

THE HISPANIC PRESENCE IN THE US: APPLICATION OF THE FIVE THEMES OF GEOGRAPHY TO DISCUSSIONS OF STEREOTYPES IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT: The study of geography is fundamental to the student's development of global awareness and international perspectives. In order to help students derive lasting benefits from their learning experience, we can integrate the study of geography with the study of culture. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate one application of the five central themes of geography to discussions of stereotypes in a foreign language classroom.

The development of intercultural sensitivity should be one of the main objectives of any foreign language course. Although the degree of sensitivity expected of students by instructors may vary according to the level of the course, the minimum expectation involves at least respect for and understanding of superficial cross-cultural customs and practices. The implication for students at this level is that all humans are basically the same; i.e., everyone is essentially like we are, with only superficial differences on the surface—a rather ethnocentric attitude. At this level students should ideally be able to recognize and explain everyday cultural patterns that include eating, shopping, work, marriage, and death, to name a few (Lafayette 1988).

At more advanced levels in the foreign language program, emphasis turns away from grammar and is placed more on culture and civilization through content courses. The objectives of these courses are to better prepare the students for intimate contact with the target culture and to provide them with a solid foundation on which they can evaluate the validity of statements about the target culture and thereby see beyond the stereotypes. Students at this more advanced level should at least accept cultural differences and ideally adapt or show empathy toward the target culture, which is ultimately the goal of cross-cultural training.

While developing, organizing, and gathering materials for an upper-level course intended for Spanish majors and minors at Elizabethtown College entitled *The Making of Modern Spanish Society*, I was immediately confronted with the challenge of discussing twenty nation-states to which the adjective "Spanish" can apply, if taken to refer to the language.

As a cultural term, the word "Spanish" is not appropriate to describe this course because it cannot encompass all aspects of contemporary society of many Spanish-speaking nations because the cultural heritage and influence on contemporary society, especially in Hispanic America, is not limited only to the culture of Spain.

Other schools with larger foreign language departments generally offer two courses related to civilization at the undergraduate level: one which addresses the culture and civilization of Latin America and another which studies the culture and civilization of Spain. Students in these programs should understand at the conclusion of either one of these courses why such

a division in the curriculum exists. One can speak of Latin American unity, despite the enormous diversity of the continent, both physically and culturally, because of the common historical movements, linguistic unity, sociological and psychological traits, and economic realities that each cultural group shares.

The comparable course at Elizabethtown College, however, is unique because its objective is to address important contemporary phenomena and issues which have shaped and continue to impact not only Spain and the nations of Latin America, but also the Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. The purpose is not to treat each area separately, or to merely compare and contrast, but to relate each area to another. However, without a basic structure on which to relate these ostensibly disparate subjects, the student is left with incomplete knowledge or, worse, bare generalizations regarding the people and their cultural practices that may ultimately reinforce stereotypes that some students hold to be true. In discussing, for example, the elements that unify the Hispanic world, I often cite religion. Most students immediately assume that all Hispanics are Catholics. It is true that historically the Hispanic world is Roman Catholic, but in practice only about 20% attend Mass regularly. Moreover, every Hispanic country has Jewish and Protestant populations, among others.

It is impossible to avoid generalizations when dealing with a topic as vast as this course proposes, but I have discovered that by adopting the five themes of geography as the overall conceptual framework of this course, students are better able to comprehend the complexities of the Spanish-speaking world. Harper (1990) denies that the five themes are a new form of geography, but he acknowledges that they are important to the study of geography, and he adds that they are also relevant to any subject that has a spatial component, such as history and earth science, to cite his examples.

Harper's interpretation of the theoretical and practical implications of the five themes should allay, however, the concerns of critics such as Cutter and Regulska (1987) who criticize educators who have little or no formal training in geography for discussing geographic concepts in the classroom. The purpose of the course at Elizabethtown is not to teach geography, but rather to infuse the concepts of the five themes as outlined in the Guidelines for Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools (1984) and to utilize them as guiding principles for the discussions related to the subject.

Interestingly enough, geography is generally treated in traditional culture/civilization courses as a separate unit. Students are exposed to a type of place-name geography in which they study the names and locations of large river systems, mountain ranges, capital cities, etc., but, generally, students fail to understand the significance of these facts or their relationship to other cultural topics. Fuson (1989) asserts that merely knowing the names and locations of places is not geography. In order to attain a deeper knowledge of the subject and to develop more than a passing acquaintance of the physical geography of a place, students need to understand the impact that geography has on other patterns of the target culture beyond the environmental sphere. Essentially, this is the larger role of geography in area studies—one that should be more than just a natural outcome after addressing the political, historical, and cultural movements of a nation-state.

As stated at the outset of this paper, the development of cultural sensitivity is one of the objectives of the course at Elizabethtown. One goal is to attain knowledge of a content area by first reacting spontaneously to it by exploring stereotypes in the classroom. An equally

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important goal is to make students keenly aware of the ethnocentric stages of intercultural sensitivity that one needs to surpass in order to more fully comprehend the culture and civilization of any group of people.

In approaching stereotypes, for example, students are asked to consider the term "Hispanic". What images does this term conjure, and to what group of people does it refer? Are Spaniards Hispanics? Are native Americans who live south of the Rio Grande and who cannot account for European ancestry considered Hispanics? It soon becomes clear that the word "Hispanic" is not a racial identity. Many Spanish-speaking peoples are black, white and brown. The term does, however, suggest a degree of cultural identity, but here also there are striking differences among "Hispanics" who, in the United States, have settled in distinct regions, including the Southwest, Northern New Jersey and New York City areas, and regions in Florida. How can the student comprehend these differences, and still understand why the term "Hispanic" is appropriate?

The five themes of geography can provide the structure and point of departure for discussion on this topic. By studying the themes of movement, region, location, place, and human-environment interactions, students begin to see patterns emerge among the distinct Hispanic groups in the US that resemble the homelands of these people. Moreover, students soon appreciate the subtle and sometimes stark differences among the patterns which help to dispel stereotypes in the Hispanic world.

The Census Bureau, preparing for the 1990 headcount encouraged the Hispanic communities in the US with the phrase, "Hagase Contar"—make yourself count. Although the attempt to achieve an accurate headcount using the slogan was admirable, and although the implication that Hispanics can become a powerful political force is true, the strength of the message may not be understood by all Hispanic communities. My students are aware now that there are no such things as Hispanic music, Hispanic foods, etc. I trust that this is an indication that they have abandoned their ethnocentric beliefs and have adopted ethnorelative approaches to the study of new cultures.

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