

**TEACHING IN A CROSS-CULTURAL SETTING:  
MAC Region  
Wednesday, July 12  
Ruben Fernandez**

Representatives from the region that includes Mexico, Central America and Panama are happy to be in this historic event with you.

We are forming a great team in the MAC Region. I want to present those that accompany me in my team this afternoon. First, I would like to remember Rev. Banos who is not with us. Although they told us in Costa Rica he would not have any problems when we arrived in Johannesburg, he was not permitted to enter the country. He is from Costa Rica and El Salvador and he coordinates the theological education by extension in the MAC South area.

I would like to also present Rev. Gabriel Lopez. He is district superintendent of a great district in Chiapas, Mexico. He is also a professor with the Masters degree program, an extension from Costa Rica, and he is the coordinator for this Masters degree program for all of Mexico.

I would like to present Rev. Rene Jimenez. He is also from Mexico. He is the area director for all of Mexico. He also works teaching and other functions in theological education. He is also part of the administrative board of the Mexican seminary.

For these days of presentation we have tried to divide the task among us and for our session now, “Teaching in a Cross-Cultural Setting”, I don’t think there is anybody who is more capable to share this type of theme with us than our sister Veora “Cookie” Tressler. She is Cookie for

friends. If you call her by her real first name, she is not going to respond. She has a lot of experience as a missionary, and is one of the few missionaries, and I'm a third generation Nazarene, that has converted herself into a real Latin American. Sometimes I forget and believe she is from Guatemala. Another missionary like that is Dr. Mary Lou Riggle.

Another one of her characteristics is that she has taught multi-culturally. You might know that in Guatemala there are over 26 people groups and different languages. She has taught several "chi" groups.

The third reason why I believe she is more indicated to give this topic is because she is a person who has passion for theological education. She breathes theological education. I think she sweats theological education. She is academic dean of our seminary in Guatemala. It is a privilege for me to present Dr. Cookie Tressler for this afternoon.

Cookie Tressler: We are going to talk this afternoon about teaching in a cross-cultural or multi-cultural situation. Ruben has told you that in Guatemala there are 26 different language groups. What he didn't tell you was that while I was teaching all those "chi" people, and other language groups, I was teaching them in Spanish. I don't speak 26 other languages. I'm not sure what I say in Spanish sometimes. But since it is the language of the heavens I'm assured of being able to talk to Jesus when I get there.

In Mexico, the Mexican brothers have told me there are at least 50 different language groups. That means in our region we are working in 76 language groups. What I would ordinarily do would be to teach classes to the "chi" brothers and sisters. They would go back to their extension centers and teach in their language. We are waiting for the day when we have "chi" missionaries

who have to learn Spanish or English to go someplace like the United States and earn their deputation funds. That will really be a fun moment won't it?

I want to say a few things and then the gentlemen are going to help me answer some questions and you are too.

The classroom for us, when I teach in my residence school – it's not really my school, but the school that God allows us to run in Guatemala – I will have Indians from 4 or 5 different Indian groups, as well as people who do not speak anything but Spanish. They, themselves, with all love and respect for them, do not really understand each other. Sometimes we solve problems just simply understanding how to say something theologically so that they can understand each other.

Another language difficulty is, if you are the missionary, you are probably still thinking quite a bit in English. If your students are predominantly one of the Indian or ethnic groups, they are still thinking quite a bit in the language that is their mother tongue but listening to my Spanish. So, we have four different cultures working in that scenario. So there may be many, many cultures in that classroom.

But we try to emphasize in our seminaries throughout our region that the classroom, itself is a microcosm of the larger culture, and you know that as educators, and at the same time a subculture. So sometimes when we come, us folks from the United States as Westerners, we consider that giving the material to the students is more important than working on communicating values, or attitudes, or norms of behavior and behavior in that classroom itself. Those things are often overlooked simply because we have a cultural block to each other.

In order to provide what would be effective instruction in a cross- or multi-cultural situation we really have to become educators – pedagogist. We have to become linguists. We have to become psychologists. Only then, if we attempt to do that will the larger cultural context also become a part of the subculture of the classroom. Now, that is a challenge.

Who’s culture are you going to adopt? Are you going to take your culture to them? Are you going to adopt their culture?

