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Culturally Responsive Teaching Toolbox

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century teachers face challenges across many disciplines. Teachers are tasked with added roles: resource provider, instructional specialist, learning facilitator, mentor, school leader, and lifelong learner (U.S. Department of Education 2017). Equipping teachers with new learning trends is paramount to student success. Research indicates that the best way to increase student achievement is to have qualified teachers with specialized skills (Sparks and Killion 2007; Gay 2013). Teachers need to cultivate an understanding of cultural diversity in the classroom to effectively promote engagement. This paper will discuss culturally responsive teaching and multiple strategies for preparing teachers with a culturally responsive skills toolbox.

KEYWORDS

culturally responsive teaching, strategies, curriculum, inclusive

Misconceptions exist regarding culturally responsive teaching (CRT). I've heard it claimed that it focuses only on holiday traditions. But, CRT is much more than that. CRT builds from the strengths of students' cultural experiences, while acknowledging that different heritages and languages affect attitudes and approaches toward learning. When skills are linked to lived experiences, "they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily" (Gay 2000, 106). Teachers who utilize CRT practices value students' cultural and linguistic background and view this knowledge as capital to build upon, rather than as a barrier to learning. According to CRT, to engage students, teachers must recognize that students' views are rooted in their culture. Equipped with this knowledge, teachers can create learning activities that connect skills-based practices and further engagement.

According to Aceves (2014), another type of engagement is culturally responsive feedback where students receive individualized support from teachers. Teachers share individualized support while being cognizant of student preferences and culture. This strategy incorporates students' responses, ideas, languages, and experiences into the feedback loop, while inviting students to construct new understandings of what they are currently learning (McIntyre and Hulan 2013). This helps in several ways: boosts self-esteem, monitors comprehension, and challenges thinking. Teachers can create such opportunities for feedback in an online environment through discussion.

Training Teachers for CRT

As the student demographic changes, the need to prepare twenty-first century teachers requires tools to reach a more diverse group of students. Teachers are already taught skills for meeting Maslow's Needs (physiological needs, personal safety, social affiliation, self-esteem, and self-actualization) in their lesson plans, course design, and educational programs ([Hanson 2018](#)). Updated skills must be taught such that teachers possess awareness, communication, modification of design, and efforts to accommodate differences (Nisbett 2003). Teachers need to consider how their cultural ideals influence the design decisions and activities that they implement. Villegas and Lucas (2002) encourage educators to include preparation strategies through coursework, learning experiences, and field experiences for success with diverse students by cultivating skills, such as the ones named by Krasnoff ([2016, 2](#)):

- Socio-cultural consciousness
- Attitude
- Commitment and skills
- Constructivist views
- Knowledge of student's life
- CRT

These skills prepare teachers to meet real world demands. This approach enables teachers to view differences as assets and to become agents of change in the classroom.

Geneva Gay defines CRT as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for [students]” (2010, 31). A way to grow these skills is to build relationships. This can be accomplished in the community with partnerships or even simply by assigning a buddy for a sense of belonging. These skills will help the teacher engage all students.

According to Pedro Noguera, to engage urban students, teachers must allow students to become active participants and learners. This differs from the existing mindset of expecting students to adapt their learning to the way in which they are taught (Noguera 2003). This needs to be included in the lesson plan and not be an afterthought or add on. It is important to have the classroom showcase different cultural themes.

When looking at culturally responsive design, the focus is on mirroring the student's cultural learning style and tools. It must be relatable to capture their attention in multiple ways. Specifically, in cultures that rely on oral tradition for information acquisition, techniques that connect learning to lyrics and music turn content into knowledge. Some ways to make content more culturally engaging are gamification, collaboration, community creation, and storytelling (Hammond 2015, 137).

The first step to creating culturally responsive lessons is for the teacher to look internally and shift their mindset to be culturally inclusive and open. This includes examining norms, beliefs, and behaviors that are passed down from one generation to the next. Upon examination, the gap between the teacher and student can be bridged and understanding and student success can be improved.

