The Culture of the Classroom in Portugal and the United States

By Cornelius Lee Grove

Photo by Heyward Associates

A blending of the ages as schoolchildren of today stroll through the grounds of the 10th century Castle of Guimaraes.

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In comparing the cultures of schools in Portugal and the United States, two features are strikingly different. These concern the social freedom and the pedagogical freedom allowed the students. In Portugal, students have almost unrestricted social freedom but extremely limited pedagogical freedom. In the United States, conversely, students have very little social freedom while enjoying a vast amount of pedagogical freedom. In spite of individual differences among teachers in both countries, this generalization may be taken as the basic working principle in the understanding of the cross-cultural problems of immigrant Portuguese students in American schools.

What are the behavioral parameters of this cross-cultural difference? First, the student attends school in her or his native land, Portugal. Outside the classroom door, he is assumed to be quite capable of looking after himself. While he is in *escola primária* (primary school), it is quite unusual for him to be overtly monitored or regimented by his teachers; if and when he goes to the *liceu* (secondary school), it is unheard of. Not only is the Portuguese student allowed to move about at will throughout most areas of the school and campus, but he is free even to leave the school grounds if he wishes. His movements are of no concern to the school authorities because a feature of the culture of the school in Portugal is that school personnel do not feel responsible on a moment-by-moment basis for the welfare and safety of the students. Responsibility for the students' welfare and safety belongs to the students themselves, and there are numerous indications that they discharge this responsibility admirably well.

But when the student crosses the threshold of the Portuguese classroom, his freedom ends. Pedagogically speaking, the student is treated by his teacher as though he were ignorant, not in terms of native intelligence but in terms of acquired knowledge. As unknowledgeable, the student cannot possibly have anything of value to contribute to the lesson. He is expected to sit silently, to listen respectfully, to take copious notes, and thus to learn under the wise and informed academic guidance of the professor.

Now this same student immigrates to the United States and begins attending school. Here he finds that he is assumed to be

so irresponsible and prone to mischief that he requires almost constant adult supervision in order to insure the safety of himself, his peers and school property. Like all other students in American schools, he is regimented and regulated in numerous ways, and his movements are a subject of continuous concern to school authorities. The notion that he might be free to leave the campus is entertained in very few American schools. He is constantly monitored in the cafeteria, in the halls and on the playground. In short, the Portuguese student finds that he has unwittingly transferred into a custodial institution. He finds his treatment here humiliating.

But the immigrant students finds another marked change not so difficult to accept: His individual contributions to the lesson are valued and may be solicited. It is considered seemly for him to ask questions, express opinions, offer information and discuss issues, and within certain limits he may even display emotion and openly disagree with the teacher. Such ways of doing things are exceedingly rare in Portugal, but most Portuguese students in America find little difficulty in adjusting to this new state of affairs. The pedagogical freedom of the American classroom is highly preferred to the Portuguese way, which more than one immigrant student has described in terms of *rei e escravos* (king and slaves).

The Portuguese erect significantly fewer obstacles barring children from the adult world than do Americans.

Let us return now to my point that students in Portugal are considered unknowledgeable by their teachers. I said — and now I want to argue more positively — that in spite of being considered unknowledgeable, the Portuguese student is *not* assumed to be unintelligent. Pursuing this thought further may also shed some light on American culture and educational practice. Consider the following:

- Portuguese schools move at a distinctly rapid pace in introducing new topics (for example, multiplication and division are taught in first grade, syllabication is taught in second grade, and so forth).
- Exams in Portugal are based almost exclusively on the ability to recall, not the ability to merely recognize.
- Exams in Portugal may cover as many as three years of study in as many as fourteen different subjects.
- There is very little solicitous intervention of Portuguese teachers in assisting students to learn.
- Portuguese students are expected to make a great deal of headway in their lessons through individual study of textbooks at home.
- Corporal punishment is administered not for disciplinary infractions, but for unwillingness or inability to keep up with the expected pace of learning.

Now could we say, comparatively speaking, that American teachers assume their students to be knowledgeable but unintelligent? As evidence that they consider them knowledgeable, we might point to the pedagogical freedom commonly found in American schools. And as evidence that American students are considered unintelligent, we might note that in our schools we move at a relative snail's pace in introducing new substantive material; that we forever exhort classroom teachers to do the impossible by devoting individual attention to the special needs of each and every student; and that we base our tests and exams more upon recognition than upon recall.

However, it is too simplistic, I believe, to conclude that American teachers consider their students to be knowledgeable but unintelligent. My hunch is that the evidence in the previous paragraph points not toward such a conclusion, but rather toward the workings of two features of American deep culture. These are the American emphasis upon operational thinking and the American tendency to adore and (over)protect children.

Operational thinking refers to the organization of perception and cognitive processes into a form that enables the individual to *act*. It stresses results and consequences, not the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. It values the pragmatic, avoiding the theoretical and regarding ideology with suspicion Operational thinking is based upon inductive reasoning which begins with facts and goes on to make inferences, to test hypotheses and, in general, to be open to the possibility that experience may alter one's conclusions. Operational thinking is the American way of approaching cognitive material, and the pedagogical characteristics of American schools are quite well-suited to promote operational thinking: Classroom procedures tend to emphasize learning by doing, verbal trading of ideas and experiences, and questioning — not only of students by the teacher, but also of the teacher by the students. All this takes time and inevitably slows down the pace of learning. It also eliminates the possibility of having only one point of view, the teacher's, expressed.

