

*Unbounded Learning: Transformative Power of Symbols for Cultural Intelligence & Compassion*

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**Part I: Executive Summary**

This project is an international peer collaboration initiative between novice Russian learners from U.S. high schools and their counterparts in the Central and North Caucasus regions of the Russian Federation. Students from both sides will engage in virtual discussion sessions, exploring meaningful symbols that represent their respective cultures and identities.

Through expanding the classroom and creating compassionate learning spaces across borders, we aim to promote the co-construction of cultural knowledge and development of engaging peer learning communities. Central to this project is compassionate pedagogy, which celebrates students' whole identities and fosters human connection and collective wellbeing. By building personal relationships and expressing interest in each other's complex identities students and peer tutors will work closely together to achieve common goals. The diversification of the students' ways of knowing through peer exchange, we create a space for a pro-social, critical reflection on both differences and similarities and appreciation for diversity in different cultures.

**Part II: Analysis**

This project encompasses a unit design for a "Global Leadership and Cultural Intelligence" course offered at the Pushkin Summer Institute (PSI) at UW-Madison, an intensive Russian language, literature, and culture program for novice high school learners. In this interactive multiliteracy unit, students will explore diverse identities and cultural symbols through a semiotic lens, which will challenge the ways they perceive and interpret observable realia, media generated content, and underlying values in the target culture as well as their own. The journey will lead learners to a profound realization of the richness and diversity within cultures and understanding of how particular symbols help represent one's identity and worldview. The focus will be on acquiring cultural knowledge, interpretive and analytical skills, resourcefulness, and critical judgement essential for engaging with cultural complexities. This also includes honing presentational and interpersonal communication skills, which will be put to the test in discussions and reflective projects. The overarching aim of this unit is to nurture compassion by enhancing transcultural competence. My hope is that engaging with one's own and target culture on a deeper semiotic level will facilitate a more meaningful participation in cultural co-curricular activities and peer language-exchange sessions during the summer program at UW-Madison. Furthermore, this foundation will prime them for effective intercultural communication during the Pushkin Summer Institute-Abroad opportunity.

In this unit, students will be invited to explore a variety of symbols (objects, spaces, clothing, art, etc.) selected by their peers from different regions of Russian Federation according to the emotional response typically shared by the members of their cultural community. Simultaneously, students will be asked to reflect on their own culture and create a compilation of symbols that comprise different aspects of their cultural identity (i.e., cultural pride, childhood, summer vacation, etc.) The relationship between a symbol and its meaning can be

nanced and can vary based on cultural or individual interpretations; some symbols can carry multiple meanings; some symbols change their meanings over time – this highly interpretive nature of symbols and their importance in communication makes this task an appealing opportunity for cultural exchange. Both the PSI students and their Russian-speaking peers will engage first in the unguided interpretation of selected symbols followed by an in-depth online discussion of their choices and interpretations. Consistent with the basic principles of semiotic analysis and Shaules’ concept of ‘deep culture’ presented below, the learners together with the peer community will explore the historical context, discuss what’s considered “typical” and by whom, and expand the conversation to underlying assumptions and worldview. The majority of PSI participants are multilingual learners from diverse backgrounds (Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico) and African-American students, which will enrich the discussion about the cultural diversity within language sharing communities. To prepare for peer interactions, students will first engage with instructor-facilitated content in class and complete noticing and interpreting activities.

### **Theoretical framework:**

The increased emphasis on culture and intercultural competence in world language education in the last two decades has stimulated significant research that shifted language instruction towards developing intercultural competence as a one of the critical skills. Intercultural communication has been included in the ACFTL proficiency benchmarks, transcultural understanding has been highlighted in MLA reports, and an increasing number of educators are offering various instructional designs to address the shift towards developing the meaning-making skills necessary for deep cultural understanding and empathy. These skills are supported by the multiliteracies and compassionate pedagogies which informed the design of this project. My proposed unit is a transdisciplinary attempt to contribute to the growing body of pedagogical practices than aim to expand the bounds of language education.

