

CONCEPTIONS *of* CULTURE

What Multicultural
Educators Need to Know

THOMAS E. WREN

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Preface

This book is about the remarkable and problematic diversity of the ways in which culture has been represented by the social theorists and educators who have shaped the discipline of what is now called multicultural education. I have designed it for a broad cross-section of present and future educators, with special focus on those graduate students who are or will be higher education faculty or educational leaders (administrators, curriculum specialists, policy makers, etc.) as well as for their own professors. Drawing upon the resources of a variety of academic disciplines I have tried to help readers develop for themselves a systematic, in-depth understanding of how the complex concept of *culture* is deployed in the massive literature of multicultural education. The book is full of theory but is not a theoretical book, at least not in the usual sense of that term. It is more like a road map, accompanied by the related theoretical information and tools one needs to navigate the tangled territory of multicultural education.

Although the goals of multicultural education are many, the specific goals of this book can be counted on one hand. They are:

1. *To enable its readers to navigate the extensive literature of multicultural education so that they can recognize and deal with the inconsistencies and complexities of the many different conceptions of culture running through that literature.* It shows how to identify the relation between various authors' implicit *theories* of culture and their educational agendas, which is to say their recommended *practices*. Although it is commonplace to declare that there is a reciprocal relation between educational theory and practice, the book shows its readers how to examine this relationship in the specific context of multicultural education.

2. *To enable its readers to apply the principles explained in this book to their own future practice.* Here the goal is for them to learn how to pick and choose intelligently among the conflicting theories and agendas presented in the multiculturalism literature and thereby create for themselves coherent frameworks that can guide their professional journeys in university-level or K-12 education. For graduate students pursuing a career in higher education, the book shows how to frame their own research questions and pedagogical agendas within the larger corpus of scholarly literature and textbooks on multicultural education. It also provides them with a foundation for teaching their own multicultural education courses against a backdrop of the often bewildering variety of views about the nature of culture and the basic purpose of multicultural education. For those who focus on K-12 education, the book enables them to lead school reform, guide staff development efforts, and develop their own multicultural education curricula.

3. *To prepare its readers for the social changes and accompanying conceptual changes in our notions of culture that are now taking place as part of the "cultural hybridity" of today's students.* To achieve this third goal the final chapter of the book examines the possibility that the conceptions of culture one encounters in today's multicultural educational literature (as well as in everyday discourse) are quickly becoming obsolete, and that new social constructions are now underway in the culturally diverse environments inside and outside our classrooms.

Writing this book was a multicultural experience in itself. I learned from many people, of all ages and backgrounds. Several friend-scholars have read and commented on portions of this manuscript or one of its earlier versions. I received especially useful critical commentary from Georg Lind, Dennis McGuire, and my own colleagues Paul Moser and David Ingram. I am deeply grateful to Ms. Patti Davis of Rowman & Littlefield who saw the project's potential and helped me improve the book on many educational as well as philosophical fronts. Ms. Alden Perkins and Ms. Jocquan Mooney's careful management and copyediting is especially appreciated, as is the help of all those librarians, graduate assistants, and undergraduate students whose names are too numerous to mention here.

I am especially indebted to the Bogliasco Foundation, not only for the fellowship that enabled me write the first draft of this book at their gracious Centro Studi Ligure per le Arti e le Lettere on the Ligurian coast of Italy, but also for their moral support in all senses of that term. I have also received financial and moral support from my own university, which I acknowledge with great pleasure and gratitude. But my greatest pleasure is in acknowledging the support of my immediate family. My daughter, Kathy, and son, Mike, were still in school when I began the research for this book, and it was largely through their eyes that I came to understand what it is like to be a student in our complex multicultural society. My

wife, Carol, herself a prominent author and professor of education, has patiently read and re-read every page of this book and saved me from numerous substantive and stylistic blunders, about which the less said the better. What cannot be said often or loudly enough, though, is my heartfelt thanks to all these wonderful people.

