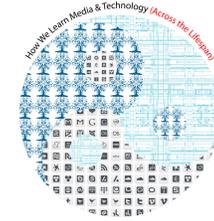




How We Learn (Technology Across the Lifespan)



Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

What is Culture?

Stephen Petrina (March 2009/2017)

This is a key question for researchers, and the challenge is to maintain a complex understanding of culture.

The Latin *colere* (culture), meaning "to cultivate," "to dwell," "to take care" and "to tend and preserve," is at base about the interdependencies of humans and nature (Arendt, 1961a; Williams, 1976, pp. 87-93). Arendt (1961a) found that "as far as Roman usage is concerned, the chief point was always the connection of culture with nature; culture originally meant agriculture, which was held in very high regard in Rome in opposition to the poetic and fabricating arts" (p. 212). Taken together, she says, "culture in the sense of developing nature into a dwelling place for a people as well as in the sense of taking care of the monuments of the past, determine even today the content and the meaning we have in mind when we speak of culture.... Yet the meaning of the word 'culture' is hardly exhausted by these strictly Roman elements" (p. 21). The Greeks did not have this equivalent understanding of culture, nor did they have a word for culture per se. In around 50 C.E., Cicero coined the phrases *excolere animum*, cultivating the mind, and *cultura animi*, cultured mind, to suggest that which makes people "fit to take care of the things [i.e., assemblies or gatherings] of the world" (p. 215).

In its simplest terms, "culture" is often defined as:

- ❑ "the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially by education;
- ❑ enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training;
- ❑ acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills;
- ❑ the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations;
- ❑ the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group;
- ❑ the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a company or corporation." (*Merriam Webster*, 2005)

These disciplinary definitions of culture suggest the common ways culture is conceptualized: learning; aesthetic development; socialization or acculturation; patterns; worldviews, or symbolic acts.

Educators also tend to interpret culture as multiculturalism and anticipate content that addresses the way different cultures around the world celebrate, tolerate, interact with and treat diversity and difference. This basically derives from the anthropological sense of the term. Cultural anthropologists, Beals, Hoiyer and Beals (1977) identify five major components of any cultural

system within society:

- ❑ a group or society consisting of a set of members.
- ❑ an environment or context where the members carry on characteristic activities.
- ❑ a material culture consisting of the equipment and artefacts used by the members
- ❑ a cultural tradition that represents the historically accumulated decisions of the members.
- ❑ the human activities, rituals, and behaviours emerging out of complex interactions among the members, the environment, the material culture and the cultural tradition.

The concept of *culture* was popularized through Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, published in 1869. Arnold defines culture broadly. Culture means considering people,

their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tones of their voices; look at them attentively; observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure, the words which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds. (p. 97)

But he also gives it a teleology or purpose:

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. (p. viii)

Culture can be reduced to symbols for guiding human action. For example, culture for Clifford Geertz is expressed in symbolic forms for communication and making meaning of the local world. Culture imposes meaning through semiotic means: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs" (1973, p. 4). Embodied in symbols, culture involves patterns or webs of meaning transmitted or extending to members, is and manifests as a system of inherited/transmitted conceptions. Geertz's webs of meaning or significance involve attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and practices, cultural customs, interactions, myths, rituals, and material constructions. Geertz theorized culture as the interconnections or webs of meaning among these components. This is similar to the way some cultural psychologists define culture. Others define culture as cultural studies theorists define it.

Culture can also be defined as a "circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is manifested in both individualized and social forms, and discourses are created, which make culture itself the object of inquiry and critical analyses. Rather than being viewed as a static force, the substance of culture and everyday life— knowledge, goods, social practices, and contexts— repeatedly mutates and is subject to ongoing changes and interpretations" (Giroux, 2004, p. 60).

Hence, cultural studies deals with culture a bit differently than anthropology. In cultural studies, culture is understood broadly as the production and circulation of meaning. This definition is drawn from the classic work of Raymond Williams, who we associate with the founding of cultural studies in the 1960s. An effective history of the word “culture” is found in his classic book *Keywords*.

Culture, then, has various meanings ranging from "whole way of life," "webs of meaning," "a 'tool-kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views," and "production and circulation of meaning," or a "toolkit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action. This "toolkit" definition is how the sociologist Ann Swidler (1986, p. 273) defines culture. She actually provides a very good analysis of varying definitions.