The guiding framework for this unit is the ‘Deep Culture’ theory which can be metaphorically described as “the core of the cultural onion” (Shaules, 2007). The three-layer “onion” includes the outer layer of explicit manifestations, the symbols of culture, “the observable reality of the language, food, buildings, houses, monuments, agriculture, shrines, markets, fashions, and art” (p.57). The middle layer comprises a deeper level of norms (right and wrong) and values (good and bad). The cultural core is described as “basic assumptions about existence” and is comprised of deep assumptions underlying norms and values. Since these assumptions cannot be formulated in a set of rules, Shaules believes that the ultimate challenge of intercultural learning is to discover differences at this deep level of culture encompassing “hidden level of values, norms, implicit beliefs and assumptions” (p.140).

One of the aims of the course is to advance students in their awareness that the ability to communicate effectively in a target language is not grounded only in linguistic proficiency, but also in the “ability to reflect critically or analytically on the symbolic systems we use to make meaning” (Kramersch, 2011, p.365). Kramersch suggests that learning a foreign language is closely connected to “acquiring a symbolic mentality that grants as much importance to subjectivity and historicity of experience as to the social conventions and cultural expectations of any one stable community of speakers” (p. 365). In this unit, students will be provided with semiotic tools, which will contribute to the development of transferrable analytical and interpretive skills and enhance their media literacy and cultural compassion.

The semiotic focus of the project has been inspired by Marcel Danesi’s (2018) introduction to semiotics that demonstrates and encourages the semiotic analysis of everyday life. The purpose of the book is to foster curiosity, willingness to go beyond habitual thinking, and deeper understanding of “networks of shared meanings that define human cultures” (p.219) through the meaning making process. Danesi’s semiotic analysis of some aspects of daily life guides the reader through the process of intentional noticing and interpreting, which allows us to make inferences, predictions, and conclusions which could in turn inform and guide our

behavior. I found this to be an effective framework for a cultural intelligence unit because Danesi's conviction that everyone is a semiotician engaged in semiotic investigations on a daily basis aligns with the concept of Deep Culture and the unit's message of profound transcultural competence not being acquired merely through the accumulation of facts but rather via reflecting on your own cultural world and developing interest toward variability within cultures, honing interpretational and analytical skills, and embracing resourcefulness and critical judgment. Danesi emphasizes the flexibility of sign systems and semiotic codes that promote alertness and openness to new interpretations. The dynamic nature of culture requires similar eagerness to search for meanings beyond the accepted norm or the reference to one's own cultural models. Danesi states that semiotics is instrumental in encouraging the acceptance of the "Other" and asserts that despite the inherited cultural predispositions, people from different cultures are capable of grasping the abundance of meanings because "the theoretical capacity for knowing is limitless and can easily transcend the very culture-specific categories that commonly guide it" (p.27). Recognizing this "capacity for knowing" in language learners independent of their linguistic proficiency and providing opportunities to engage in a semiotic analysis at different levels of cultural proficiency were important in creating this meaning-rich unit.

Multiliteracies pedagogy aligns well with the goals of the unit and provides a useful framework for the unit design. It addresses "the variability of meaning making in different cultural, social, or domain-specific contexts" and stresses the importance of the learners' ability "to negotiate differences in patterns of meaning from one context to another" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p.3). It also embraces the multimodal ways of meaning making and encourages the integration of multimodal texts and digital media into curriculum. In this unit students will be interacting multimodal media products that offer rich material to explore contemporary culture and diversity of perspectives. The learning will be designed around the four knowledge processes that the framework offers, which will allow students to 'experience, conceptualize, analyze and apply' knowledge and skills to access different social and cultural codes and engage in interaction from the place of transcultural awareness.