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1

Defining Culture and Multicultural Education

How to Do It, and Why

We start with a little story, fictional but easy to imagine. Mr. Peabody is introducing a unit on citizenship to his 11th grade social studies class. "Citizenship," he begins ceremoniously, "has been defined in many ways. For the ancient Greeks it was the capacity to participate in the governance of the city-state or *polis*, which they did by making and enforcing laws, sitting on juries, declaring war, and so on." He then explains that it was different in imperial Rome. "There the political realm was not a small polis but a huge empire, and citizenship was a special status that gave certain people equal protection under the laws though not any authority to make or enforce them." Warming to his theme, he cites Webster's dictionary, according to which citizenship is "the state of being vested with the rights and duties of a citizen."

At this point Mr. Peabody, who has obviously done his homework and is eager to stimulate interest in the new unit, smiles and reels off still more definitions. "Today people define citizenship in various ways. Some understand it as a set of rights and duties, whereas others define it as full membership in the political community. Some insist that citizenship is participation in the public sphere as distinguished from the private and economic spheres, and still others claim that our usual notion of citizenship is now undergoing a transformation from a national to global status, roughly like the transition from the Greek notion of citizenship to that of the Roman Empire. And so it goes."¹

At this point Albert, a keen but not particularly docile 16-year-old, interrupts. "All right," he demands, "but which definition are *we* going to use?" Mr. Peabody beams. He was about to tell them just that. "In this class," he announces, "we will understand citizenship as a contract between a state

and its recognized members in which those members agree to abide by certain duties and the state agrees to ensure that the members enjoy certain rights." Unimpressed by the legal jargon, Albert punctures his teacher's confidence with the ultimate question: "*Why that one?* I don't see what's wrong with the other definitions." Mr. Peabody is taken aback. He doesn't have a ready answer but feels sure that there is a good reason for his choice even though he knows there is nothing fundamentally "wrong" with the other definitions. Fortunately the bell rings at that moment. Relieved, he smiles wisely and tells Albert and his classmates, "Good question. I'll give you the answer tomorrow."

Here the perspective of the story changes. Now *you* are the teacher. Classes are over and you are in Mr. Peabody's shoes, trying to decide how you will answer Albert tomorrow. Suddenly the sky clears. You realize that you do indeed have a solid reason for choosing the definition that you announced to the class, and it is simply that your lesson plans for this unit are all based on the important concept of a social contract. However, with this new clarity come other questions. Did you consciously design your lesson plans around this concept? If so, why? If not, should you make some last-minute adjustments, either to the objectives you have for this unit or to the definition you will use as your point of departure? Perhaps your lesson plans should also have secondary agendas such as clarifying the notion of a common good or promoting loyalty and other civic virtues, so that you now realize a change of plans is necessary. When you return to Albert's question tomorrow you will have to expand your core concept of citizenship to include other features that together add up to a complex but nonetheless coherent mix of definitions that fit with your multiple agendas. For instance, you may decide to tell Albert and his classmates that the class will also discuss how citizenship is a social construction that has evolved and continues to evolve over the centuries as the conditions of social life change.

On the other hand, perhaps you now realize that you don't actually have a good reason for choosing this definition of citizenship. In fact, you are no longer sure that your unit on citizenship should have started with *any* single definition or have a tightly structured master agenda, even though you're still convinced that what you have to say over the next weeks about civic life and citizenship is important and coherent. In that case, what should you do about Albert's question?

THEORY AND PRACTICE

This book is about culture and multicultural education, not citizenship and social studies, but its central issue is analogous to Mr. Peabody's

examination of the relationship between definitions of citizenship and his teaching agendas or—to put it more broadly—the relationship between theoretical inquiry and educational practice. Following the lead of scholars who discuss this relationship as well as the common sense of front-line teachers, I assume throughout these pages that the relationship is reciprocal: that is, that theory informs practice and practice refines theory (Mullen, Greenlee, & Bruner, 2005; Dilworth, 2007). In the present context, this means that in the professional discourse of multicultural education, theory-laden definitions of culture should influence what is said about the contents and methods of multicultural education, and reciprocally, that the educational agendas promoted through those contents and methods should determine which of the many definitions of culture serve as foundational concepts or premises.