To achieve this, teachers should observe their surroundings by doing something as simple as taking a neighborhood walk. The teacher will come to know the community in which the school population is located. This is best accomplished when guided by a local student. Be mindful of things such as:

- shapes in building design,
- minerals and rocks present,
- the types of suppliers in an area,
- styles of music being played,

- variety of games played,
- flags and symbols being displayed.

Next, take a look at community assets. This can be accomplished by selecting adults from the community that are culturally different from yours. Consider:

- What are people in this community particularly good at accomplishing?
- Describe how you would like to see the community five or ten years from now.
- Identify any barriers.

This will help to see the community through the eyes of someone who knows it intimately and through a different lens.

Finally, focus on the community resources. Find out who the local residents of the community see as leaders.

- Who do members of the community recognize as spokespersons?
- Are there particular organizations that community members belong to?
- Are there organizations (formal and informal) that people in the neighborhood identify with?

Be sure to get the perspective of the residents and look at religious institutions and community centers to make a map of the community.

It is important that teachers be taught to explore multicultural awareness by examining their own beliefs, setting high expectations through challenges and engaging activities (Hillberg, Tharp, and DeGeest 2000), incorporating critical thinking and parent involvement, and considering social justice with the cultural community. These skills work well in traditional and online settings.

Design CRT Activities

View students in the class setting and consider what they are reading, how they are interacting, and their role in curriculum decisions. Add this information to the findings from the neighborhood walk and consider ways to adapt traditional lessons to be more inclusive. Here is an example from the Southwest region of the U.S.:

Science Crop planting, hunting, fixing mechanical things	Literacy Bible study, family stories, family letters
Math Selling, managing income, budgeting	Social studies, history, geography Local mapping, local history, building codes, immigration routes
Health, PE Childcare, first aid procedures, games, childcare	Arts Folk music, carpentry, textile design, masonry

Based on the observations in the Southwest, these findings could be incorporated into different lessons.

As seen through differentiation and universal design for learning strategies, CRT could also be incorporated into the curriculum in an online platform. This approach would develop designers who can adapt lessons to students' diverse backgrounds, nourish relationships with families and communities while positively promoting cultural differences into the framework of instruction.

Lessons can be adapted to incorporate CRT ideas. A typical activity, such as creating a family tree, can exclude students with distant or unknown relatives. Such assignments can be altered to focus on primary relationships. This can be accomplished by adapting a typical family tree to include an interview of family members. Additional ways to broaden a family tree assignment to be more inclusive would be focusing on community resources through surveys, conversations with family members, and video interviews. Adaptations are compared in the table.

Traditional Lesson	Culturally Responsive Lesson
Family Tree	Video Interview of family members
Classics Literature Reading- Fitzgerald . . .	Globally diverse texts; different cultures
Current Events - CNN & Fox news	Current Events from a multi-cultural view: BBC, Aljazeera news . . .
Oral presentation of local area/ state	Include students' native countries
Language tutoring	Organize ESL students as peer language tutors
Local Guest Lecturer	International Guest Lecturer via Zoom
Field Trip	Virtual Field Trip internationally
Mnemonic device for science to tune of ABC song	Mnemonic to tune of culturally relevant song
Government class will write about different ways that citizens can participate in democracy	Have students write officials describing something in their lives that the official has the power to impact and offer a solution.
Students are asked to select a famous scientist and write a biography with a credible source.	Students find a scientist of color or diverse background and write a biography based on a credible source.
Learn Vocabulary terms	Practice Orally, sing terms Game such as a puzzle or Kahoot Social interaction Make it a story

Based on neuroscience, culture and background make learning easier as the brain processes information linked to prior knowledge (Hammond 2015).

Teachers need to adapt their teaching styles to meet the academic needs of all students (Banks 2013). Best practices of CRT techniques equip teachers with the skills to change their internal perspectives and to understand all students so that meaningful engagement activities can be created.

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