In addition to providing the tools for engagement with cultural diversity, it's equally important to foster a favorable environment for engaging with cultural complexities. In his model of intercultural competence, Byram (1997) emphasizes not simply holding positive attitudes towards people within a different cultural matrix; the focus should be on encouraging "attitudes of curiosity and openness" and a willingness not to rush to judgment when encountered with different ontological and epistemological systems. Willingness to analyze one's own meanings from the perspective of the other is also considered an important part of *savoir être* (p. 34) and will constitute an important part of the unit. This aligns with the principles of compassionate pedagogy which celebrates students' whole identities and fosters human connection and collective wellbeing (Laucella, 2019; Vandeyar & Swart, 2016). The proposed unit is an attempt to construct compassionate space through open stimulating discussions and reflective projects.

## Part III: Design

### Stage 1: In class

This is the first part of the unit in which students will view and read a variety of multimodal texts, such as commercials, online magazine articles, and social media content featuring commercial advertisements for a variety of symbols and messages they offer.

Learners will interpret media texts using the semiotic approach, connect their ideas to the concept of Deep Culture, express and support their point of view in a discussion, reflect on the meaning making process, and present their ideas to the group. Students will continue to develop their media competencies and cultural intelligence by practicing decoding media messages, identifying the intended audience for the media texts, discussing the meaning encoded in specific symbols, and reflecting on how these signs might be interpreted in a

different cultural context. Additionally, students will analyze how cultural attitudes and beliefs are embedded in images and how those are connected to deeper layers of culture.

Students will be invited to watch 4 popular commercial ads. They will also explore magazine and social media ads for the same products. Video materials should be intended for different audiences and offer a variety of signs and messages.

For this learning plan, I am using a modified version of an instructional multiliteracies sequence proposed by Paesani, Allen and Dupuy (2016) that allows for the effective integration of the four knowledge processes and works well for a lesson integrating multimodal texts.

Stages	Activities
<b>Pre-viewing (Situated Practice)</b>	Students engage in an independent 5-minute writing activity. They write down or draw their associations (or lack thereof) with the following brands/products: Raffaello chocolates, Coca Cola, Nike, and farmer's cheese. Students share their ideas with a partner.
<b>Initial Viewing (Situated Practice/Overt Instruction)</b>	Students watch each video without sound first and write down everything that catches their attention with regard to symbolic signs. All ideas are being collected and displayed. Some basic linguistic questions are addressed by instructor. The main focus of this stage is on denotations.
<b>Detailed Viewing (Critical Framing/Overt Instruction)</b>	Students watch the videos with sound on and add to the list of observable signs. In small groups students begin the initial interpretation of signs (e.g. grandma's food – comfort, love, etc.). The main focus here is on connotations they have in their semiotic repertoire. In instructor-led follow up, linguistic choices, music, colors, and other details are discussed.
<b>Critical Viewing (Critical Framing/Overt Instruction)</b>	Students are split into groups and assigned one of the advertised products. In groups they engage in the process of decoding the messages in the video as well as magazine and social media ads for the same product by following instructor's critical-questions prompt. Students think about the intended audience and how they would "read" the commercial compared to how their group interpreted it. Students discuss the rules, norms and values that could be alluded to. By the end of this stage students should compose a dominant decoded message as the product of their analysis and be able to explain their choices. All students take notes during this discussion because they will present their group's findings during a jigsaw activity in which a member of each group reports on the results of their analysis. An instructor-led summary of the main discussion points and important clarifications and explanations conclude the first part of the lesson.
<b>Applying (Transformative Practice)</b>	Students are asked to use what they have learned and create an online ad (Google slide) of their product for a U.S. audience (or another country of their choice). In addition to the visual, they should include a list of all signs they have chosen, the connotations they have assigned to them with their audience in mind, and the message they encoded in their ad with the reference to the cultural norms and values of the chosen country. Ads are shared with the class and presented.

