

What does Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy look like?

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Co-Creating Curriculum through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Charlene Mendoza

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) challenges me to create democratic, pluralistic spaces for and with students. As part of re-imagining our classroom as more dialogic, students engage in inquiry to explore, struggle with and perhaps overcome social injustice by creating understanding through the texts we encounter.

A CSP inspired re-envisioning of a literary analysis essay in my AP English Literature and Composition class is one example. With the sound of pencils whishing and the pages of our mutually created diverse text sets flipping, thinking is palpable. Students identify and follow their tensions and connections provoked by literature, reader-response engagements, collaborative discussions and reflective writing. Through self-selected engagements like conflict maps, heart maps, and dialectic journals, students construct questions that inspire writing prompts that they answer in essays. Engagement skyrockets as students become curriculum-creators, not passive recipients of my curriculum. Students humanize themselves and peers as collaborators and scholars.

By questioning texts, sorting those questions into thematic clusters and selecting a cluster to write about, students direct their own learning. Some students pursue inquiries into identity and its intersections, others explore "what makes a family: biology, love, responsibility, sacrifice?" Once students craft prompts, they mine the texts, engagements and collaborative discussions for evidence to support the theses they have constructed. Small groups grapple with questions like "Can someone do bad things but not be a bad person?" or "How did that character cope with having parents who were unreliable or absent?" or "Do children have agency in their own lives?" This focuses classroom activities on meaning making that flows from issues students choose to explore connecting the texts to their own lives and communities.

Through the lens of inquiry, students have an embodied experience of the world through literature. Students become problem-posers who "develop their own power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire).

It's easy to imagine stereotypical English teachers as disconnected, uncaring, elitists more engaged in correcting grammar and teaching the "right" interpretation of canonized literature through a transmission model. In these classes, students are passive occupants in class waiting to be filled with knowledge supplied by the teacher. Our classroom, however, is filled with student voice and choice. We are acting

upon and with each other to share, critique and create knowledge and meaning. This dialogic power-sharing space humanizes our mutual learning by supporting pedagogy that acknowledges youth as fully actualized human beings with knowledge, awareness and resources who are agents in their school lives directing explorations of text and writing in a scholarly and rigorous manner.

Paris and Alim (2014) challenge teachers "to envision and enact pedagogies that are not filtered through a lens of contempt and pity but, rather, are centered on contending in complex ways with the rich and innovative linguistic, literary, and cultural practices of ...youth and communities of color." My re-imagining is a step in that direction.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy Across Two Different School Contexts

Lorena Germán

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) is an effective strategy in any classroom setting. It looks different depending on the school context in which you teach. I've taught from a CSP framework in both an urban public school and a predominantly White independent school. I've had amazing results in both.

In the urban public school where I taught, CSP looked like creating units that were centered on students' lived experiences and voices. One example was engaging a classroom of 10th graders by analyzing Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing." Students were highly engaged and this was evident through their intellectual debates and products where they made direct connections to their communities. As an educator, I had to be prepared to engage students in challenging dialogue about police brutality, racism, and gentrification. Ultimately, the conversation led us to discuss educational inequality which is what we were experiencing together in the classroom. We spoke about aspects of their schooling that were unjust and attempted to find ways to navigate those circumstances. CSP, in the urban public school, meant that I had to become a student with them and intentionally guide the content to be inclusive of their extracurricular conversations and experiences. These activities led to writing that was critical of systems of inequality. It led to character-based analytical debates and discussion of such tropes in their own community. Standardized testing for the sake of appeasing some federal policy was not at the top of my priority list.

At my current independent school, CSP looks like engaging in courageous conversations about the white gaze, feminism, slavery, gentrification, and soon to come: the politics of language. Students research and present on these concepts and we learn together as a class. We invite guest speakers and find ways to explore experiences different than our own. As a class, we have worked on stretching the boundaries of text, writing, and reading so that we can be more inclusive of other voices and cultures. Some examples of this include welcoming street art as a text, or reading a tattoo as text, or creating a street art inspired one-dimensional piece that was a visual representation of their original analytical essay. These activities have pushed students to think critically about their own experiences, others' experiences, and begun to shape them into considerate and culturally aware young people ready to participate meaningfully in society.

CSP is not a teaching guide or a set of lesson plans. It's an approach to the craft of teaching. Often teachers want a 'strategy' or a concrete unit to reach their students. Being ourselves and engaging our students' lives as the content for analysis is CSP. CSP allows me to be the inclusive and socially just k-16 teacher I never had. And when I'm engaged and present, my students are engaged and learning.

Exploring & Sustaining Conceptions of "Respect" across Cultural Difference

Matt Knieling

The word respect is nearly ubiquitous in schools, from codes of conduct to classroom rules. We expect that students respect their teachers, respect their peers, and respect the classroom. However, the concept of respect is rarely interrogated, and too often perpetuates dominant white, middle-class values, along with a power structure that frequently marginalizes students.