I lived and worked for five years in Costa Rica. A friend from Costa Rica came to visit me in Guatemala. In the Spanish language there are three ways to say you. My friend spoke to me in Bose. My students were very offended that a “Latina,” a Latin person would speak so to me. By using this form of address it would mean that we are, I don’t know how to say it in English, “chums,” the very best of buddies. I had a rough time explaining to my students that she and I had become spiritual partners, prayer partners in Costa Rica and it was okay that she was speaking to me in Bose. They didn’t want to ever hear that again. They have white people and missionaries on some kind of a different hemisphere. We don’t breath air. We never eat hamburgers and we certainly never have problems. So that in itself is a situation that we have to learn to deal with.

So what culture are you going to adopt? Are you going to use your culture to reach them? You probably won’t be able to do that effectively. Are you going to adopt their culture? I’m not sure you really can adopt their culture. I would to God that I were from Guatemala. I would love to crawl into their brains and think like they think. Because, quite frankly, they think spiritually in a very different and much more sensitive, and effective way than I was trained to do by pastors or Sunday school teachers in the United States.

Let's talk about perceptions. The gentlemen are going to pass out some papers to you. Let's look at some of the perceptions that happen when you are working in an educational situation.

One of the problems for an outsider teaching in Latin America is speaking too fast. I can't imagine that I can speak Spanish fast, but I'm told that I do. The first few times it occurred, I didn't have any concept of what was happening. There would have a thing that resembled a blackboard and I'm supposed to write on this with this enormous, horribly bad, dusty piece of chalk. The students would stop me and say, "Would you please tell us how to spell that word." I would reply "Oh, don't worry about that word. It's not important. Just get down the main words."

They have been taught in Guatemala to write down every word the teacher says. The teacher knows. The teacher is the person who is going to give them what they need to know. This goes on from grade school years, up to and through the university. I would say to them, "You don't need to copy everything I say." Their reply was "Well, how will we learn?" The other thing is they wouldn't have had the books to do any of the reading. They want to take home a tool. They want to have something to reflect about later on. They don't do a lot of reflection in class. So they are justified in asking me to slow down and to spell words.

Let's look first at the perception of the teacher. In cross-cultural, multi-cultural ministry just being told there are differences doesn't mean you will remember that when you enter that classroom. If you've been teaching for a few years, or many years in the United States, or Canada or in Europe, and you go to another country to teach, I can guarantee you will fall back in the tradition that you learned under, were taught under and possibly were taught how to teach under.

Learn from observing them. They will be your teachers. Some of them will try to lead you astray but they will be your teachers. They are the best way for you to learn. Watch them. Spend time with them. They live, and they are, the culture. Why would you want to simply be told or read about it? Learn from them. Watch how they interact.

Let's look at "Social Distance Between Student and Teacher." In 1980, in the city of San Jose, the very first week I was teaching classes and I was being taken around by a female student to help me buy some supplies for my house. I was really quite shocked when the Latin girl, who was just probably just a little bit less tall than I am, grabbed my hand and wanted to walk down the street with me. In Jerome, Pennsylvania women don't walk around holding hands and I pulled my hand from her. When I looked at her face I realized I had made a grave error. No matter how many times I said, "excuse me" it didn't matter. I had rejected her from wanting to walk around the streets and seeing that I walked in the right places and got to the right places and to take care of me. What is the social distance, what's the rule for distance between students and teachers?

How do you value respect and politeness, reverence for authority, how does that affect teaching? Do you have to respect the teacher to learn from them? Is that respect interpreted in such a way that the student can never or would never think of having a different opinion than you do?

I have students who will not discuss. If I just play devil's advocate, and throw out some ridiculous question or statement, they just will look at you. How do you gauge the rules for deference?

How much space between you and me is proper to allow? What is informal and what is formal in the classroom situation. What should be? Let's get real basic here. What forms of address do you

use? We aren't supposed to be saying doctor this week correct. It's really easy for Al Truesdale to call me Cookie. But, it's not real easy for me, coming from Pennsylvania to call him Al.

After I had been on the mission field a couple of years I was visiting a professor's home while doing deputation. We went to the beach to play Frisbee. When we played Frisbee and he missed it I said "Doctor." He said "Please, don't call me doctor." I thought "But, my mother must be listening." And she told me never to do that to, excuse me, "older people" and people that had accomplished certainly more than I had.

So, what do they say to you? How do they address you? I never hear my name in Guatemala without the word "sister" in front of it. Never. I'm sister to everyone. They will never call me doctor for which I'm thankful. But when I taught at the university they referred to me by a title. They knew the boundaries. In the church the correct term is brother or sister – always. Visiting in the home of one of my students, 8-10 years after she graduated, she said to me "Cookie" and her mother corrected her. She is a 33 year-old woman and her mother said "This is Sister Cookie. This is not just Cookie."