## **Stage 2: Out of class**

The second part of the unit will expand the discussion of culturally relevant symbols. Both PSI students and their counterparts in the Central and North Caucasus regions of the Russian Federation will be asked to reflect on the symbols (objects, people, spaces, clothing, art, etc.) representing different aspects of their identity and shared by the members of their cultural community (i.e., cultural pride, childhood, summer vacation, etc.) and create a visual board with the images of those symbols. PSI participants and their peers will exchange the boards prior to their virtual discussion and will engage in an unguided interpretation of the symbols. During the online meeting, they will compare their analyses, symbol choices and interpretations. The learners together with the peer community will explore the historical context, discuss how these symbols might vary across their respective cultures, and expand the conversation to underlying assumptions and worldview.

**N.B.** Novice learners are typically shielded from meaningful cultural discussions partly because they cannot be sustained in the target language. For the purpose of the cultural discovery, this project will draw on the participants' knowledge, skills and experiences, and not on their target language proficiency. Russian will be used for image commentary and accompanying video content, but not for the discussions.

### **Learning objectives:**

1. Students will continue acquiring cultural knowledge of products/practices and their representation as well as developing awareness of perspectives and assumptions underlying norms and values by engaging with the unit's readings, viewings, class presentations, and peer discussions.
2. Students will continue to develop the ability to critically evaluate cultural products, behavior, and values while suspending judgement and practicing cultural tolerance and compassion.
3. Students will continue to develop analytical and interpretive skills by engaging with complex imagery.
4. Students will compare and reflect on differences and similarities in cultural representations of practices, values, and norms as well as in interpretations of signs and symbols.
5. Students will expand their lexico-grammatical repertoire in relation to the themes in the unit.
6. Students will improve their presentational and interpersonal communication skills by facilitating and participating in discussions, completing small group and pair activities, making oral presentations, and sharing their ideas in video journal entries.

### **Assessment:**

At the end of Stage I, students will present an advertisement they created for a specific audience and their encoding analysis.

At the end of Stage II, students will record a video journal entry with their reflections on 1) the learning that took place during peer discussions; 2) conversations that made them feel seen, heard, and known; and 3) ability to understand and appreciate a peer from another part of the world. Additionally, students will respond to video journals created by their Russian-speaking peers.

### **Grading:**

Students will receive a grade based on the successful completion of all tasks in the unit and a content rubric addressing the effort and quality of the final product.

## **Part IV: Development**

The resources for the project include: a device with internet access, Google folder with cultural identity boards, schedule of peer meetings, classroom projector.

Possible video materials for the class:

[Raffaello](#)

[Farmers' cheese](#)

[Coca Cola](#)

[Nike](#)

I don't anticipate any issues with the development of this project. Considering the positive feedback on peer language exchange sessions and overwhelming interest in the "Global Leadership and Cultural Intelligence" course, I believe the program leadership will support this project.

### **Part V: Implementation**

The proposed unit will be discussed during the course revision session with the principal course instructor in the Fall of 2023 and implemented in the summer of 2024. All standard policies and procedures for the course will be followed. It's a one-week unit with 2 hours of in-person instruction time, 2 hours of virtual meetings with peers, and one hour of reflection work. All students will be given sufficient prep time during regular study halls and will be assisted by residential counselors if needed. All in-class materials will be provided by the instructor, and the program will provide electronic devices for virtual meetings if necessary. We will take into consideration the different time zones and devise a schedule that will be convenient for all participants. There might be some challenges with the video/audio quality of the meetings, but all participants will be encouraged to use reliable devices with internet access.

### **Part VI: Evaluation**

In addition to the students' reflections in video journals, I will administer a short Google-survey after all project assignments are submitted to collect feedback on additional aspects of this learning experience. In the survey, I will include can-do statements with unit objectives and will ask the students to self-evaluate their progress. Peer partners from Russia will complete the same survey. The feedback obtained will be used to make adjustments or improvements to the unit design for the following year.

### **References and resources I found inspiring while developing this project:**

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