lives by himself. He made sure he gave me his undivided attention by turning off his cell phone. He is very talkative and open about his educational and private life, so establishing rapport was easy. We are both well


traveled people and that was what our off-the-topic conversations were about. He has been to Brazil a couple of times, China, Japan, most countries in Europe and lived in Argentina for three months, but never went to school overseas. I believe that due to his travels, he has become highly aware of difficulties that a non-native speaker like me would have. Therefore, he acted very patiently while took notes and asked him for clarifications.

Not once did I feel uneasiness with the interviews. By the fourth interview, we developed mutual admiration and respect. He felt comfortable to provide even personal information such as age and religion and to ask me questions. He was also fully collaborating by bring further information that would elaborate on answers to previously asked questions.

The Crossroad between Accomplishment and Testing

Standardized tests were developed in the beginning of last century: the first, the intelligence test of Binet's, followed by arithmetic, handwriting and composition tests (Rich, 1974). There is clearly a long tradition of testing in the United States. From tender age, students take not only standardized tests such as the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT), but also teacher-made tests. They are evaluated through group projects and other types of evaluations if a child belongs to special programs. When they initiate college, the battery of tests is no different, if not greater.

This may be explained by the fact that Americans place a lot of importance on measurable achievement "by standards conceived to be external to the acting individual"

(Kluckhohn, cited in Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p. 69). My informant often complained about the number of exams he had to take. In the nursing program, students are prepared for an exam called NCLEX. All the tests are multiple-choice and geared towards NCLEX, which will allow them to apply for their RN (Registered Nurse) license. In addition to this, Craig has “a quiz every week in one class, and the other classes have an exam or quiz every second or third week. [They] also have practical exams in the laboratories where we have to demonstrate a skill, like giving injections or performing a head to toe assessment of a patient. There are also on site exams like giving medications at a hospital.” 

Such predominance of measuring skills inevitably places students in ranks (Kim, 2001), which in turn creates competitiveness amongst students and colleges. According to Stewart and Bennett’s article, “Competition is the primary method among Americans for motivating members of groups” (1991, p.79) to achieve. In fact, Craig’s account supported this, even though he pointed out that it depends on the field:

“E: You have been a student for over 11 years. Do you think students are more competitive nowadays?”

D: I think it depends upon the course that you take. Since we all know that we are going to get jobs, my fellow students are not so competitive.

However I did take a pre-med chemistry course earlier this year and they were intensely competitive. I think it depends much more upon the group of students than the year or decade.”

Colleges also want to prepare their students to do well in the standardized tests, NCLEX, in order to keep their license and attract funding. Obviously, their ultimate goal is to be ranked as one of the best in the state or in the state or country (Kim, 2001). Craig's description of test preparation supports this:

“E: After going back to school after 11 years, do you feel that there have been some changes in the way teachers evaluate students? What is the same?”

C: The biggest change is that now everything is on computers. In one class we even take the in class tests on computer. One reason this is done now is that the entire program is to get us to pass the state nursing exam, which will be multiple choice on the computer. So now they give all tests as multiple choice, which helps to prepare us for the test that we will be taking at the end of our studies and graduation to become registered nurses. You see, if students don't do well, the institution can have their course closed or get a cut back on funding.”



In some societies, tests are supposed to determine the students' future or to determine if the content has been mastered at a point in time. The importance of achievement in American society is reflected in the fact that tests are supposed to gauge how much a student has progressed (Wenzhong, & Grove, 1991) as Craig states in his response:

“E: What do test measure? Your present knowledge or you progress?”

C: To be honest, some tests measure my testing skills, like the NCLEX, but in general they test my progress because a test often includes stuff from the previous test.”

Getting grades is a form of tangible achievement (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Numbers are more concrete than mere feedback and progress is best conveyed with grades. I asked Craig:

“E: Imagine that from now on your professors will only give you feedback on how well you do instead of grades? How would you like it?”

C: I would love it because I think it would dramatically lower my level of anxiety, but that is not how the system works. We need to have numbers to enter grad school, some proof that we did well. I am sure that most students would think that feedback is not enough, too vague, though they would like the idea too.”

Competitiveness and fear of failure (Kim, 2001) appear to go hand in hand. “Traditionally, Americans have seen failure as lack of will and effort on the part of the individual” (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p. 82). In American culture, failure is a lurking danger because only the ones who achieve in the personal and public sphere are respected. As a consequence, many students resort to cheating. Craig said that his classmates from Georgia Tech once had access to questions and answers that were

administered the previous year. When asked why they did so, he said, “We knew it is illegal, but there is just too much to cope with. The course was very demanding and we wanted to make sure we would do well. They did it even when they knew all the stuff sometimes”.

One American ethos is that they should always be looking ahead at the next goal to achieve. Grades not only represent achievement, but they hold the key to future goals. Craig, for instance, wants to get good grades in the undergraduate program in order to be accepted in the graduate school.

“E: Do you believe that the tests will determine your future? Or are they means to gauge your progress?”

C: I think both are true. They may determine whether I can get into grad school or not, and they do gauge my progress. Sometimes though they are not a good gauge of progress and that can get frustrating, especially after I have studied really hard for a test and not done well.”

Achievement and Individualism

In an individualistic society like the United States, “the focus or center of teaching is the individual learner (...) This focus on the individual student in U.S. education mirrors the strong cultural value of personal autonomy and individual rights so deeply entrenched in the American psyche” (Samovar & Porter, 2000, p.359). For this reason, test accommodations are common- place to give an opportunity for every individual to succeed academically regardless of the impairment. Further, “education is a way of

improving economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence” (Hofstede, cited in Samovar & Porter, 2000, p.358). Craig confirmed this in the interview:

“E: Are test accommodations made for students with special needs?