The concept of culture sits, clearly but unsteadily, at the heart of the term “multicultural education” and also at the heart of the goals that those in the field have already set for themselves. They want to have something called “cultural competence” as well as to help their students acquire it. They want their students to respect other cultures, but just what is it they are supposed to respect? How has culture been conceptualized? A quick look at the educational literature would show that many quite diverse conceptions of culture run through the theories and practices of multicultural educators: culture as heritage, as discourse, as worldview, as social position, as cognitive style, as a by-product of race and gender, and so on. To adapt Albert’s “ultimate question” (*Why choose that one?*) to the present context, the question before us is: How can we make sense of the fact that there are multiple, sometimes even antithetical, definitions of culture?

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND CULTURE: TWO KINDS OF CONCEPTS

To deal with this abundance of meanings we must understand the logical difference between the two terms “multicultural education” and “culture,” each of which has a wide array of definitions. Comparing these two arrays will sharpen our understanding of the concept of culture and prepare us to deal appropriately with multiple definitions of these two very different terms. Each case includes a set of background assumptions about what counts as a good definition. Most of these assumptions are obvious (a good definition is clear, coherent, etc.) but a few need to be spelled out. In the case of everyday terms like “multicultural education,” a good definition should reflect the way the term is actually used by most speakers. In the case of theoretical terms like “culture,” though, a good definition should reflect the theory that produced it. Let’s start with the first case.

In an often-cited article, Geneva Gay (1994) reviewed over a dozen different definitions of “multicultural education” and then declared that their differences were not problematic since multicultural educators agree on the fundamental issues of the field, such as “ethnic identity, cultural pluralism, unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, and other sociopolitical problems stemming from long histories of oppression.”² There is no consensus about which of these issues are central to the field and which are peripheral, but this absence is not a problem for Gay, who believes that because multiculturalists value diversity it is only to be expected that they will have significantly different views of their own subject matter (see also Bennett [2010]). This is probably true, but there is another, deeper reason for this lack of concern, one that goes beyond mere tolerance of difference.

Multicultural educators can embrace many different definitions of their field without self-contradiction because those definitions are framed in terms of compatible and often overlapping *practical agendas*. In contrast, definitions of *culture* refer to one or another relatively sharp-edged theoretical construct that both informs and is refined by a practical agenda. Unfortunately, this contrast is absent—or at least very blurred—in most of the literature of multicultural education, where we find very little difference in the ways the two terms are treated. Its authors cite multiple definitions of *culture* with the same cheerful, live-and-let-live acceptance that they have for fundamentally different conceptions of *multicultural education*, with no acknowledgment that competing definitions of a theory-based term such as culture are problematic. Open-mindedness and tolerance are intellectual virtues as well as moral ones, but a lazy-minded openness and tolerance of key theoretical differences could lead to indifference and, in the end, a devaluation of the very important ideas of culture and multicultural education. True, some education theorists have little use for the very idea of culture and seek to replace it with notions of power or class. However, the greatest challenge to the validity of the culture concept is found in the mainstream literature of multicultural education, where it seems that almost any definition of culture will do. It is understandable that in this literature there are ambiguities and differences in the treatment of culture. Unfortunately, they are uncharted and, even worse, unacknowledged. As a result it is unclear how a student or teacher of courses about multicultural education is to determine where the experts stand on questions such as: What is culture? How does the idea of culture differ from, include, or oppose other ideas and practices such as race, heritage, or ideology? Is culture the cause or the by-product of social bonds? And so on. To navigate this conceptual terrain we need a map of the educational literature and a philosophical compass to steer by.

CULTURE FOR MULTICULTURALISTS

You may be surprised to learn that there is an important difference between how culture is discussed in the literature of multicultural education and the way—or better, *ways*—it has been treated in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and other branches of social theory. If so, your surprise would be understandable. After all, one might ask, doesn't the literature of multicultural education simply borrow a concept that has already been debated and refined in the social sciences?

Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Few multicultural education textbooks or scholarly works acknowledge the complexities and historical evolution of the various conceptions of culture that one finds in the social sciences, where culture has always been a vigorously contested issue. In contrast, when culture is discussed in the educational literature, the discussion is typically brief, superficial, and completely ahistorical. Reference is sometimes made to authors and signature quotations from anthropology, sociology, or (somewhat less often) cultural psychology, but the authors' own orientations are not defended and the quoted passages are usually woefully undertheorized if not irrelevant or even misleading. For instance, a reform-minded multicultural education theorist might propose a structural functionalist definition of culture without noting the essentially conservative character of that sociological model, which treats culture as society's thermostat for minimizing conflict and preserving the status quo. A complaint lodged almost two decades ago by the anthropologist Ronald Waterbury is still valid: "The teaching of multicultural courses," he said, "often proceeds with little or, at best, a common sense understanding of the key concept: culture. Of course, getting our conceptual ducks in a row is critically important for any teaching endeavor, but [in multicultural education] it is doubly so . . ." (1993, p. 63). Such misgivings or demurrals by concerned onlookers such as Waterbury as well as by the growing band of outsider-insiders who call themselves critical theorists are at odds with the practice of mainstream multicultural educators, who tend to be much more tolerant of the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the accounts of culture that one finds in this literature.

This tolerance is questionable for several reasons. What are we to think of the absence of any internal debate over a foundational concept such as culture? Does it signal a tacit agreement among multiculturalists on how culture should be understood? If not, why in their literature is there almost no visible exchange of arguments and counterarguments about the nature of culture? Perhaps the source of this seeming unanimity is the fact that authors of multicultural education literature have a virtually unlimited "tolerance of ambiguity," to borrow a term that some personality

theorists use to describe the highest levels of ego development. Or is the reason less praiseworthy: perhaps a simple conflict-avoidance tendency or even worse, a morbid lack of curiosity? Correlatively, what would it mean to *define* a complex term like “culture”? Are there different standards of adequacy for understanding the meaning of different sorts of concepts? Or to push this line of questioning to its outer limits, what does it mean to ask for “the meaning” of *any* concept, not just those of culture and multicultural education?

The rest of this chapter is devoted to these and similarly foundational themes such as the difference between abstract scientific terms and terms that stand for concrete social practices. It also takes up the difference between what some philosophers call “open” and “closed” concepts, the utility of parsing existing descriptions of culture or multicultural education into what I will call “formal” and “informal” definitions, and the importance of subjecting those definitions to systematic qualitative analysis. These philosophical themes are especially relevant for professors and students of multicultural education at the graduate level, who need to understand the logical and philosophical underpinnings of the literature they are using. They rightfully expect the presuppositions of their textbooks and other course materials to be discernible, that ambiguities be clarified, and hidden agendas exposed. If these expectations are not met, then they must turn to other resources to discover how to read between the lines in order to interpret their multicultural education materials. This book is one such resource. Its overarching objective is to enable readers such as yourself to interpret and use the many definitions of culture found in the multicultural literature as well as how to identify connections or disconnections between educational theory and practice. The rest of this chapter deals with the theoretical tools you will need for these tasks.

Sometimes, especially in chapters 3 through 5, the tone is somewhat critical but my aim is never simply to score points on authors of textbooks and other resources if they stumble (after all, as the Roman poet Horace said, even Homer nods). The aim is rather to show fellow educators, especially those in colleges of education, how to engage with a multiculturalist author as an equal, by which I mean how to read an author as though they were swapping ideas and challenges in a university seminar or at their favorite watering hole. In a word, I want to show how to turn passive reading into active, constructive discourse.

THE DEFINITION GAME

In this section I will draw on philosophy and rhetorical theory in order to support what I have already said about how terms such as culture and

multicultural education should be defined. The underlying idea, to which we will return over and over again, is that in spite of its extended uses in the popular media, the concept of culture is a *theoretical* concept whereas the concept of multicultural education is a *practical* concept or, as some philosophers prefer to say, an *everyday* concept. To understand the first sort of concept we must understand the theory that shaped it, whereas to understand the second sort we must understand the uses to which it is put. Once these two aspects of conceptual analysis are clarified we will be in a position to chart the various uses that education theorists and others have made of the category "multicultural education," and the various theoretical schemes or paradigms associated with the polysemantic category "culture."

