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Daniel D. Pratt  
*The University of British Columbia*

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# An Analytical Framework for Cross-Cultural Studies of Teaching

Daniel D. Pratt  
The University of British Columbia

**Abstract: Working cross-culturally, whether defined by discipline, institution, community, or nation-state, inherently means working outside the familiar. The aim of this paper is to present an analytical framework through which to explore and understand different conceptions of teaching. The framework consists of three analytical categories: epistemic beliefs, normative expectations, and pedagogical procedures.**

## Introduction

*Culture is first and foremost a shared way of making sense of experience, based on a shared history ... Because a new culture takes them outside familiar meaning systems, individuals learning a new culture [or new conceptions] find themselves in situations where familiar ways of interpreting and acting are not reliable, yet others' ways of interpreting and acting are not fully accessible.*  
(Jacobson, p. 16)

For the past decade, colleagues and I have been studying conceptions of teaching. Working in several countries, we have studied nearly 400 teachers of adults, include teachers of adult basic education, accounting, automotive repair, Chinese classics, computer science, cooking, mathematics, English, pharmacy, physics, psychology, surgery, Tai Chi, and a host of other subjects. (e.g., Cheifitz, Pratt, and Wells, *under review*; Pratt, 1991; 1992; Pratt and Associates, 1998; Pratt, Kelly, and Wong, 1999) Using interviews, surveys, focus groups, and observations we have been trying to identify fundamental structures that might account for different conceptions of teaching across variations in discipline, institution, and culture.

Conceptions are culturally embedded reference points through which we make sense of, and give meaning to, the world around us. They are specific meanings we attach to experience or phenomena which then influences our behaviour. We form conceptions of virtually every aspect of our perceived world and use them to delimit something from, and relate it to, other aspects of our world. In so doing we tend to project our way of understanding, and even our forms of 'logic', into contexts in which those ways of understanding and reasoning may not be appropriate. Although common to many everyday situations, our conceptions are perhaps most 'uncommon' when working in another culture. When we cross cultural, linguistic, or even disciplinary boundaries we run the risk of unwittingly assuming *our* conceptions are *their* conceptions, in which case we often end up seeing others as only a shadow of ourselves.

Although our research teams generally included members of the disciplines and cultures which we were studying, we were faced with a persistent problem: How might we break free from our

own conceptions of teaching so as to better understand other conceptions of teaching? How might we avoid the imposition and rationalization of our own cultural, historical, or philosophical biases about teaching? Our search was for variation, not affirmation. How do conceptions of teaching vary and, more importantly, what are the structural properties of that variation?

In order to conduct our studies, across variations that we could only partially understand, we had to first identify that which we believed was essential to all conceptions of teaching. What elements or properties must be present for something to qualify as a conception of teaching? We concluded that any conception of teaching must address at least three constructs and sets of related questions:

Teaching: What does teaching mean; and what is the social role of a teacher?

Learning: What does learning mean; and what is the primary role of a learner?

Knowledge: What is to be learned; how will we know when that has been learned?

Underlying our approach, and the analytical framework that guided our research, was an assumption that conceptions of teaching are both individually and socially constructed. However, we also assumed that social constructions were more potent in this dialectical relationship than were individual constructions. Certainly, individual teachers bring unique personal attributes to their understanding of teaching, both in terms of how they go about teaching and what they believe about learning and knowledge. This is, in part, what makes teaching exciting and rewarding.

Yet, as much as we might want to recognize the power of individual agency and creativity there is a growing body of research that suggests the social is more potent than the individual when it comes to conceptions of teaching. Although there are as many idiosyncratic ways of describing teaching as there are teachers, there is a limited number of *substantively different* ways in which teaching can be understood. This assumption has been supported, both in our research and in a recent review of research on conceptions of teaching in higher education. (Kember, 1997)

Kember's review suggests there are very few significantly different conceptions of teaching, perhaps as few as four or five. While individuals espouse their own conceptions of teaching those beliefs and admonitions are apparently informed by, and are a reflection of larger social, cultural, historical, and/or disciplinary contexts within which people live and work. Indeed, for many teachers the ways in which they think about teaching are written and sanctioned by the social structures within which they live well before they are enacted by the person-as-teacher.

This is not surprising. Within each community of practice there is an accepted identity or social role of 'teacher' that precedes individual constructions, or skillful performances, of teaching. Individuals who wish to practice in those communities go about learning the scripts and roles of

teacher in ways that will give them legitimacy and membership within that community. For many teachers, much of what they do is judged on the basis of how well it conforms to particular 'cultures of teaching.' (Hargreaves, 1994) For Hargreaves, teaching cultures are comprised of "beliefs, values, habits, and assumed ways of doing things among communities of teachers who have had to deal with similar demands and constraints over many years" (p. 165). From this point of view, "there is not one global culture of teaching but myriad sub-cultures localized by place, context, subject content, and language." (Pratt and Nesbit, in press, p. 14) To be a 'good teacher' in one culture of teaching is not the same across all cultures of teaching. Thus, we assume conceptions of teaching are constructed, enacted, and judged within specific cultures of teaching, or communities of practice, often without questioning the norms or values of those communities.