C: Yes, these are done through the office in school specially set up for this purpose.

E: How do you think individuals who need accommodations benefit from them?

C: They can make a living and become independent, productive citizens.”

Due to the country’s individualism (Kim, 2001), American students use their unalienable right of freedom of speech and expression when unfairness or inaccuracy affect their academic achievement. Unlike in other cultures, Americans are not reproached for “standing out from the crowd” and challenging power. This also reveals the countries’ small power system. Craig gave me the following information that proved my argument:

“E: Give me an example of when you challenged a teacher for disagreeing with her/his grade or evaluation. What happened?

C: In a recent quiz I did disagree with an answer and I successfully argued the point with the teacher of the class. It did take a while but I was fortunate to have much of the class on my side also. The question was a little confusing, and the answer did not apply in all cases. In another quiz question I also tried to get her

to change her mind but was not as successful, and she would not change it to accept my response.”

The following excerpt not only touches on small power again, but also on the fact that achievement is a result of an individual’s “hard work (at any kind of job), scholarship or skill, initiative, and an agreeable personality” (Lanier, 1996, p. 22).

“E: Changing gears a little bit, is there a lot of pressure from the institution, the professor or yourself to have good grades?

C: It is well known that anyone graduating nursing school is going to have no problem getting a job, so grades do not really matter that way. Grades are however very important for me; I like to do well and I can sometimes get pretty intense over it. I like to do well, I like to have good relationships with my professors, and being an older student, see them more as peers than as my superiors. I have good relationships with them so I want to do well in their classes. I also want to go to grad school so grades are important to me for that reason.”

Achievement is not only a consequence of hard work, but also independent work. In addition, American students seem to favor individual rather than group evaluation, which is a characteristic of individualism. In this case, Craig is concerned about lack of cooperation, and its effect on his grade:

“E: How often are you graded individually as opposed to collectively?”

C: Most often individually, only once in the last few years did I do a group project.

E: Do you enjoy doing group projects? Why? Why not?

I do not enjoy group projects since I often work the hardest, and the others just bring my grade down.”

A characteristic of an individualistic society is the tendency to value privacy. Americans value personal privacy (Kim, 2001) about their personal and academic information. Since good achievement is prized, some students might feel embarrassed if their poor academic status is made public. Thus, in order to ensure privacy, grades are individually posted on Web CT, a website that students can access to look at their records and communicate privately with professors if they wish. Craig provided the following information:

“E: How are grades or general feedback reported to students? Verbally, in writing?”

C: Everything now is most always on the web, on WebCT. Sometimes tests are handed back with grades, but this is becoming more and more infrequent.

E: How would you feel if a teacher made comments about your grade or progress in front of other people?

C: I have never seen this happen during all of my years of school, I'm fortunate to always have had very professional teachers."

Teaching Implications

Teachers who come from a less individualistic and goal-oriented culture might need to make some adjustments in their teaching style in order to suit the U.S. college culture of testing. In the U.S. culture, students should develop their ability to the full, regardless of impairments or leaning disabilities. Hence, teachers should be prepared to make test accommodations that will increase the individual's chances of succeeding. These accommodations might entail reading the paper aloud, enlarging the font size or allowing more time.

First of all, since Americans tend to be very competitive and anxious about the risk of failure, a language teacher might consider creating a low anxiety situation in order for students to have low filter (Krasen, 1982). There are several strategies to deal with test anxiety. One way of dealing with that is by saying encouraging words and stating the purpose of the test: "Next class we are going to have a test. We don't need to be nervous about it because we have practiced it several times and you are prepared to take it. The purpose of this test is for you see what skills you are doing well and what skills you need to work on".

In addition to this, standardized and teacher-made tests are numerous and sometimes complicated to grade. As I have stressed in this paper, grades are determinants in a student's academic life and career. If the teacher is expected to administer and grade the standardized tests, they have to ensure that the instructions are followed closely.

Failure to do so can result in dismissal and cancellation of teaching certification. Teacher-made tests are to be graded impartially. Displaying favoritism towards a student can cause students to distrust the teacher. Further, some teachers may be expected to “teach to the test” rather than take a “back to the basic” approach so that students can get better grades. As stated before, this will have positive results on both the institution and the teacher.

In the U.S., it is acceptable for students to challenge the teacher’s decisions that affect their academic life. Therefore, teachers should be open to listen to students’ criticism and make an impartial decision preferably based on rules that were previously established. That is why is very important that teachers state the regulations for test make-ups, test cancellation, grade attribution, deadlines and assignment standards in the course syllabus.

Even though some college program such as nursing may require students to answer the questions verbatim, cheating and plagiarism are illegal and should be addressed in the first day of class.

Finally, for the sake of privacy, teachers are not allowed to share any academic information unless required by the administration, the court or parents if the student is underage. It is advisable that teachers utilize a private, written mean of communication (email or Web CT) in order to share information with the students. Also, the grade would be safeguarded if written in the last page of the test to ensure that nobody can see it.

Conclusion


In this paper, we have made an attempt to establish a connection between testing and U.S. culture. With the evidence presented, we can affirm that one of the reasons why tests feature prominently in American schools is because they are tools to rank students according to their measurable results, which allow individuals to have access to further education, goods and wealth.

Since testing reflects the belief that anyone can achieve as long as personal effort is made, competitiveness is what drives individuals to succeed. Not only students but also institutions compete amongst themselves. Consequently, students may suffer from anxiety as a result of pressure and may resort to cheating.

There is also a strong relation between testing practices, achievement and individualism. Test accommodations and privacy measures are in place to ensure that the individual is protected and stands a chance of thriving.

It is highly recommended that programs or institutions that hire exchange teachers from around the world make them aware of the cultural differences in order to ease their adjustment.

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