



Module – CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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1. Why teach this module?

As symbolic animals, humans invariably culture the world they inhabit. Cultural production refers to processes of reconstituting, transforming, or tinkering that ‘produce new conditions, grounded in a particular time and space and factual in their consequences’ (Varenne & Koyama 2011: 51).

This module addresses two examples of cultural production relevant to education. The first is the institutionalization of universal schooling, a culturing process that created local and global distinctions between ‘educated’ and ‘uneducated’ persons and between various kinds of ‘educated persons’. The module draws on ethnographies of schooling in Nepal and the Amazon to reflect on ways of understanding what it means locally to be seen as ‘educated’ or ‘schooled,’ and how local versions of ‘educated persons’ are contested.

The second example addresses ongoing cultural processes of producing, maintaining, redrawing or transcending symbolic boundaries of, for example, neighbourhood, community, ethnicity, class, nation, or other. This example highlights the symbolic work people do to mark or blur their perceived differences. It explores how people mark boundaries with ‘symbolic fences’ that create categories of difference that come to matter in people’s lives.

The module thus introduces to anthropological understandings of cultural production by focusing on how people make ideas of ‘being educated’ and ‘being different’ matter. It may be taught as one continuous module or as two separate modules.

2. Ethnographic Entry Points

Topic 1: Cultural production of the educated person

The first two texts in this set explore what constitutes ‘educated persons’ in vastly different contexts. (See [educated person](#)). Ethnographies of Ecuadorian forest people (Rival 1996) and squatters in Kathmandu (Valentin 2005) call attention to the intergenerational challenges of local cultural transmission and social coherence when ‘modern schooling’ becomes the only legitimate and recognized form of education. These ethnographies encourage students to reflect on modern schooling as one among many other forms of education, and to attend to national school history as well as the intergenerational production of ‘educated persons’ in their own families. Students may also explore societal perceptions of teachers as ‘educated persons’ and reflect on the status differences of primary, secondary and tertiary educators, or vocational, business and academic teachers.

Moving closer to home, Wolcott’s detailed article on the ‘sneaky kid’ (2002) calls attention to the ongoing cultural production of ‘inadequate schooling’ that leads to ‘inadequately educated youth’ and school drop-outs. The article allows reflection on how particular notions of ‘educated’ afford (or constrain) social mobility, create social hierarchy, and attribute authority and legitimacy. The article



calls for reflection on what constitutes ‘adequate schooling’ and how we might transform systems of education to achieve adequate schooling for all.

Topic 2: Cultural production of symbolic boundaries

Drawing on ethnographic studies of how intergroup boundaries are culturally produced and wielded in actual situations, the first two articles in this set discuss the dynamics of ethnic boundary making. Arguing that not all intergroup distinctions are drawn along ethnic lines, *the first article* illustrates this through the shifting strategies, contestation and situatedness of boundary work on the Croatian peninsula of Istria. Here different histories of migration and settlement affect how people negotiate, shift or blur boundaries between ‘other ethnic and ‘co-ethnic’ consociates, viewing for example other ethnics as fellow Istrians and co-ethnics as backward interlopers (Valenta and Gregurovic 2015). This work is useful for reflecting on how seemingly stable boundaries between ethnic groups shift with political, economic and demographic change, and on how distinctions based on education factor into both boundary marking (stigmatization) and boundary transcendence (acceptance).

The second article addresses schools as sites of constant boundary work in which categories of ethnicity and class are created and maintained, concealed or ignored, crossed or challenged. Discussing boundary work in a mixed-ethnic Israeli school with an ideology of ethnic integration, the authors contrast the *work teachers do* to neutralize ethnic boundaries and their political implications with the *work students do* to place their everyday experiences of interethnic tension squarely on the school’s agenda in an attempt to narrow the gap between ideology and reality (Tabib-Calif and Lomsky-Feder 2014: 22).

The final article *defines cultural production* as the ongoing interpretive work people do that creates the ground on which certain behaviours stand out in ways that are consistently and institutionally consequential. McDermott et al. (2006) posit that mainstream educational politics and the compulsive competitiveness of American education make American schools well organized to create hierarchy out of differences. They are also well organized to mix and match learning disabilities (LD) with minority status as American educators draw on a dual classification system that produces *kinds of persons* along ethnic, racial and linguistic lines and in relation to supposed mental abilities. An important point is that the *cultural production of children with LD* is embedded in the concerted activities of professionals – doctors, lawyers, psychologists, educators – and parents, who are all engaged in looking for and producing evidence of LD in educational settings designed to make symptoms of LD visible – particularly among minority students (McDermott et al. 2006: 12-13).

3. Ways of understanding

Classical anthropology’s interest in questions of cultural continuity and social cohesion led to studies of cultural transmission, enculturation, and acquisition that looked at how people pass on beliefs, language, customs, knowledge, values and worldviews from one generation to the next. It also led to studies of *social reproduction*, of how people maintain social structures, group continuity, and systems of stratification grounded in age, gender and social privilege. Both approaches can be found in ethnographic studies of childhood education and schooling. While some have engaged in detailed studies of core processes of cultural transmission, acquisition and learning, others have drawn on critically theories of social reproduction to study how educational systems reproduce class structures and perpetuate systemic cultural dominance and social inequality (cf. Levinson and Holland 1996).

