Collaborative Identity Learning:
How Cultural Identity—Individual or Family—shapes or hinders collaborative learning

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The cultural identity of the teacher shapes their instructional strategies.

“…the beliefs and attitudes of individual language teachers towards a target language shape the teacher’s choice and implementation of instructional strategies” (Shimizu and Green 2002, 228).

This session will present several collaborative learning exercises developed from the Cultural Self Discovery workshop for multicultural teams that focus on cultural identity impacting language and culture learning.
Introduction and Identity

• Introduce yourself (name, organization, work location) and give one or two words that best identify/describe you.
There are two main cultural identities found around the world or two main ways that people identify themselves—individual or family identity.

Your identity reflects your culture (how you perceive the world, make decisions, think, and feel).
Individual vs Family Identity

• Individual identity considers what things are important to the individual—what I like, what I prefer, what I choose… Identity is in terms of one’s own perception of their characteristics/skills, etc.

• Family identity considers what things are important to the family—what we like, what we prefer, what the leader/s choose…Identity is in terms of how the family perceives you.
• Individual Identity views the world from their own unique perspective.

• English reinforces an individual identity. It focuses on the use of singular pronouns (eg. you and we).

• English is also a subject prominent language necessitating information about “who the subject is, what he/she does and why.”
• Views the world from the perspective of the group. This includes group thinking, group decision-making, group responsibility.
• Family identity languages focus on plural pronouns rather than singular pronouns.
• Family languages are also more topic prominent necessitating more information about the people and the social context. “How or in what way?” rather than “who?”
Individual vs Family identity

“I,” “me,” “my”

“we,” “us,” “ours”
Identity Exercise—“I” or “We”

• Pair with someone you don’t know well.
• If you are from an individual-oriented culture, talk about your identity using plural pronouns “we, us, or our.”
• If you are from a family-oriented culture, talk about your identity using singular pronouns “I, me, or my.”
• How did you feel and why?
• In Western cultures identity is based on Greek dualism—the material world is perceived separate from the immaterial.
• Therefore, the person is considered primarily a physical being between birth and death.
• Western dualism led to the development of scientific methodology that develops a way to discover information or truth via categories, labels, etc. with abstract concepts=**either/or, right/wrong**.
Family Identity

- The family identity begins with the whole universe with everything flowing together into one unity.
- The family is basically spiritual as the spirit takes on a body at birth and leaves it at death.
- In Asia chi or qi 氣 means “breath,” “air,” “energy,” or “life force” that affects change through the interaction of yin and yang that are mutually complementary and not opposites =both/and.
Individual children...

- are taught to view the world from the perspective of what they like or don’t like leading to what is right and wrong.
- they are taught that only they themselves can discover the truth about themselves.
- they are socialized to have their own points of view, be independent, and chose what they like.
Family children...

• are taught that humans cannot have all the truth about themselves much less about God.
• family members are taught to be aware of others’ feelings and therefore careful in what they say.
• family members are more tolerant of other beliefs in order not to cause shame or offend and are socialized to seek harmony.
• Chinese character for person consists of two strokes referring to two people 人.
• This character also indicates how a person should behave—demonstrating love and concern for family members.
• People become fully human through their actions.
Individuals are generally socialized by their parents and teachers to explore options for themselves, to have their own points of view, to be independent from the group, and to choose what they personally like and dislike as a way of revealing their distinctive tastes and character (Lindholm 2007, 4).

The difference between individual vs the family identity is that individual cultures want to know “who” the person is while Asian cultures the question is “what” the person is (Abe 1997, 67).
Comparisons

- Family identity focuses on social roles and everyone’s responsibility to one another and long term relationships. Social relationships are clearly defined hierarchically.

- Individual identity focuses on work, time, methods, plans with individual responsibility and short term relationships. Social relationships are individually determined.
• In a family culture with a hierarchical structure, it is important to show respect to elders—in both speech and behavior (e.g. bowing, being quiet, etc.).

• Not only are younger people to be quiet in the presence of older people, they are also not allowed to disagree or question the authority of older people.

• The reason for this behavior is to demonstrate respect for the hierarchy/family. If respect is not shown, the reputation of the group will be disgraced/shamed.
Individual vs Family Exercise

• In groups of two: determine who is the oldest and the older one tells the younger one how to learn a language while the younger one does not speak, but listens, nods, and shows agreement.

• How did you feel?
Communication in Individual Identity

• Individuals are expected to state their own opinions without regard to how others feel—that is their problem.
• Speech is direct and aggressive/straightforward.
• A “yes” is a “yes” and a “no” is a “no.”
Communication needs to show respect to the hierarchy and say only those things that uphold the reputation of the family.

Speech is more polite and meek taking into consideration other people’s feelings and respecting the hierarchy.

A “yes” may be a “yes” or it may be a “no.”
Communication Exercise

- In groups of two, talk about effective language learning strategies using indirect speech.
- How did you feel?
What are your thoughts about how your language learning strategies are shaped by your individual identity?

How might you implement different strategies for your language learners to more effectively learn a family identity language and culture?
Resources: available on Amazon

- Tapestry of Grace: Untangling the Cultural Complexities of Asian American Life and Ministry, 2016 with Ben Shin.
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