

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Higher Education

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One of the major tenets of culturally responsive teaching is that students' current culture is used as a necessary starting point for learning. Here, Students' linguistic tools, their ways of seeing and being, and their background knowledge are used as a foundation for learning. Culturally responsive teaching consists of three interconnecting elements: (a) high academic standards that focus on students' total intellectual growth, (b) cultural competence and inclusion, and (c) critical or sociopolitical consciousness. These elements are interdependent meaning that culturally responsive teaching is found at the intersection and interconnection of all three. This article ends by describing some strategies and conditions that might facilitate culturally responsive teaching.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, systemic racism

When I first encountered the term, 'culturally responsive teaching', I assumed it was just another set of pedagogical strategies for me to learn and incorporate into my teaching repertoire. I thought that if I could just learn and implement these strategies, then I could be an effective culturally responsive educator. But I was a bit misguided in my assumptions. While there are strategies that can facilitate culturally responsive teaching, it's not simply a set of strategies. In this article, I will explain what culturally responsive teaching is and describe some strategies that can be used in higher education to facilitate it.

Three Interconnected Elements

Culturally responsive teaching is comprised of three interconnected elements (a) high academic standards that focus on students' total intellectual growth, (b) cultural competence and inclusion, and (c) critical or sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014) (see Figure 1). It's not possible to include all of them in a single course or curriculum immediately. But over time, you can begin to include many of them.

Total Intellectual Growth

Total intellectual growth is an enhanced capacity in students' social, emotional, spiritual, creative, and intellectual dimensions. Three parts of total intellectual growth are described here:

SOLVING PROBLEMS AND CREATING PRODUCTS. This means that students leave your courses better able to solve problems and create products that are valued in a real-world setting.

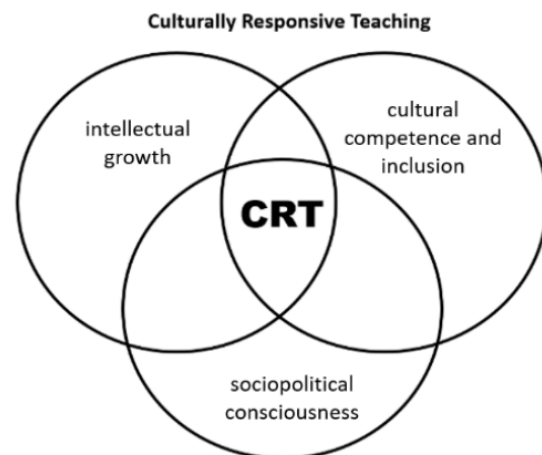


Figure 1. Culturally responsive teaching: three interconnected elements

This, by the way, is how Howard Gardner defines intelligence (Gardner, 1999).

TRANSFORMATION. Your students are transformed on a personal level. They're also able to use what's learned to achieve transformation on environmental and social levels (Banks, 2002; Hammond, 2015). In other words, they become agents of change who are both inclined and able to evolve self and society.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION. Self-actualization is the term used to describe the natural unfolding and realization of one's full potential (Johnson, 2022). Here your courses enable stu-

dents to achieve their full potential as learners, professionals in their field, and as human beings.

Cultural Competence and Inclusion

Four parts of this element are described here:

INTEREST IN STUDENTS' CULTURES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES. It's not possible to have in-depth knowledge of all the cultures that students bring to your classes or to completely understand all students' lived experience. However, it is possible for you to take an interest and to learn. This of course is predicated on trust and relationships with the instructor and with the other students in the class (Hammond, 2015). This trust must be earned, especially with traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups.

STUDENTS' CULTURE IS USED AS A BASIS FOR LEARNING. Students learn more and learn more easily when new knowledge is connected to old knowledge (Johnson, 2019). Whenever possible, invite students to bring their cultures, histories, experiences, values, art and music, and ways of seeing the world into your courses (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These are used as the basis for their new learning (Hammond, 2015).

MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION STYLES ARE INCLUDED. Help your student understand and navigate cultural norms for communication. Rather than trying to negate students' current ways of communicating, you teach them when it is and is not appropriate to use the various types of language and writing styles (Irizarry, 2017). The goal is to enable your students to appreciate their own ways of communicating while also learning to develop fluency in another. Ladson-Billings (2017) refers to the dominant academic language (DAL) as the culture of commerce and social advancement. While DAL is the primary way of communicating in higher education, you must not diminish the language styles germane to any culture.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SYSTEMIC RACISM IS RECOGNIZED AND INCLUDED. Cultural understanding of any group cannot be separated from a historical context (Lee & Walsh, 2017). This calls for teachers to know a bit of history. Toward this end, I would recommend six powerful and well-written books as a starting place: "An African American and Latinx History of the United States" by Paul Ortiz (2018), "Caste: The Origins of our Discontents" by Isabel Wilkerson (2020), and "An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States" by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014). More recent history includes "The Autobiography of Malcom X" by Malcom X and Alex Haley (1965), "The Fire Next Time" by James Baldwin (1991) and "Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism" by Derrick Bell (1992). These are just some of the many resources that provide a view of US history that is a bit different from the white-washed McGraw-Hill version of reality with which many of us grew up. These books can be used as assigned reading in courses. But more

importantly, they will provide you with some of historical perspective necessary to understand students' cultures.