As for tests and exams, those of the objective variety are based more on recognition than on recall. Consequently, a premium is not put on the ability to memorize and regurgitate, which is scarcely a mode of learning that stresses practical consequences and openness to experience. Even more promotive of operational thinking are essay or "subjective" exams, especially those asking the student to compare and contrast, to adopt a point of view and defend it, or to relate one set of facts to another. Incidently, this type of exam usually will cause the immigrant Portguese student to feel very much at a loss as how to proceed. For only rarely are such exams given in Portuguese schools.

Operational thinking appears not to be valued in Portugal nearly to the degree that it is here. Portuguese classroom procedures are much better geared for dispensing knowledge for knowledge's sake, for emphasizing facts and the theoretical, and for approaching cognitive material on the basis of deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning emphasizes the manipulation of given facts through the use of logical processes, playing down the lessons of experience and showing little interest in practical consequences. Such an approach to learning easily dispenses with points of view other than those of the teacher and the textbook, so that the class can move ahead much faster from topic to topic. In addition, Portuguese examinations are typically based on recall. Rote memorization, therefore, is the most efficient way in which the student may acquire the material upon which he is to be tested.

The ideal is for American children to enjoy their childhood, no less in the school than in the home.

Turning now to the matter of the American tendency to adore and (over)protect children, we should note that, in spite of the explicit value placed on initiative and self-reliance in our culture, Americans erect numerous barriers intended to bar children from the adult world for as long as possible. The institution of the babysitter serves this function admirably. Children are protected from bad news, the facts of sex and quarreling parents. They are prohibited by law from working until an advanced age, relative to other cultures including that

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always popular since it involves knowing a foreign language or two.

In summary, these are the advantages of transparency: makes complex issues more understandable and, therefore, more manageable; reduces myths, fear, emotion, prejudice, conjecture and aggression; creates credibility and confidence inside and outside the corporation; corrects and repositions image; attracts the brightest, most service-oriented young people, those who prefer to work for a socially conscientious company; opens up channels of communications, providing valuable feedback; promotes detente and cooperation among business, government and educational institutions, employees, shareholders, unions, journalists, etc.; encourages ethical behavior because of the knowledge that actions will become transparent.

The alternative to transparency is to do nothing. One can always find reasons for doing nothing. But this is not even a temporary solution. It's an invitation for governments and other critical factions to increase pressure and limit corporations' activities. Just consider the many government regulations that might have been prevented by greater transparency.

Transparency may not be a panacea for avoiding aggression altogether. But it is logical that voluntary transparency reduces the possibility for aggression — and it's much easier on a corporation than forced disclosure. Moreover, the decision to be voluntarily transparent will affect governmental attitudes with respect to inducements versus taxation and regulations. Settlements imposed on losers are usually much harsher than those arrived at voluntarily. ■

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"He says he got that one from a goalie in Montreal."

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of the Portguese. American parents, especially those belonging or aspiring to the dominant middle class, feel that they must listen to their children, solicit their opinions and feelings, and run a more or less democratic home.

Now I do not believe that Portuguese parents are entirely different from American parents. What I do believe is that the Portguese not only erect significantly fewer obstacles barring children from the adult world, but also implicitly assume their children to be mature and responsible individuals at a comparatively early age. No doubt economic factors are involved here. For whereas the dominant middle class in America expects, and can afford, to sacrifice for its children for a long time (especially between ages 18 and 21 while the child is at college), the dominant lower class in Portugal is compelled by its poverty to view its children as an economic asset beginning at about age 14.

Not surprisingly, the child rearing patterns that find expression in the home also find expression in the school — to arrange matters differently would be to risk a disjuncted culture. And since American parents are comparatively indulgent with their children, wanting them to be happy, expressive and self-actualized, American teachers take a similar approach in the classroom. The ideal is for American children to enjoy their childhood, no less in the school than in the home. Consequently, the American public school is not a place where particularly severe demands are made on children. Academic work proceeds at a comparatively leisurely pace, homework is seldom assigned in large quantities and tests are rarely terribly difficult. A significant amount of school time is given over to artistic and creative efforts. The teachers are encouraged, if not expected, to provide for each individual child a tailor-made set of learning experiences, and to administer these with as much solicitous attention as possible so that the child will undergo affective as well as cognitive growth. And the learning process customarily includes not a few features which in Portuguese culture would be associated almost exclusively with recreational pursuits.

In Portugal, school is not conducted in this fashion. It is not fair or accurate to say that school in Portugal is "serious business," implying that school in the United States is not. We educators in America are serious, too, but we are serious about different things and in different ways. In Portugal, the object seems to be to move ahead academically as rapidly as possible, and to expedite matters by keeping virtually all non-academic pursuits out of the school altogether. Consequently, school in Portugal is experienced by the students as an unrelenting grind. Those who gain cross-cultural perspective by attending school in America look back with a sense of awe at how hard the academic work was in the *escola primária,* and especially in the *liceu*. Conversely, academic work in American schools is perceived as distinctly undemanding.

On the other hand, it may seem to the immigrant student fresh from Portuguese schools that his American teachers relate to him as though he were somewhat lacking in academic ability (as he has learned to define "academic ability"). His perception is better explained, however, by reference to the American teachers' tendency to view him as less mature and more in need of helpful attention than was the case in Portugal. My hunch is that this comparatively paternalistic attitude is resented by some of the students, but that this resentment does not become a serious problem because the teachers' attitudes are demonstrated in ways that the student usually finds agreeable. In my interviews with immigrant Portuguese students, I found that they universally experience American teachers as warmer, kinder, more friendly and accepting — in a word, more humane — than most or all of the teachers they had in Portugal. ■