

Cultural Practices, Products, and Perspectives

Practices—are patterns of social interactions, behaviors. Practices involve the use of products. They represent the knowledge of “what to do when and where” (p. 50) and how to interact within a particular culture.

Products—are the tangible or intangible creations of a particular culture. They reflect a culture’s perspectives.

Tangible products: paintings, a cathedral, a piece of literature, a pair of chopsticks

Intangible products: an oral tale, a dance, a sacred ritual, a system of education, a law

Perspectives—the philosophical perspectives, meanings, attitudes, values, beliefs, ideas that underlie the cultural practices and products of a society. They represent a culture’s view of the world.

Examples of Practices:

rites of passage	the use of forms of discourse (e.g., use of formal vs. informal forms of address)	the use of space (norms of respect in social interactions)
the social “pecking order”	meal times	table manners
gestures and other nonverbal forms of communication	turn-taking (in conversation or in games)	playing behaviors
traditions related to holiday celebrations	shopping behaviors	socially appropriate behaviors for interviewing, dating, weddings, funerals, etc.

Examples of Products:

<u>Tangible</u>	<u>Intangible</u>
toys; household items; pottery	dance
musical instruments	music
traditional and contemporary dress	language
types of dwellings	literary styles/genres
foods; sports equipment	social, economic, political institutions (e.g., the educational system of a country)
literature	
artwork; tools	
political cartoons	

Examples of Perspectives:

youth valued over age or vice versa	importance of individual freedom; independence	importance of family
the belief that bigger is better	valuing of sports/entertainment over education	values attached to bilingualism, multilingualism, monolingualism
value of having (ownership)	belief that humans are part of the natural world and must respect and care for it	value associated with personal privacy

Examples of the relationship among the three:

Whatever the form of a cultural product, its presence within the culture is required or justified by the underlying beliefs and values (*perspectives*) of that culture, and the cultural *practices* involve the use of that *product*.

In some Asian cultures, members are positioned (a *perspective*) on a hierarchical scale based on age, social status, education, or similar variables. In those cultures, the exchange of business cards (a *product*) that provides key information is a helpful *practice*. Because the cards facilitate social interaction and are treated with respect in those cultures, one should not scribble another name or phone number on the business card (taboo *practice*). The information on the card also directly affects the nonverbal behavior (*practice*) of those involved in the communicative interaction, as well as the choice of linguistic forms (*products*) that indicate status.

In the U.S., youth has traditionally been valued more than old age (a *perspective*). As a result, *products* that purport to prolong youth and vitality (e.g., face creams, high fiber breakfast cereals, and fitness equipment) have become an integral part of our culture. At the same time, *practices* that are perceived as prolonging youth and health are encouraged: school children have physical education to promote physical exercise; many invest in running shoes (*products*) or join a fitness club (*product*); some take extreme measures to look younger and have plastic surgery (*practice*) or wear clothes associated with a younger set (*products*).

In Spain, bread is considered a fundamental part of every meal (*perspective*). Fresh, long baguette-type loaves of bread (*products*) are baked and sold daily in panaderías (*products*). At the table, people break off (rather than slice) pieces of bread from the long loaves and often use the bread to scoop food onto eating utensils (*practices*). Butter isn't served with the bread (*practice*).

Source: National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project. (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century*. Lawrence, KS: Allen Press, Inc.