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Book review: Culture Myths

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Abstract

Book review of: DeCapua, A. (2018). *Culture myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 188pp.

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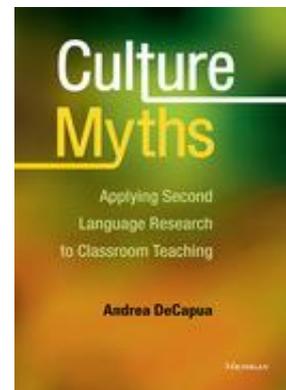
Book Review

Skye Playsted



DeCapua, A. (2018). *Culture myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 188pp.

If you are interested in cross-cultural awareness in the second language classroom, Andrea DeCapua's *Culture Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* is a great introduction to this field. As the title promises, DeCapua applies research into culturally relevant teaching (DeCapua, 2018; Gay, 2000) to the classroom setting, with examples and practical suggestions for teachers of students from different cultural backgrounds. The title of each of this book's chapters is a "myth" statement based on commonly-held views of culture in the classroom:



Myth 1: We are all human beings, so how different can we really be?

Myth 2: The goal of education is to develop each individual's potential.

Myth 3: Focusing on conversational skills in the classroom is overrated.

Myth 4: Not looking at the teacher shows disrespect.

Myth 5: How something is said is not as important as what is said.

Myth 6: Everyone knows what a good instructional environment is.

Myth 7: By the time students get to middle or high school, they know how to be a student.

In the book's introduction, DeCapua defines key concepts such as *culture* and *collectivism/individualism*. I think this is important to note, because defining cultural constructs is an essential first step for any teacher hoping to develop cross-cultural awareness. What do *I* mean when I say *culture*? What do *you* mean when you think of *culture*? As DeCapua reminds us, "culture, values and beliefs impact [one's] worldview, identity and behaviors" (p. 1). Being able to tease apart aspects of my culture through observation and evaluation has led me to appreciate the complexity of cultural differences in my classroom. Appreciation and understanding

are key aspects to a teacher in becoming aware of cultural misunderstandings, so these misunderstandings don't become points of negative judgement.



“ **make the unfamiliar familiar** ”

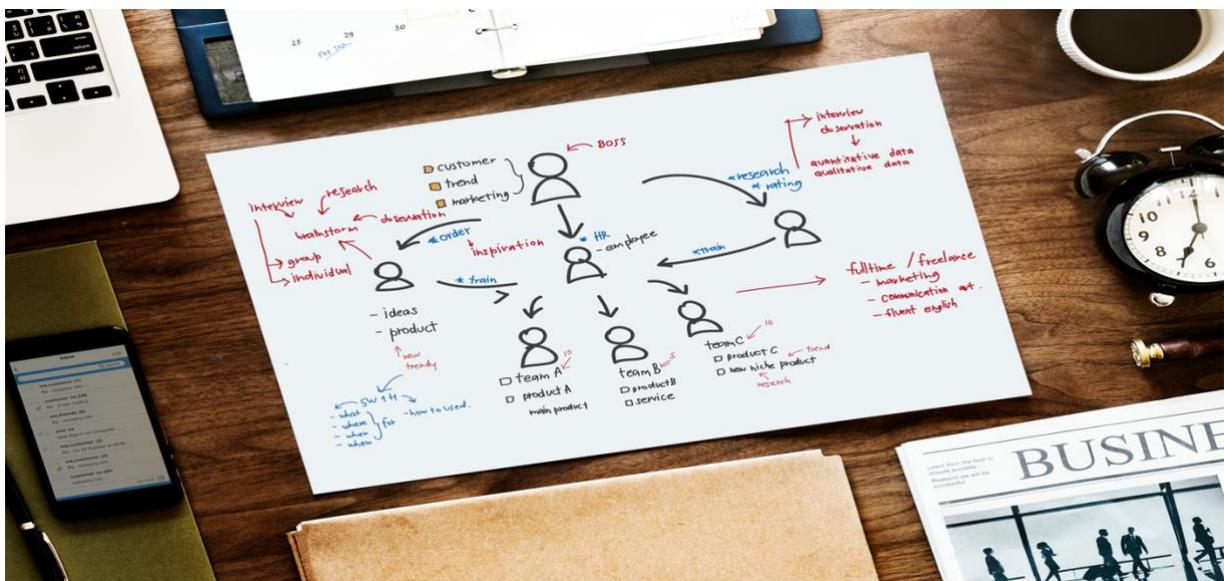
Although the book is written in an accessible, teacher-friendly style, it would be a mistake to assume this reflects a lack of connection to research in the field of culturally responsive teaching. [DeCapua](#), based at New York University has taught, presented at conferences and published in this area for over 30 years. She and Dr.

Helaine Marshall are well-known for their work in teacher education, cross-cultural awareness, and teaching students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Marshall, 1998). This is an area which is particularly relevant to those of us teaching students from refugee backgrounds, as our students have often had histories of interrupted schooling due to conflict and displacement. However, even if this is not your student cohort, you may still find it a worthwhile experience to engage in the self-reflection process, which DeCapua's book encourages, to develop a deeper understanding of culture as not as a “thing” but as a system of cognitive processes reflected in practices” (p.11). The principles which guide our understanding of our students' cultural backgrounds are the same as those we apply to understanding our own.

Each chapter of *Culture Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* begins with an anecdote that relates to the myth being examined. Relevant research is then followed by suggestions for “What We Can Do” (p. 27) as teachers of English language learners. DeCapua's practical teaching points help us to identify underlying cultural expectations and norms, which students from other educational

and cultural backgrounds may need to have explicitly explained to them if they are to adjust to and participate successfully in a new learning environment.

Reading DeCapua's book has helped me understand more about the hidden elements of culture that can affect learning and teaching, particularly with classes of refugee-background students. For example, learning may have taken place orally and informally for a refugee-background student with limited formal education. A "Western-style education [with its] academic ways of thinking" (p. 138) deems that students need to be able to order and interpret the world in a way that relies on literacy skills, which they have not needed previously. This doesn't mean their previous experiences of education are less valid or rich, but that they are different. If these students are to make the adjustments needed to participate successfully in a Western-style classroom, part of my job as a teacher is to understand what they *do* bring with them into the classroom, and to help explain classroom expectations that they *don't* yet understand. The things I take for granted: raising your hand to ask a question, working by yourself on a task without asking your peers for assistance, understanding graphic organisers which, as DeCapua points out "are not useful learning aids for those who have not yet developed the tools to interpret them" (p. 146). That's not to say teaching tools such as graphic organisers should be avoided, but their use needs to be scaffolded so that students understand how to use them. They need practise in how to incorporate and use new ideas like this in their own learning process.



For me, reading *Culture Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* helped me to focus on intercultural communication in my classroom. It is written in a way that makes it an excellent resource for encouraging discussion with other teachers, or for use as a study guide at staff professional development sessions.

Finally, DeCapua and Marshall's Intercultural Communication Framework (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013) leaves teachers with three essential principles that promote cross-cultural awareness:

1. Develop an ongoing, two-way relationship with your students and their families.
2. Identify priorities in your culture and in theirs.
3. Make the unfamiliar familiar. (p. 150).

I hope you find this book as challenging and interesting as I have!

Skyl Playsted teaches students in academic English and adult migrant English programs in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. She studied at the University of Queensland and is completing her M Ed (TESOL) through the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. Email: skye.playsted@icloud.com

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