3 | CULTURAL ANALYSIS

A major difference between animal behaviour and human behaviour is that human beings rely less on instinct than on learning. A bird does not need to learn how to build a nest, but humans do have to learn how to use tools, how to use language, how to know what is appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, and many other aspects of culture. The disadvantage of this is that children are dependent on their parents or other adults for many years; on the other hand, human behaviour is much more flexible and adaptive: we do not have to do exactly what the previous generation did, but can make changes. Thus social change is a feature of human communities but not of animal groups.

CULTURE

The word 'culture' as used by social scientists means everything that is created by human beings themselves: tools and technology, language and literature, music and art, science and mathematics, attitudes and values – in effect, the whole way of life of a society. Culture, as defined by Linton (1940), is 'the sum total of the knowledge, attitudes and habitual behaviour patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society'.

Any society has the problem of passing on this way of life, or culture, to the next generation. In simple societies culture is transmitted directly by members of the family or by means of other 'face to face' relations. In complex societies, the division of labour and social mobility make it impossible for culture to be passed on by traditional, informal means, and the task is partly entrusted to formal education.

Education is concerned with making available to the next generation what we regard as the most valuable aspects of culture. Because schools have limited time and resources, the curriculum needs to be planned to ensure that an appropriate selection from culture is made. Those responsible for making the selection have a duty to demonstrate that it is neither arbitrary nor idiosyncratic; it should be open to rational enquiry and justification, not least because complete agreement about the curriculum will rarely be possible.

In order to plan a curriculum based on a justifiable selection from culture, it is necessary to have a process or set of principles by which it can be seen that the selection is being made. That process will be referred to as 'cultural analysis'. The

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rest of this chapter will include an outline of a cultural analysis process which cannot claim to be 'value-free', but can claim to state values explicitly. 'Justification' takes place in a context of values, some of which may be well-established societal values enshrined in legislation (such as equal opportunity), others will be more basic human values common to all societies, and some may be values which in a pluralist society may be seen as more controversial – but still open to rational enquiry.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND CULTURAL MAPPING

There are two possible approaches to cultural analysis: the classificatory and the interpretative. The classificatory method would involve checklists, tables and elaborate statistical systems. The interpretative approach is concerned with looking at the culture as a whole.

Some anthropologists have attempted elaborate systems of classification of simple societies by listing and categorising key characteristics such as kinship, economic features or religious beliefs. The danger in this approach is of being so concerned with the accumulation of detail that generalisation becomes impossible. On the other hand, it is equally possible for anthropologists to misinterpret a society by relying on dominant impressions and reaching conclusions too easily.

The educationist analysing his own society has some advantages over the anthropologist in a strange community: he is unlikely to be so completely misled as some anthropologists seem to have been by native informants; but he has to be aware of the problem of analysing his own society through his own ideology or belief system. He may take some aspects of culture for granted which ought to be questioned, and he may assume the value of practices which ought to be doubted. Part of the answer is that anyone attempting this kind of cultural analysis has to learn to stand back from society and try to see it as much as possible as 'an outsider'. The observer can never be value-free, but he can learn to become more aware of his own values, beliefs and prejudices.

MEASUREMENT OR INTERPRETATION?

Some aspects of culture can be measured (for example, some economic features of industrial societies), but observers should avoid the temptation to measure what is easily quantifiable and then place too much importance on those measures. Much of cultural analysis has to be at the level of impressionistic description:

The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, that

man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be, therefore, not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretative one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1975)

It will sometimes be necessary to be more specific than Geertz suggests, and to ask detailed questions about knowledge, skills and values; but it will always be important to retain that interpretative view of culture. If we try to reduce a culture to tables and checklists, we run the risk of over-simplification. But there may be times when tables and checklists will have a limited usefulness.

At the simplest level, cultural analysis for the purpose of curriculum planning would ask:

1   What kind of society already exists?
2   In what ways is it developing?
3   How do its members appear to want it to develop?
4   What kind of values and principles will be involved in deciding on this 'development' as well as the educational means of achieving it?
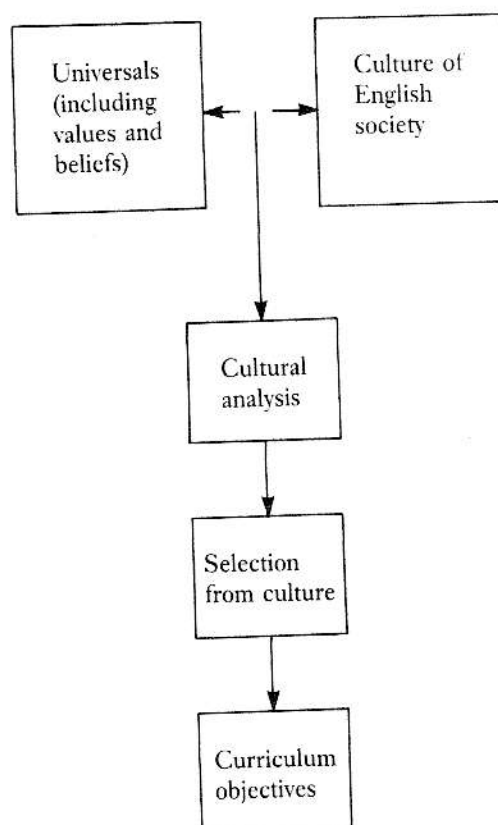
In the process of cultural analysis it is helpful to view culture as an historical as well as a contemporary process: not only to 'take a snapshot' of culture now, but also to see how it has developed. In educational analysis, we must look for culture lag and curriculum inertia: there is a tendency for schools to lag behind other aspects of social and cultural change, and for the curriculum to become irrelevant. This is not to fall into the trap of identifying 'educational needs' with technological advance nor to equate education with vocational training; but there is a tendency for curricula to get out of date unless efforts are made to counter the natural conservatism of schools.

A selection from the culture is thus made by analysing society and 'mapping out' the kind of knowledge and experiences that are most appropriate for the development of the society. Three kinds of classification are needed: first, deciding on major parameters – the cultural invariants or human universals; second, outlining a method of analysis to describe any society making use of those parameters – that is, moving from cultural invariants to cultural variables; third, a means of classifying the educationally desirable knowledge and experiences.

This is to deviate from the traditional approach to curriculum planning: in the past, much discussion took place about the classification of knowledge (for example, Hirst (1975) and Phenix (1964)) but little attention was paid to the analysis of society, and deriving from that analysis an account of the kinds of knowledge and experiences needed by the young at various stages in their development.

A diagrammatic outline of this approach, represented as a series of five sequential stages is set out on the next page (Figure 1). As a model and, therefore, as a simplified guide to action, it could be used at any level of curriculum planning: for example, for drawing up national guidelines, at the level of school planning, or by an individual teacher making a deliberate choice of teaching materials:

Figure 1 *Curriculum: a selection from culture*

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┌─────────────┐          ┌─────────────┐
│ Universals  │          │ Culture of  │
│ (including  │ ◄──────► │ English     │
│ values and  │          │ society     │
│ beliefs)    │          │             │
└─────────────┘          └─────────────┘
        │
        │
        ▼
┌─────────────┐
│ Cultural    │
│ analysis    │
└─────────────┘
        │
        ▼
┌─────────────┐
│ Selection   │
│ from culture│
└─────────────┘
        │
        ▼
┌─────────────┐
│ Curriculum  │
│ objectives  │
└─────────────┘
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HUMAN UNIVERSALS/CULTURAL INVARIANTS

Anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict (1934) have emphasised differences between societies; others such as Clyde Kluckhohn (1949) and Dorothy Lee (1960) have stressed the essential similarities between all societies. My purpose is to begin the analysis by looking at the characteristics that all human beings appear to have in common (the human universals/cultural invariants) within the Kluckhohn tradition, and then to analyse at a later stage how these are or should be related to education.

In analysing cultures I suggest that we concentrate on nine major headings describing groups of cultural invariants. It is not suggested that the nine sub-systems are exhaustive, and culture could be sub-classified in a variety of ways, but there are good sociological reasons for suggesting that no society could exist if it lacked any one of the following nine sub-systems, although it might be

the case that some of them are more important than others in industrial societies from the point of view of formal education. In other words, a society could not exist without any one of the nine, but it is perfectly possible to imagine an education service, without one – provided that the system were transmitted by other means.

The nine cultural invariants or cultural sub-systems are as follows:

1 Socio-political system
2 Economic system
3 Communication system
4 Rationality system
5 Technology system
6 Morality system
7 Belief system
8 Aesthetic system
9 Maturation system

1 Socio-political system

All societies have some kind of social structure, that is, a system of defining relationships within the society as a whole. Kinship, status, role, duty and obligation are the key social concepts which not only exist in every society but have to be passed on to the next generation.

In some societies, social structure is simple and taken for granted; in others, the system is complex and open to change. The socio-political system will be closely related to economic and technological factors: for example, when Western European societies were largely rural and agricultural, the dominant political factor was the possession of land; but as trade and industry developed, land ownership became less important than the ownership of the means of production. There are various ways of classifying societies: for example, social stratification is usually important, and in industrial societies social class is highly significant. Power and authority are important concepts; the family and other social institutions always exist in some form.