The challenge is to avoid:

1. a totalizing of the west, the east, or south, etc, recognizing the diasporic, hybrid, heteroglossia nature of culture at this point in time.
2. a privileging of one form of culture, high, middle, or low, or circulation of meaning over another.
3. an asymmetry of plural cultures and singular nature (alternative is the turn towards natures-cultures).

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What is Material Culture?

Excerpt from Shukla (2015), *Costume*: If material culture is defined as "culture made material" and dress is a form of material culture, then dress (or costume) can be read as material manifestations of culture. Costume requires creators, so study must recognize individuals and individual interpretations of the costume traditions, standards, and goals. In focusing on the individual in the creative act, material culture studies combine attention to the object— its form, technology, and aesthetics— with attention to contexts of production and performance, where influences, processes, and procedures of evaluation come together. In acknowledging the centrality of contexts, we note those that are visible and tangible and those that are hidden in the mind yet fill the acts and products with meaning. (Shukla, 2015, p. 249)

What is Cultural Studies?

Cultural Practices

Cultural studies aims to examine its subject matter in terms of **cultural practices** and their **relations to power**. Its constant goal is to expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices.

Cultural Contexts

Cultural studies is not simply the study of culture as though it was a discrete entity divorced from its social or political context. Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the **social and political context** within which it manifests itself.

Cultural Forms

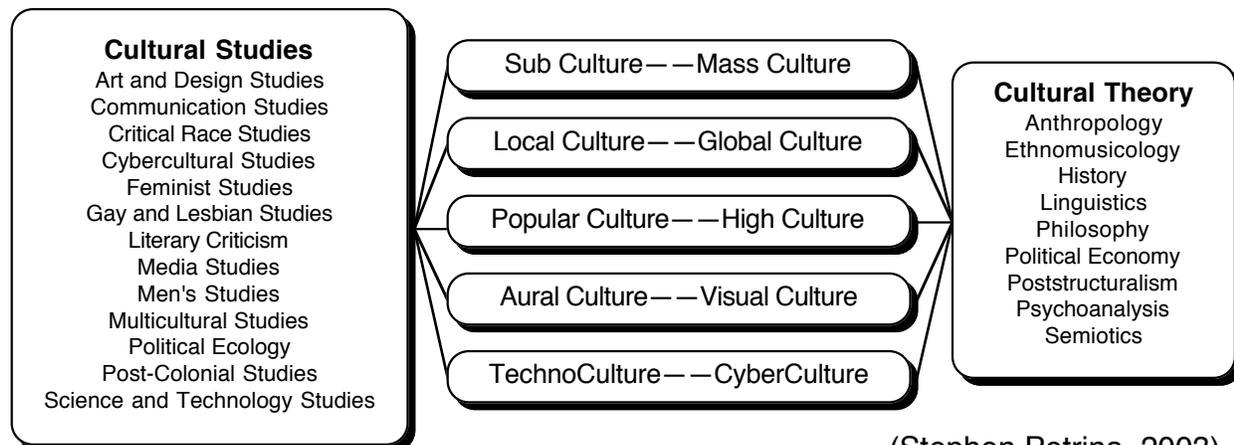
Culture in cultural studies always performs two functions: it is both the **object** of study and the **location** of political criticism and action. Cultural studies aims to be both an intellectual and pragmatic enterprise.

Cultural Theory

Cultural studies attempts to **expose and reconcile the division of knowledge**, to overcome the split between tacit (that is, intuitive knowledge based on local cultures) and objective (so-called universal) forms of knowledge. It assumes a common identity and interest between the knower and the known, between the observer and what is being observed.

Politics of Culture

Cultural studies is committed to a **moral evaluation of modern society and to a radical line** of political action. The tradition of cultural studies is not one of value-free scholarship but one committed to social reconstruction by critical political involvement. Thus cultural studies aims to **understand and change** the structures of dominance everywhere, but in industrial societies in particular. From Sardar, Ziauddin & Van Loon, Borin (1997). *Cultural Studies for Beginners* Cambridge: Icon Books, p. 9.



(Stephen Petrina, 2003)