What are student's visitation patterns with you? Do they just stop by your office to chat? Are they only allowed to come when they have an appointment? Do they stop by your house? On this campus teachers live here. I wonder if students just freely go and knock on the door and say "I don't have any tea. I'd like some."

Do they just drop in and out of your office? Do they have to knock? Do they have to ask the secretary if they can come and see me? What is allowed in the culture you live in?

What things do you tell other people? What is okay to tell other people? What is not okay to tell other people about your life? That really sets up different cultures among us immediately.

In your culture or subculture or multi-culture you are working in, to what degree is the teacher perceived as the authority figure? They may be so perceived as the authority figure that they perhaps take the place of parents or even the state. How does that affect the classroom environment?

Does the teacher dominate the classroom activities? I agree that lecture is important a lot of the time to get information to them. But are you the only one that is allowed to talk? Are they allowed to stop you? Are they allowed to question you? Are they allowed to interrupt? If Latins weren't allowed to interrupt we probably would never get anywhere.

The other area would be the teacher as mentor. Does your culture that you're working in, or your own culture, understand the idea of mentor? When I say that in Spanish, they say "Oh, somebody who is a tutor." No, not only being a tutor. That's only part of being a mentor.

These are things that affect the way you are going to interact with your students. Allow them to interact with you. Will they respect you less if you just throw all that away. Will they really respect you? You have to try and understand that. You can only understand that by doing it by trying and failing, experiencing it and moving on.

Let's go to number 2 - examine performance expectations. Is it a competitive style vs. a cooperative style? Are they in competition one with another? I asked a couple of students what they thought about that before we left. One of them said to me "I just hate working in groups cooperative style." I said, "Well, tell me why." "Cause only one person ever does the work and

I'm tired of being the one person who does the work. You know I don't mind working in groups if everyone does their job but invariably people don't do their job. So I would rather you just give us the work to do by ourselves."

There exist different expectations of performance across cultures. For our purposes let's look at 4 areas:

Attitudes about time.

What are the attitudes about time? How does your attitude about time affect your teaching. Latins are known for going late everywhere. How does time affect the bells that ring in your institution? I'll tell you something. In Guatemala we don't have any bells. Once we lost a U.S. director, we lost the bells.

Here I want to ask one of the gentlemen from Mexico. So Brother René. How does time affect you or doesn't it affect you or do you think I'm crazy because I want to be on time.

"It has been said that Mexicans usually arrive late. He is always arriving 10 or 15 minutes after the hour. There is no problem. For education that is something we are working on always. In education we need to make an extra effort to be on time."

Okay, Brother René, tell me how you react when your students come late to class.

"We take that into consideration when we give out notes. If he arrives a few minutes late, he will have a tardy. If he arrives too late, he will be absent although he might be there

for the end of the class. He might have to do an extra task, an extra assignment, because he has been late too often.”

Okay, so time is not too important to him if he goes to church a few minutes late. But when his students come to class late, he gets his grade marked down. How conflictive is that? I mean, they do that all the time. The Latin teachers are harder on the student about time than the “gringa.”

Brother Gabriel, he’s the angel among us. How much time or homework is appropriate for your students?

Since I have taught at three levels things are different. At the beginning of each class we make sure that each student knows what are the rules for the class and they accept them. I have discovered in my experience that the key is the professor. If he arrives on time then the students arrive on time as well. An example that we have is when we receive professors from outside our country who come to teach they are usually right on time. As a pastor I began our service beginning with who ever was there punctually and then we had our Sunday school.

I went to teach a class in Honduras a couple of years ago and I thought I had really arrived. I passed all the missionary tests. When I went to the center to teach the class and one student came and he arrived about an hour and one-half late. I was supposed to have about 10 students that morning. When we called the district superintendent, who was the educational coordinator, in another city, to ask him what had happened he said, “ I didn’t think they would do that to you. They do that to us Honduran teachers all the time.”

So exactly what our brother is saying. They set up standards among themselves. If the guy comes from Chili to teach the class they are going to receive him in a different way than the Mexican who is living in that center. I don't know what that says but you better learn in our culture to work with that or you're lost completely.