2 Economic system

Every society has some means of dealing with the problem of scarce resources, their distribution and exchange. In some societies, the economy will be simple, in others such as Western industrial societies, they are extremely complex. There are various ways of analysing economic systems, about which countless books have been written. One important differentiating factor is the division of labour and the amount of specialisation that exists; this is connected with concepts such as work, leisure and the market. In most societies money, credit and other ideas associated with wealth, income, buying and spending will grow in complexity as the society

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becomes more industrialised and moves further away from simple systems of economic exchange.

Most adults in modern industrial societies have only a very hazy idea about their own economic system and how it works.

3   Communication system

One of the major differences between human beings and other animals is the existence of language and the greater degree of complexity in communication that this affords. Where communication is entirely by means of spoken language, much of the learning required is informal – children and their parents need not be aware that language learning is constantly taking place. In those societies where written language is developed, two changes take place: first, writing has to be consciously learned; second, those who acquire writing skills are at an advantage over the 'illiterate'. The invention of print is also of considerable social significance. Printed texts make specialised knowledge available but, at the same time, increase the differences between the educated and the uneducated. In pre-literate societies age, experience and 'memory' are valued much more than they are in those societies where records are easily kept. Thus the communication system is related to the socio-political system in important ways, as well as to rationality (see below).

Communication consists of more than language: many kinds of signs, symbols and signalling systems have to be learned by each generation.

4   Rationality system

All societies are rational in the sense of having a view about what is reasonable and what counts as an explanation. The kinds of explanation will differ from time to time and from place to place, but human beings always attempt to explain physical phenomena and human behaviour. The system of rationality is closely linked with the communication system; words and other signs must be used consistently to make comprehension and cooperation possible.

Levi-Strauss (1966) has classified societies as 'hot' societies characterised by scientific thinking, and 'cold' (primitive) societies which are 'time-suppressing' and rely on myth rather than science and history to explain their universe.

5   Technology system

Human beings in all societies have developed tools to build shelters, to produce food and to improve the quality of life in other ways. All human beings are 'technologists' in the sense of being users and makers of tools. The process of learning to use tools is always an important feature of cultural life. The system of technology will range from the very simple, where every member of society can master the whole of the technology, to the very complex where no one individual can ever understand all of it. The complexity of the technology system poses

problems for cultural transmission: specialisation and division of labour have repercussions on the socio-political and the economic systems.

6   Morality system

All human beings a moral animals. All societies have some kind of code of behaviour, and make distinctions between right and wrong. What is regarded as appropriate in one society may be very different from the rules operating in another place or time. In some societies the moral code is unitary and taken for granted; in others, value pluralism exists and the problem of transmitting morality to the young will become more difficult.

7   Belief system

Every society will have a dominant belief system. In some, beliefs are predominantly of a religious kind, perhaps based on divine revelation. In others, beliefs may be derived from creation myths. In Western industrial societies, religious beliefs have become weaker, but have not disappeared altogether; nevertheless, sociologists talk about such societies as being secularised, where 'man is the measure of all things' and scientific explanations occupy a dominant position.

8   Aesthetic system

All human beings have aesthetic drives and needs. Every society produces some kind of art and entertainment, even when living close to subsistence level. If a society makes cooking pots, there will be a tendency to decorate them, and where decoration exists, standards will develop. One of the interesting features of human life is the range of aesthetic forms, but in no society is a sense of 'beauty' absent.

9   Maturation system

Every society has a set of customs and conventions concerned with 'growing up'. Anthropologists have written extensively on the variety of child-rearing practices which exist or have existed. In some societies the transition from childhood to an adult role is marked by rituals and ceremonies indicating a clear-cut change of status; in others, there may be a vague, ill-defined period of adolescence.

All societies have activities associated with stages of development: children play whilst adults work or hunt (although the concepts play and work may not exist as such). Growth, maturity and ageing are treated differently in various societies, but there are always important customs to be observed. In some developed industrial societies, the problems of transition may be considerable, partly because no clear rules are available.

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SUMMARY

I have attempted to analyse briefly those characteristics which all human societies have in common. Any human group which did not possess all of those nine systems could not be considered to be a 'society'. No anthropologist has ever found a group of human beings living permanently together lacking any one of those nine characteristic systems.

A society not only possesses the nine systems but must also have some means of transmitting these systems from one generation to the next. Some societies will achieve this cultural transmission partly by means of formal education. It will be the responsibility of schools to pass on all these aspects of culture, unless there are other agencies available for that purpose.

The argument is deliberately circular: if curriculum is defined as a selection from culture, then the selection must be an adequate one; culture can be sub-divided into nine systems, so an adequate selection will include all nine, unless we can be assured that the necessary transmission takes place outside schooling.

The next stage of cultural analysis will involve applying those nine sub-systems to our own society. Such a description provides the basis for cultural mapping, giving a more detailed picture of those features of contemporary culture which should be represented in the school curriculum. Part of that stage of planning will be to examine existing curricula in terms of the description of society derived from the analysis.

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