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## *American Culture in Modern Contexts*

Review by Glen Penrod, BYU-Hawaii

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AMERICAN CULTURE IN MODERN CONTEXTS, Vol. 3. Orem, Utah: Producers Consortium, 1986. Film or Video. List price \$295 (Vols 1 & 2 - \$195 each)

With all the debate about whether or not to teach "American" culture in the ESL classroom, teachers are often left wondering whether they should risk telling the students that they have to "behave like Americans" in order to speak good English or teach them nothing and leave them with serious communicative inadequacies.

The video cassette series (also available on 16mm film: \$210 per individual title. \$1260 for all. 6 titles in Vol. 3) *American Culture in Modern Contexts* gives teachers a creative solution to this dilemma and allows them to present cultural factors without being too prescriptive.

The series is designed to help ESL students who are already in the U.S. (or have contact with Americans in business or social settings) understand and deal with situations in which cultural elements play an important role.

Volume three, the most recent in the series contains six 10 minute capsules sporting such titles as *Cultural Competence: A Beginning*, *The American Cultural Clock: A Concept of Time*, *Life is What You Make It: Decision Making in American Culture*, *Friendship American Style*, *Body English: Non-Verbal Notions of Communication*, and *Personal Space: Cultural Distance*. (The other two previ-

ous volumes each contain six titles as well.)

Each of the capsules is long enough to cover the subject matter well, and the presentation is well-paced in order to keep the viewers' interest. A great variety of material, ranging from literary quotes to body language, is presented in the video series, and the film clips within the individual capsules deal with real life situations in which foreign students from Latin America, Asia, and the Near East are depicted interacting with Americans in different settings.

The "foreigners" in the film, to which many ESL students can relate, make different kinds of cultural blunders. But rather than dwell on the mistakes, the video gives an explanation as to why Americans may react a certain way in response to a particular behavior (i.e. standing too close or being late for an appointment) and offers helpful suggestions on how students can avoid similar situations.

The positive tone of the narrative makes students feel that it is easy for them to understand and master communication skills despite errors that they might sometimes make.

The accompanying teacher's manual is a very helpful supplement to the series. In addition to transcripts of the dialogues and narrative used in the video tape, the manual contains different types of exercises which can be used to reinforce what the

students learn as well as give them necessary practice in conversation skills, grammar and vocabulary.

I found the series to be informative, well-organized and professionally designed, allowing teachers to present many important aspects of American culture that students will likely encounter in everyday activities.

The thing I liked most about the video was that it presented the material in a very objective manner, without making judgments, stereotyping or prescribing behav-

ior. It left the viewer with the impression that although things in a given culture might be different, they are not necessarily wrong or better than those of another culture.

I highly recommend *American Culture in Modern Contexts* to ESL teachers whose students will be dealing with Americans in business or personal situations in or outside the U.S.

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