Next, let's talk a little bit about performance. What about students consciously working toward the achievement of their own personal goals? Has their culture allowed them to see that they can have, they need, they should have their own personal goals? Do you want them to be working to attain your goals because they came and said they are going to be a pastor? What happens if now, they truly understand God's will and they are not supposed to be a pastor. Are you going to make them stay there because they said they'd be a pastor? You going to force them to stay there because you just need those numbers?

Do we really encourage our students? Do they understand what goals are? Do we encourage them to develop their own goals? Do they understand why it is, other than just "I'm going to be a preacher," why they're studying in a theological institution?

We've come to the point in Latin America, at least where I live, when a mother has come to me and said, "Sister Cookie, what am I going to do?" "I don't know, Sister." "My son told me today he's going to be a pastor." So, I did the proper thing and gave her this really joyous hug. She said. "No, I don't want him to be a pastor. He'll be poor the rest of his life." Do they really understand that, obviously the first day they walk through the door. But, do they understand that the day they walk out the door or out of their extension center?

Observations regarding Student teacher interaction.

We talked about this a little bit so we are not going to dwell here. How much should the student be able to talk in classroom, even is lecture is your main method, and it probably is your main method, of teaching?. How much is proper for students to be involved? And I don't mean students being involved in wasting time, but telling jokes, you know having a good time. That's wonderful, but how much time is appropriate?

How much time do I allow them to respond to a question without giving them the answer? If time passes and passes and passes and there is this awful thing called silence what do you do? (There is never silence in Latin America. They like noise whether it is chickens, fire crackers or radios, they like noise.) You know what will often happen? The student next to him will say "I know the answer. Let me answer" because they don't want him or her to be embarrassed.

How much time do you work with them so they know how to think, how to grapple with the question and how to respond. Not only come up with a correct answer but react with you and with their classmates. Now I've found when they are responding to me they will take a lot more time but if they are responding to each other you can't keep them quiet.

Gestures. There are things I don't do in America Latina that I used to do in the United States. There are movements I don't make in Latin America that I used to make in the United States. What gestures are appropriate? Do your students gesture appropriately? I don't teach without moving something. How much movement is proper? How much is improper? Lots of movement would be important in my area. In Mexico, no; in India, no; in the city, yes, very dynamic.

In Guatemala we're in the race to figure out if we are singing hymns or choruses and whether we have worship groups or the old fashioned choirs. We clapped our hands in Costa Rica. We moved, we jumped and we got into the spirit. We were happy people. And then I got to

Guatemala. I was sitting beside the missionary in chapel who was going to introduce me as the new missionary. We were singing and I was clapping. I realized that nobody else was clapping. The senior missionary said, “We don’t do that in Guatemala.” That missionary needs to return to Guatemala now because if you don’t clap they say, “What’s the matter - lose your salvation?” So in 15 years that has all changed.

What topics are appropriate to discuss? Are there things they are going to discuss with me or are there things they are not going to discuss with me because I am female teaching them. The first time I show up to teach I know many of my students are completely uncomfortable, especially if it is a predominately Indian group. So I have to get their respect somehow. I wear a dress. I have to be a lot more polite than I would be in Pennsylvania. I have to take a lot more time to greet each and every one of them. I have to wait and see what it is they want to talk about. Maybe that’s okay when you’re teaching theology or Bible but what about when you are teaching courses on health, prevention of disease? Can you really just talk about body parts? We don’t talk about body parts in Latin America.

What’s appropriate to discuss or not discuss. What are appropriate jokes? What’s appropriate crossing the sexual lines? What do Latin men talk about that they are not going to talk to me about? What simply can I not discuss with them without offending them or losing my ministerial license to be a minister there. What is appropriate about physical interaction?

How many times do you say hello? How many times do students say hello to you? If you walk from your office to the library say 4 times a day every time I see a student, even if it is the same student, I must speak. If I don’t they will say, “They’re mad. What happened to him today? How come he’s not talking to me? You gringos don’t speak to anybody do you? What’s the matter with you?” I said, “She said hello to you this morning.” “Well, that was 5 hours ago” – or 3

hours ago or an hour ago. So, how many times do we greet each other and how do we greet each other?

I'm going to distribute another sheet that has a little hand plastered on it there. I want you to pair up with somebody next to you. For the next 5 to 7 minutes I want you and your partner to discuss the things listed under "some hands-on food for thought." The proverbs on the sheet you can read at your leisure.

Cookie closed their presentation by asking the meaning of the proverb "the teacher talks until the monkey goes to sleep." He never stops. Some things are just so important that you have to keep going whether the students are going to get them or not.