

42

61

"We shall not cease from exploration And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time..."

These words by T.S. Eliot, floating on two pages of black starchy space, introduce this remarkable book: Learning about Peoples and Cultures. Its dazzling readings, visuals and quotations lead students and teachers to questions what people accept as normal or factually true, and to expand their awareness and vision. Perceptive, inventive and challenging, the book demonstrates a form of self-education far different from classroom practices in most schools today. Instead of "teaching about other cultures", the book speaks of "learning from/about peoples" (including ourselves). Instead of prescriptive teaching of an academic subject, instead of students passively memorizing information, education becomes a dynamic process in tune with the changing times—a search for larger truths.

This freedom to learn and its appropriateness to education about culture and development is made clearer in the book's accompanying Teacher Guide. When we learn about peoples and cultures, we are concerned with human nature and the nature of humans: how and why we are alike and different, how we became the way we are and what we can become.

Until recently, the process of education was mainly one of training, whereby learners were

PERSPECTIVE Education from development

enjoined to follow the traditional ways of their elders—their parents, professors, priests, patriarchs and political leaders. This system worked well as long as there were few modifications in ideas and livelihood within a society, and people continued to live in the same place with the same group. Now, however, few places can escape the world's rapid and intrusive changes and fewer people stay put. Young people today can tell their elders, "You have never been young in the world in which I am young."

Since people will increasingly live in cultures that are less and less extensions of the past, we now have the opportunity and the necessity of being culture-creators as well as culture-inheritors. Cultural studies can help us transcend our cultural conditioning by enabling us to encounter culturally different minds.

We must also be made conscious of group mores and folkways. This heightened awareness is needed because we will have to become more and more self-directing to become our own teachers and continue the life-long process of self-education. As Jean Piaget said, "The principal goal of education is to create persons who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done—people who are creative, inventive and discoverers."

To some this is a period of crisis (a double-meaning word encompassing both danger and opportunity). To do what needs to be done we must improve our vision in the historical sense of understanding more fully our human history and in the psychological sense of affirming and activating our human potential. By learning how human beings have developed and why we behave as we do, we can learn more about the processes by which human societies form their attitudes and actions. The survival and fulfillment of earthly life depend on the degree to which we can become masters, rather than victims, of our own behaviour.

Humanity can progress in opposite—but not necessarily opposing—directions: toward a self-culture of more individualized choices and toward a global society in which all of us serve, share and benefit. There is under way, according to Teilhard de Chardin, a "planetization of mankind which will make us more completely personalized and human."

The main objectives of learning about peoples and cultures are to help students develop positive skills, understandings, attitudes, appreciations and behaviours. Emphasis is on the process by which such learning occurs. Methods have first priority. In other words, the process is the content.

Learning about Peoples and Cultures shows how this can be done. In keeping with the process of active self-education which it advocates, teachers and students of all ages are urged to read the book on their own, writing down their own questions and reactions before experiencing the book together.

Readings, visuals and quotations indicate a sequence of ideas to explore but the choices are not explained. In fact, students are invited to substitute their own messages drawn from their own inquiry and lives. The factual information given is intended to be stimulating—not mastered.

The selected readings are considered as parables, each with a particular lesson or message; the "moral of the story" must be perceived by the listener. The suggestive but uncaptioned visuals and quotations from many cultures are also important to this self-learning process.

The book's 19 chapters are arranged in five units, each of which represents an important aspect of study. The first two units (Changing Views of Ourselves in the Universe, and Seeing Each Other as Outsiders and Insiders) focus mainly on understanding our past and present.

The next two (Considering Why Human Viewpoints Differ, and Communicating with Each Other) are more concerned with

ways we can begin to behave differently through increased awareness and motivation. The last unit (Perceiving Cultural Patterns in New Ways) explores how these understandings can be applied to peoples and cultures in the students' own country. Learning about other cultures is not considered something done as a favour to the people who live in them—as an expression of goodwill. Such knowledge can be of immediate and profound benefit and pleasure to the learner.

A variety of approaches are offered: there are chapters of imagination; of specific content; of methodology; and chapters about different cultural viewpoints.

One chapter compares arranged and romantic marriages in different cultures; another, differences in the sense of time, comfortable space, tone of voice, and informality, in human relations. In a third, Professor Yu-Kuang Chu suggests principles for cultural teaching: Beware of stereotyping "foreign peoples"; see the common humanity of people amidst cultural diversities; recognize different scales of values in cultures; develop empathy and concern for other peoples; discern the interrelationships between language and culture; and finally, study cultures for their intrinsic worth and thus see the richness of human thought and life.

Evaluation and activities are crucial when studying a process, because what is learned is shown more in a student's behaviour than in his or her ability to recall content. The guide includes a suggested final examination. One sample section: A Muslim philosopher once said: "Half of knowledge is the question; the other half is the answer." Create your own question regarding learning about peoples and cultures, and compose a sample response.

Activities especially appropriate to cultural studies are given in categories such as "activities that encourage students to reflect at various levels of understanding on the human condition, and activities that reveal how the learning process follows a hierarchy from fundamental understandings to insights and applications."

What then do students learn from the book's journey as they proceed from "exploring" to "finding", from the outer space of the first chapter to inner home-place, with the final pages returning to the original theme? They can discover that the World Decade's theme, seemingly so vast and abstract, are actually integral to education and people's lives. They may come to feel part of culture and development, not just their own but of all humankind. And hopefully they will find meaning in the concluding words of Dr. Fersh's book: "We are all citizens of one world. We are all of one blood. We are all equally human... Let us have one end in view: the welfare of humanity."