The Forensic Trap

The first move in constructing a comprehensive account of the difference between the practice-guiding concept of multicultural education and the theory-laden concept of culture is to recognize the serious limits of what for most people—especially teachers—is the standard model of a good definition. These limits are not at all obvious, since so much of western education is *forensic*, using that term in the literal sense of debate in a public forum. To speak only half metaphorically, most of us have been training for a debate tournament that will last for the rest of our lives. Not surprisingly, this training shapes the way educators—who after all were once students too—discuss professional issues among themselves. The first thing debate coaches tell their teams is: "Define your terms!" They know that debaters who construct sharp and concise definitions will endear themselves to judges, force their opponents into certain channels, and otherwise take charge of the forensic situation. The same message is sent by schoolteachers, college professors, and—for students who join the professorate—scholarly authority figures such as senior colleagues and editors, as though the principal index of a person's intellectual worth were the ability to open any important discussion with a single, clear and distinct representation of the concepts under consideration. It may come as a surprise, then, to learn that for many concepts this familiar view of what counts as careful intellectual discourse, as well as of what counts as a "good" definition, is based on an outmoded, now very dubious, view of what contemporary philosophers are wont to call "the meaning of 'meaning'" (Putnam, 1975). It goes back to John Locke and other philosophers who thought that knowledge consists in a true one-for-one match between concepts that sit in the mind and things that sit out in the world.³ Words, be they relatively simple terms like "dog" or more complex phrases and sentences, were thought to have their meanings by virtue of one-to-one matches between mental concepts and external reality.

Locke's view has been challenged by many philosophers, but its underlying assumptions about the meaning of "meaning" were not questioned until John Dewey (1925) weighed in with his pragmatic theory of truth. As a result, today we find in the opening pages of most educational literature, especially that devoted to multiculturalism, definition-like statements that simultaneously yet not always coherently stipulate and advocate, describe and evaluate, analyze and illustrate the topics to be discussed. It is as though education theorists know they are supposed to define their terms, but are wary of doing so too narrowly, which is to say with too much precision. They tend to speak not of the "meaning" or "reference" or "definition" of their subject matter, but rather of its multiple "conceptualizations," "construals," "dimensions," or "approaches." Careful readers may find such statements exasperating since they do not provide clear and distinct definitions of their subject matter. However, exasperation would be the wrong response. They should be relieved to discover that education literature tends to avoid stating "the" definitions of complex social concepts and practices such as multicultural education.⁴

The admonition of the late John Wilson, a philosopher of education trained in the Oxford tradition of linguistic analysis based on what is usually called "ordinary language" theory, is worth quoting here at length, since what he said about words like "work" and "democracy" also applies to the contrast between "culture" and "multicultural education."

The best way of looking at this point is to say that in questions of concept we are not concerned with *the* meaning of a word. Words do not have only one meaning; indeed, in a sense they do not have meaning in their own right at all, but only in so far as people use them in different ways. It is better to say that we are concerned with *actual and possible uses* of words. . . . Sometimes we behave as if all we had to do was to find out the 'real' meaning of a word like 'democracy' or 'boat' or 'science', and then the answer to our question would be obvious. But unfortunately it is not so simple as that: and a moment's thought will show us that words like 'democracy' and 'science'—and even words like 'boat'—do not have 'real meanings'. They just have different uses and different applications: and our job is to analyse the concepts and map out these uses and applications. . . .

Of course there are some words which do have precise definitions: in geometry and mechanics, for instance, words like 'triangle', 'straight line', 'point', and 'force', 'mass' and 'work' are precisely defined. If we are asked 'What is work?' in an examination on mechanics, we know that we have to give the textbook definition. But that is because mechanics is a highly evolved and reasonably precise science, and the examination is testing our knowledge of that science, not our ability to analyse concepts. If we were asked 'What is work?' in a general paper for a university examination, however, our approach would be quite different. We should start thinking about the concept of work as it is used in everyday life, not just in the science of mechanics. And in everyday life

there is no [single] definition of 'work': we should have to notice various uses of the word, the different meanings it bears in different contexts, and so on. (Wilson, 1969, pp. 10–11)