Conceptions of teaching are, therefore, a mix of individual perceptions of what is sanctioned by the community as well as what fits one's individual style. Yet, even within this balancing of the personal and communal there is a tendency to regress toward the mean and conform to:

**Epistemic Beliefs**, that is, the community's beliefs about the authorized knowledge in a field or discipline; **Normative Expectations**, that is, expected roles and responsibilities for teachers in a community of practice; and **Pedagogical Procedures**, that is, what are considered effective forms of practice.

Our analytical framework focused on the mix of epistemic beliefs, normative expectations, and pedagogical procedures related to the constructs of teaching, learning, and knowledge. We assumed these to be common and necessary to all conceptions of teaching, yet not so binding as to lead us to re-discover variations on our own ways of construing teaching. What follows next is an elaboration on the analytical framework, with examples of findings that differentiate between conceptions of teaching within each analytical category.

### **An Analytical Framework**

Epistemic Beliefs. Epistemic beliefs are related to the nature of what one is teaching, the aims or purposes for education, the nature of learning, and the kinds of evidence that are acceptable when making claims about what people have learned. These beliefs may arise from traditional cultures and/or from one's profession, discipline, or vocation. In terms of the central constructs of teaching, learning, and knowledge, this dimension of teaching addresses such questions as:

What is considered valid knowledge?

Who is considered authoritative?

How does a person gain knowledge?

Who is the best judge of learning?

What kind of evidence attests to learning?

Some of the epistemic beliefs arising from our work that differentiate between conceptions of teaching, across variations in culture, discipline, and institutional contexts refer to:

*Weak/strong categorization of knowledge*

*Role of basics or foundational knowledge*

*Locus of responsibility for learning*

*Type and role of examination and assessment procedures*

Each of these findings, in some way, refers back to the initial constructs of teaching, learning, and knowledge.

Normative Expectations. Normative expectations of teaching refer to one's social identity, position, and duty as teacher. Normative expectations about teaching are learned from living within specific historical, political, cultural, and institutional contexts. As with epistemic beliefs, these expectations are often received and reproduced without challenge or question. Specifically, they inform our understanding of how a particular conception of teaching defines appropriate roles, responsibilities, and relationships.

In terms of the three central constructs of teaching, learning, and knowledge, we were interested in the following: What is expected of the teacher in this setting, with this content, and

with these learners? And, what is expected of the learners? Some of the normative issues that arose from our studies include:

*Nature of a teacher's authority*

*Duty and responsibility as teacher*

*Responsibilities inside and outside class*

*Nature of relationship with students*

*Moral aspects (heart) of teaching*

Again, these further elaborate the central constructs of teaching, learning, and knowledge and give insight into the next category: pedagogical procedures.

Pedagogical Procedures. Conceptions of teaching also suggest appropriate pedagogical procedures, that is, teaching actions or approaches (the what and how of teaching). Throughout our research, data collection and analysis was guided by asking, "What's going on here?" In each case we assumed that what appears to be happening may be misleading; events that look the same may be interpreted differently, depending on one's point of view. This is particularly important when evaluating teaching. Under the press of evaluation, pedagogical procedures are

often judged appropriate only if they are consistent with dominant values and social norms within a profession, discipline, vocation, or society. (Pratt, 1997; Pratt and Johnson, 1997) Thus, within this framework pedagogical procedures are interpreted in terms of the social norms and values that are being enacted.

Again, within our work some of the pedagogical procedures that were related to epistemic and normative dimensions of teaching included:

*Use of instructional time*

*Nature of the instructional process*

*Nature of feedback to students*

*Ways of adapting to group or individuals*

*Ways of questioning students*

*Ways of responding to students*

However, the beliefs and expectations beneath procedures are essential to interpreting the actions above. Consequently, pedagogical procedures are understood to represent only the visible tip of any conception of teaching.

### **Summary**

It would be a mistake to assume we are only talking about studies of teaching which explore cultural differences within or between nation-states. While those are common forms of reference for cross-cultural studies, we think it is useful to remember Hargreaves' admonition that there are many 'cultures of teaching.' They may be defined by disciplinary, professional, or institutional affiliation that represent communities of practice characterized by different beliefs, values, habits, and assumed ways of doing things. As such, we must start with the assumption that other conceptions of teaching are likely to be qualitatively different from our own. If we are to understand substantively different conceptions of teaching we need analytical tools that will allow us to remain open to meaning systems that are strange or even challenging to our own ways of thinking and valuing.

Thus, working cross-culturally, whether defined by discipline, institution, community, or nation-state, inherently means working outside the familiar. The aim of this analytical framework is to provide a rigorous, wide angle lens through which we can embrace and understand conceptions of teaching that lie outside our own meaning systems. Rigor is essential if our work is to be credible in identifying variations in the nature and quality of teaching; equity is important if the framework is to be fair across cultural, disciplinary, and institutional contexts. We have found the framework to be flexible and parsimonious, providing a useful language and set of constructs by which to talk about teaching, whether researching or evaluating it, cross-culturally.

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