

Dear Sao Paulo Ten ( January 1999),

I really meant what I said to you on the last Friday afternoon of the course when you told me what sensory things made you know you were really back home again:

the differences between individuals within a cultural community are greater by far than the differences between one cultural community and another. Maybe one of my dissatisfactions in teaching a course around culture is that we spend most of our time exploring the inter-community differences rather than the inter-personal ones within our own group.

For me the richness of that now I am home exercise was amazing:

- I see my dog and the dog jumps all around me
- I go into my flat and I hear the echo as I am still getting things together
- It's the smell of my place, my sheets, my mother's place ( in the landlady's house the smell was what first met me at the door )
- I feel home the moment I get on the plane in the foreign airport with the sound of Portuguese
- The bustle and noise and feeling in the Sao Paulo airport lets me know I am home
- It's when I see the Brazilian border guard. He is so Brazilian. I don't like him.

These are not all the things said, but these are the ones that come effortlessly to mind at 7.00 am on Sunday morning, two days later.

It is striking ( to me) how culture permeates all aspects of life. Let's take those questionnaires you wrote for the Pilgrims administration: the evaluation of the training program gave these results: 3 mixed fours and fives

1 mixed ones and twos

6 straight fives ( 1 = bloody awful  
5 = very good )

Had this group been Swedish the fives would have been fours/threes , the fours would have been three/twos and the mixed ones and twos would have been straights ones.

The Italian " Ottimo" translates as the Swedish " Not bad " when it comes to evaluating courses.

The interesting thing is that my organisation does not take these vital cultural differences into

account and happily adds all the satisfaction/dissatisfaction numbers in one great pile, thus arriving at nonsense statistics- if Pilgrims were to lose all trainees from South America and the Northern Mediterranean and only welcome folk from Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden the same trainers would generate averages of 3.5 rather than 4.5. Thus does culture influence language school statistics.

With quite a number of the nationalities we deal with we really don't know how evaluation questionnaires affect them. I suspect that for some Japanese the request to evaluate the Sensei, the Master, is one that clashes with their strong feeling of respect for the Sensei role, however miserable the particular person filling it may be.

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I have made valiant efforts not to compare the 1998 Cultura group with you folk. Such comparisons are not really very useful, as each person is a universe. Yet ... one thing chamou-me a atenç~ao on Friday as we listened to the project thinking: the folk in 1998 chose their project topic and then got on with collecting data - one person had a finished, written product by the last Friday. In our group <sup>this year</sup> there was clearly much more thinking going on: I was thrilled as I listened to the way A█████'s thought evolved from working on the imaging of Britain to wondering creatively about how much your own school has followed the eddies of Thatcherite thinking and action over the past 15 years. For me the indecision over which project to do indicates a sincere and passionate approach to the subject.

If I were a participant I would want to do a project that I could use with my students, to do something that would feed directly into my teaching process (agreeing with R█████ and S█████). On the other hand, in trainer role, I reckon it is vital that project decisions should be completely free as it is right that teachers should sometimes forget their students and do something entirely for themselves.

Let me end this letter with a request that you do let me have a copy of the written part of your project, with an indication as to whether you would want it published in Humanising Lang Teaching, the Pilgrims Web mag. If so, please send a disk version, too. Bearing the potential worldwide audience in mind, I obviously must exercise editorial choice.

Mario.

Ps 1. Thank you for allowing me to spend three weeks in Southern to downtown Sao Paulo and a bit in Campinas too. ( Of course, R[REDACTED], nothing can beat the hot springs and small town charm of my favourite place in Brazil! ) I have hugely enjoyed the course- it is a rare privilege to be allowed to see your own, local place through the eyes <sup>of</sup> people from elsewhere, especially a well-defined elsewhere.

Ps2. I have had the feeling that the best thing to do with Italians is export them. They seem to be best out of Italy, mixed in with other folk as in Sao Paulo, New York and B. Aires. Maybe they are like Pisco Sour, you need to cut the pisco with plenty lemon. La distanza fra Alessandria e Mondovi/Ceva e di una centinaia di chilometri e tu, Claudia ti trovi a Sao Paolo mentre io sto qua sulle sponde del Creek. You enrich Brazil and I enrich Faversham. We are Piemonte's gift to the wider world, as S[REDACTED]a is Calabria's.

Ps 3. S[REDACTED], thank you for your gift of an outsize T shirt ( fits me to a tee) and a piece of jaggedly cut green stone that tells the time. Time has been a real cultural tussle between course organisers and course participants and so a clock is a wonderful present with an edge to it.

Ps 4 Whitstable fish restaurant: in our discussion I think I did two things:

- 1) listen to your various feelings and evaluations of the situation
- 2) suggest that one or two "spatial rules" in the host culture had been transgressed . ( I am not sure, given the emotional temperature at 4.30 ~~that~~ afternoon, whether those observations were fully heard )

My thinking at the time was in the personal/emotional area and the cultural. I did not have the dynamics of our group in mind.


In cool hindsight I guess weeks 1 and 2 were pretty honeymoony for a number of people in the group ( not for all ) but that week 3 saw us move into a time of group transition or "storming " . [ this is a very normal phase in group work, when you have got to know the

other participants a bit more for what you think they are, ditto the group leader and the task area.] The storm could not “break” within the group as we were very fragmented in Week 3 by the projects but ~~that~~ it was partly “lightening conducted” by the rudeness of the waitress. She offered us a safe, external scapegoat, in the same way that often a group participant or the group leader can become the target for group frustration ~~→~~ voiding.

This is just an additional element that I want to suggest now, and which was not clear to me at the time of the discussion. This is just one further hypothesis, neither more or less valid than waitress PMT, down-right waitress rudeness which would be seen as such in any culture{ here speaks S[REDACTED] in “universalist” mood }, incoming breaking of host culture spatial and auditory rules, being a waitress being such a shitty job that she had to take it out on us, etc.....

I enclose a reading on group dynamics.

Ate logo, com un abrac,o italo-brasileiro

  
Mario