Support Students' Critical Consciousness

IT CRITICALLY EXAMINES EXISTING FRAMEWORKS AND PRACTICES. In your courses include learning experiences that invite students to critically examine established ways of thinking, seeing, and knowing. Invite students to examine and evaluate curriculum, books, policies, practices, and culture through a racial equity and social justice lens (Lee & Walsh, 2017). Also, provide students with the tools to address social, cultural, economic, and political problems. In this way, they are able to become agents of change in addressing social justice and racial equity issues (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016)

IT IS REFLECTIVE. Include reflective activities that invite your students to identify, examine, and clarify their own values (Johnson, 2006).

IT IS EMPOWERING. Empower your students by offering choices about what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate their learning. This reflects a student-centered approach to teaching (Johnson, 2017). Strive to move away from traditional authoritarian, top-down relationships based on power and authority, and instead embrace more equal relationships based on principles of respect and a shared set of values. Instead of using power to control students or grades to motivate and manipulate them, use relationships to invite students to cooperate in creating an effective learning environment and meaningful learning experiences.

IT IS EMANCIPATORY. In your courses strive to liberate the mind from traditional ways of thinking which tends to reflect a white, Eurocentric perspective (Freire, 1993; Gay, 2018). Provide opportunities for students to untether themselves from the mainstream canons of knowledge and conventional ways of knowing in order to think about new things as well as think about old things in new ways.

IT INCORPORATES REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES. Try to bring students' real-life experiences into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Instead of studying an abstract, academic world defined by a white, Eurocentric cultural perspective, link new learning to students' lives to the greatest extent possible. This means that issues and problems germane to students are incorporated into your coursework. Include real world problems, experiences, and situations in your courses.

Facilitating Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning

And as stated previously, culturally responsive teaching consists of three interconnecting elements: (a) high academic standards that focus on students' total intellectual growth, (b) cultural competence and inclusion, and (c) critical or sociopolitical consciousness. These elements are interdependent. Meaning that any individual element is not sufficient in

and of itself. Instead, culturally responsive teaching is found at the intersection and interconnection of all three.

Some Conditions

Below, are described some conditions that might facilitate culturally responsive teaching. These call for us to step outside our roles as objective dispensers of knowledge to instead become human beings interacting with students to enable them to construct knowledge and engage in more meaningful learning.

AUTHENTICITY AND CONGRUENCE. You cannot be a culturally responsive teacher without being in relationship with your students teaching (Hammond, 2015; Gay, 2010). For relationship to occur, you must first display authenticity and congruence. This enables students to see the human being, not simply a professor persona. Toward this end, you might share bits of your life with students (as appropriate). You might also identify emotional states when appropriate. As well, join small group discussions as a participant.

TRUST. Students naturally want to learn. It is part of the human conditions. We must trust them to do so. Thus, not every assignment or activity needs to be graded. Not every element of your courses needs to be tested. Progress can be gently and infrequently monitored. As well, students might be encouraged to demonstrate their learning in ways that are not always measurable.

See and be seen. One cannot relate to what one cannot see. Spaces should be provided within your courses for students to see and be seen by other students. This includes sharing writing or journal entries, class meetings, small group discussions, and listening practice (below).

Some Strategies

Below, are described examples of a few of the many pedagogical strategies that might facilitate culturally responsive teaching.

LISTENING SKILLS. Active listening skills enables one to fully attend to what another person says with honest intent (Johnson, 2017). Honest intent means that you sincerely try to understand and respond to what the other person is saying, you are not simply waiting for a quiet spot to jump into the conversation. Active listening skills enhance students' ability to relate to others in their professional fields as well as in their personal lives. These skills are especially relevant in higher education as students are grappling with identity formation, social issues, and future careers.

For example, once a week Dr. Perez has listening practice in her Educational Psychology course. Students are randomly paired. One person is the listener, and the other person is the speaker. She might give the speaker a prompt like, "Describe a problem in your life." Or "Talk about an important event this week." Other days she might simply say, "What do

you want to talk about today?" The speaker shares while the other student engages in active listening. After five minutes, the roles are reverse.