Open and Closed Concepts

Wilson's ordinary language account of definition-making, which boils down to the idea that everyday terms should be defined by the way they are *used*, fits nicely with the way education theorists define multicultural education, but not so well with the way social theorists define culture. In the case of culture, a somewhat better fit would be with the forensic or so-called "ideal language" view that a good definition gets at the heart of a concept by stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying it. In doing so, one identifies a given concept with a semantic vehicle such as the English word "sphere," and then associates that concept and its vehicle with something in the real world, say a child's ball. Wilson himself recognized that sometimes this can be done, as we see in his example of what he called the scientific (that is, theoretical) concept of work that is part of what he called the science of mechanics. (Promissory note: Such definitions will be the subject of the next chapter, which is a knowledge base of various definitions of culture generated in the social sciences of anthropology and sociology, as well as in the subsequent inventory of definitions of culture drawn from the literature of multicultural education.) More often though, there is *no* set of necessary and sufficient conditions, in which case constructing a rigid, exception-free definition is logically impossible. In other words, in everyday discourse the fit between language and things in the world is coarse and flexible rather than exact or fixed. (Think of the word "art." The *Mona Lisa* is art, but what about a Lamborghini or Duchamp's "readymades"?)

To summarize: The contrast between everyday, open concepts on the one hand and scientific or theoretical, closed concepts on the other is quite straightforward. The meaning of an open concept consists in its *use*, whereas the meaning of a closed concept consists in its *conditions of application*, which is a bit of linguistics jargon denoting the features that a thing must have before it can be counted as a member of whatever category is associated with those features. Thus Aristotle's simple definition of a human being as "a rational animal" purports to list the two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for calling something "human," and so on.

The Open Concept of Multicultural Education. The idea of multicultural education resembles the idea of art more than it resembles the idea of culture. If we actually look and see what it is that people commonly call "multicultural education," we will not find common properties but only strands of similarities. The same point holds for art. Knowing the meaning of either term is not

apprehending some latent essence but rather being able to *use* it in order to advocate, facilitate, describe, and explain practices that are generally called by the names "multicultural education" or "art" in virtue of these similarities. (The terms have other uses too, but these are some of the more obvious ones.) The common characteristic of these terms is their open-endedness. When I want to illuminate such a concept, I can refer to certain paradigm cases, ones which nobody in my language community would hesitate to label as, say, "multicultural education" or "art," but I cannot cite an exhaustive set of criteria for such cases. The aesthetics philosopher Morris Weitz once made a similar point, saying, "I can list some cases and some conditions under which I can apply correctly the concept of art but I cannot list all of them, for the all-important reason that unforeseeable or novel conditions are always forthcoming or envisageable" (1956, p. 31).⁵

A related point is that a concept is *open* to the extent that its conditions of application are easily revised. This is the case with most of the concepts we use and talk about. New situations require us to decide between the alternatives of, on the one hand, using the old concept in an expanded way to cover the new situation, or on the other hand, covering the situation with a completely new concept, perhaps identified as a "term of art." In contrast, a concept would be completely *closed* if (and only if) it were possible to state the full set of necessary and sufficient conditions for its application.⁶

The Closed Concept of Culture. I said above that a concept is open to the extent that its conditions of application are easily revised. The opposite also holds. In principle the application conditions of a completely closed concept could never be revised, assuming of course that we are not talking about simple ambiguity or sheer equivocation (as when the word "Banks" denotes the sides of a river, financial institutions, and the prominent multicultural educator James A. Banks). Thus within our language system a bachelor is an unmarried adult human male "by definition," and within the decimal system there is no way the sum of two plus two can be other than four. However, these are mere tautologies. Within a scientific paradigm a theoretical term such as "absolute zero" ordinarily has only one meaning, but its definition could change if there were a fundamental paradigm shift, just as the theoretical meaning of "culture" has changed several times in anthropology and sociology over the last two centuries. In such cases the concept is only *relatively* closed.⁷ Simply put, the terms "art," "game," and "multicultural education" are very open, whereas theoretical terms such as "atom," "superego," and "culture" are very closed, and that is enough of a distinction for our purposes.

THE ART OF DEFINITION FOR CLOSED AND OPEN TERMS

At this point I want to refine and then apply the foregoing distinction between open and closed terms, or as Wilson put it, the distinction between