The use of ethnographic methods forced the hand of scholars to move beyond deterministic theories of social reproduction. Rigorous ethnography had to reliably demonstrate how cultural forms play



out in educational settings where they are negotiated and contested by teachers and children alike. It also had to reliably demonstrate how children take on social hierarchies, how they appropriate, enact and negotiate privilege and inequality in everyday life.

Through this, anthropologists have come to understand culture as a process, as continually produced, even when seemingly 'reproduced'. This replaces understandings of culture as a static and unchanging body of knowledge 'transmitted' between generations. Emphasizing culture as a continual process of meaning-making in social and material contexts, cultural production allows us to explore, portray and interpret how "people actively confront the ideological and material conditions of their life in schools and beyond"(Levinson and Holland 1996: 13-15). It addresses the processes through which social actors actively and jointly produce cultural and social forms in particular times and places. From this perspective, both continuity and change are achievements, the outcome of the joint work or concerted action of all involved. This approach requires fine-grained and nuanced studies of the processes through which children as social actors gain knowledge of privilege and hierarchy and a sense of where and when to wield, resist or submit to it. Studies using this approach look closely at how children come to understand and discern racial, gender or ethnic differences and gain knowledge of which forms of boundary work are acceptable in particular situations.

The study of cultural production, of how people culture the world is open-ended in the sense that outcomes of this production are not predetermined; rather they remain to be found out. This approach allows for agency, contestation, situational complexity and serendipity without losing sight of the fact that humans are born into worlds-not-of-their-own-making, that human agency is always constrained by past arrangements, even as it always and inevitably makes the world anew.

4. Suggested Exercises

Preparation:

- Read the ethnographic articles carefully and familiarize yourselves with the *key concepts and arguments* and the *ethnographic* examples. Prepare for in-class discussion of these texts and how they are useful for thinking about educational concerns, issues and realities in your own country or local region.

Group work:

- **Educated person:** Divide the class into two or more groups:
 - **Group one:** Facilitate a discussion of the different ways in which you and/or people you know are seen as 'educated' (or not). Relate this to questions of status, authority and your own decision to become a teacher.
 - What does being seen as 'educated' imply for a person's access to particular jobs, goods, esteem and membership (or not) in the present situation?
 - Which kinds of knowledge, skill and behaviour comprise being 'highly' or 'adequately' educated in different settings and contexts?
 - Which forms of authority and legitimacy does 'being educated' bestow?
 - **Group two:** Search online for public debates on education in different countries/regions. Discuss understandings of 'the educated person' found in these debates and how they are contested.
- **Symbolic boundaries:** Divide the class into three or more groups:



- **Group one:** Drawing on Gullestad's concept of *Invisible fences* (1986), discuss how 'imagined sameness' (equality conceived as sameness) plays into the way people draw ethnic (or other) boundaries around national identity in your country.
- **Group two:** Based on the following quote: *the unintended consequence of a particular set of ideas may be the erection of 'invisible fences', even though the original, or conscious, motivation was precisely to eliminate them* (Gullestad 1986: 55)
 - Discuss one/two of the most important 'invisible fences' that operate in your school – despite efforts and policies to eliminate them.
 - How do these invisible fences work? Are they grounded in differences of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, seniority, subject matter, politics, or other? What keeps them in place?
- **Group three:** Using Barth and Gullestad as backdrops for your discussion:
 - Search online for a public debate about immigration. Carefully note the *categories* and *metaphors* (*dregs, invaders, decent folks*) people use to express their opinions about *kinds* of others.
 - Discuss the cultural *boundary work* people are doing by using these particular categories and metaphors in public debates. What kinds of boundaries are they trying to erect, maintain or transcend?

5. Learning Prospects

- Teachers will reflect on how they 'produce culture' in teaching and in everyday school life.
- Teachers will reflect on the systems of classification they draw on to interpret children's behaviour and learning and how their use of particular categories *cultures* the world.
- Teachers will reflect on themselves as 'educated persons,' how this positions them in local and global educational hierarchies and how these hierarchies are produced and maintained.
- Teacher will reflect on links between mainstream ideas of 'the educated person', pedagogical ideology, national curriculum, and understandings of the 'the adequately educated child.'
- Teachers will explore how particular versions of 'the educated person' are locally negotiated and contested.
- Teachers will explore the notion of 'boundary work' and reflect on kinds of boundary they mark in the local school setting.
- Teachers will reflect on the cultural production of ethnic (and other) boundaries in school settings and how they are marked, negotiated and blurred and who does what and how?

6. Literature

The cultural production of the 'educated person'.

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The cultural production of symbolic boundaries

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Further Readings

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