I can imagine those in fields outside the social sciences might think listening practice to be a waste of precious class time; however, the human/interpersonal dimension impacts all professional organizations and fields. Learning to understand others, especially those who have differing perspectives and experiences, is an endeavor that will prepare students to be more productive in any working environment and to thrive in a diverse global community.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING. Cooperative learning is a structured teaching and learning strategy in which small groups of students work together using a variety of learning activities to accomplish a shared goal (Johnson, 2017). Cooperative learning consists of five elements: First, there is a specific learning task to be accomplished in small groups. Second, there is positive interdependence. This means all students must be actively engaged in the completion of the task in order for the group to be successful. Third, there is face-to-face interaction. When cooperative learning groups are working, students must be seated "knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye" so that they can look at their group mates as they are working together. Fourth, social skills are addressed. Cooperative learning groups provide a perfect venue to use for teaching the social skills necessary to function in a group. And fifth, reflection and review are included. At end of every cooperative learning activity time is set aside for groups to examine their effectiveness in working together and completing the task.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING. Problem-based learning enhances students' ability to solve problems. Also inserting real-world problems into your course also connects your course to the real world (Johnson, 2017). A common strategy for problem solving is to have students work in small cooperative groups of three to five to find solutions for the problem. The small group format provides a safe environment for students to explore options and alternatives as well as providing them with a variety of ideas and perspectives.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING. Experiential learning is another strategy that enables students to make connections with the real world. Experiential learning is a process through which learners construction knowledge and skills directly from real life experience (Wurdinger, 2005). Here students first have a primary experience in which they must use a skill or application. This primary experience could be a problem, application, or skill related to your course content. This is followed by a secondary experience in which students are involved with related theory and information. In other words, instead of providing background information to enable students to understand the experience or apply the skill, students learn by having the experience first. Background knowledge is

then provided on the back end to put their experience in a theoretical context.

VALUES CLARIFICATION. Values clarification is a pedagogical strategy that can be effectively used to enable students to identify, analyze, and describe their own values (Johnson, 2009). Values clarification activities invite students to describe, list, rank, or rate things that they value or find of worth. This could include personal traits, people, physical things, or experiences. Students usually share their ideas in small groups. Sometimes small groups are asked to come to a common consensus. The conversation that takes place here enables students to engage in a form of moral reasoning. It also helps them to better understand the human beings in their class.

{T-talk.} The T-talk is a structured discussion strategy that enables students to identify and express their views (Johnson, 2017). It also invites students to experience multiple viewpoints. It can be adopted and adapted for a variety of situations. These are the steps:

- First, design a dualistic statement that reflects lesson content, assigned reading, a current event, or a common issue. A dualistic statement is one in which students have to either agree or disagree. For example: “Because of freedom of speech issues, religious groups that express homophobic views should be allowed to speak on campus.” This is a statement that students can either support or reject.
- Second, students work in pairs to identify two supporting and two refuting ideas. At this stage, partners should not know each other’s position. Supporting and refuting ideas should be made regardless of what students might actually think. Each pair is given a sheet of paper with a large letter ‘T’ on it. This is the T-chart. The dualistic statement is listed on top of the T. On one side of the T-chart is where the pair lists at least two ideas to supporting and refuting ideas.
- Third, each pair combines with another pair to form a small group. After sharing their ideas on both sides of the issue, each group member identifies his or her individual position. The group’s task then is to try to reach a consensus. This is where most of the discussion occurs. There will be times when a consensus cannot be reached. When this occurs, the group may need to revise the dualistic statement or simply agree to disagree. All members will get a chance to describe their individual ideas later.
- Fourth, at the end of the small group session, one speaker from each small group shares the group’s conclusion with the class. The speaker has one minute to share their group’s position along with two reasons to support the group’s position. Example: “Our group believes... because (a)... and (b)...”
- And finally, the topic is opened for class discussion. To

make this a writing activity, students can also describe their individual opinions in a blog, learning log, short paper, or an online discussion site.

WRITE AND SHARE. Students are asked to write and share their ideas in small group discussions. The writing prompts here should be related to course content as well as one personal or intrapersonal prompt. Prompts are usually given a week before the small group discussion. In my courses I provide one mandatory personal prompt to which all students respond. For example: Describe something you enjoy doing. They are also given five to ten course-related prompts and asked to respond to one. When students meet in small group all respond to the same personal prompt and hear a variety of perspectives on course content.

Final Thoughts

We want colleges and universities to be places in which all students are able to achieve their full potential. Culturally responsive teaching is one important tool that can and should be used toward this end. This paper described the three interconnecting elements of culturally responsive teaching: total intellectual growth, cultural competence and inclusion, and sociopolitical consciousness. It also described conditions and strategies to facilitate it.

Video Resources on Culturally Responsive Teaching

- [What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?](#)
- [Strategies for Culturally Responsive Teaching](#)

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