Recognizing that respect is a culturally-constructed notion, I am working with my students to develop a more nuanced and culturally sustaining understanding of respect. This is particularly important because I teach in a very diverse school--racially, ethnically, linguistically, etc. Furthermore, as a white teacher in a diverse school, it is critically important that I remain cognizant of my classroom dynamics and the ways in which I inadvertently perpetuate oppressive systems. Working with my students to explore deeply and meaningfully how they understand respect--which not only brings in their voice, but allows me to disrupt the dominance of white, middle-class culture in schools--is one way that I am working to create a culturally sustaining classroom.

Each morning begins with "crew," which is similar to homeroom, but focuses more on community-/relationship-building. My crew consists of 14 sixth grade students. Every morning, we eat breakfast together and participate in a mini-lesson. Because this space is designed for openness, dialogue, and community, I decided to use this space to explore, collectively, conceptions of respect among my students. We only recently started this thematic inquiry, but already, we are gaining valuable insights into the diverse ways in which we understand/experience respect.

Rather than trying to define respect, my students and I are each writing and sharing stories related to respect. For instance, the first question I posed was: What was a time when you felt respected by a teacher? We all wrote for a few minutes, then some of us shared. Some students shared stories of teachers going out of their way to help them; some shared stories of teachers listening to them before jumping to conclusions; others shared stories of specific teaching styles (e.g. Explaining content more slowly). Just from this activity alone, we learned that respect means something very different to most of us. Based off my students' input, we will continue to explore these ideas, including times when we felt both respected and disrespected by a teacher or a peer.

Though I am only just beginning to explore how our diverse backgrounds contribute to diverse understandings of respect, I am already learning so much and understanding the disconnects between the way teachers demand respect and the way students understand respect. It is my hope that through this process, I am able to build stronger relationships with my students, to allow all of my students--across cultural differences--to feel respected, and to sustain their own cultural backgrounds within my classroom, through my practices and interactions.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Recognizing and Honoring every (Student) Tile within the (Classroom) Mosaic

Gabriella Corales

Honoring the diversity within our classrooms is necessary. Historically, our school system has committed cultural and linguistic genocide (e.g., Native American Boarding Schools, prohibition of Spanish in schools, etc.). However, rather than rejecting what is "different," we ought to create spaces and curriculum that embrace and sustain cultural and linguistic diversity.

My students hail from some of the hardest working families. Many were born to immigrant parents or are immigrants themselves from Mexico, Peru, Vietnam, India, and Nigeria. They each represent unique cultures, religions, sexual orientations, and genders. Each student is a tile within the classroom mosaic.

At the beginning of the year, we read Lorraine Hansberry's critically-acclaimed play "A Raisin in the Sun." In it, Hansberry sheds light on important social issues, while also capturing African American, working-class language. I play the original Broadway recording at the beginning so students can hear the characters' language variety and personality. Doing so not only sustains this particular language variety, but also communicates that ways of using language have value across the spoken English continuum. Moreover, the familiar language increases access and engagement.

As students' fluency around reading and comprehension increases, we begin our analysis. Students learn about and apply Feminist, Marxist, and Critical Race Theory literary lenses to their reading. They first practice this with Disney lyrics, such as clips from Shrek for example. We discuss various forms of oppression (social, psychological, economical). They begin to analyze the portrayal and treatment of women, the working class, and historically oppressed groups in supplemental texts. Students identify the ways in which the characters reinforce or undermine oppression. Armed with this critical lens, we return to "A Raisin in the Sun" to uncover some of Hansberry's underlying themes.

My favorite part of this unit is when students begin questioning, making connections, and saying, "I cannot look at [TV] the same! As I was watching, I realized that they portrayed [women] as...!" As educators, we can use texts that use variations of language and dialect and then get creative with how students analyze and discuss those texts.

Moreover, we can create spaces for (Four Corners) discussion activities that encourage students to share their experiences as young people of color, women within patriarchal cultures, and immigrants, for example.

We can also provide multiple text selections rather than focusing on one narrative/culture/dialect. During our Immigration unit, students chose one of seven books, representing various cultures (e.g., Nazario's "Enrique's Journey," Adichie's "Americanah," Tan's "Joy Luck Club"). During our interdisciplinary Civil Rights rhetoric unit, students chose one of six historical movements, analyzing its rhetoric and resistance strategies. These options allow students either to explore deeply a part of their identity and generate pride and passion or to learn about other cultures and generate compassion and understanding.

Regardless of the text, language variety, or content, we can get students to think critically, identify an author's messages, formulate valid claims, and cite supportive evidence. In doing so, not only do we meet the demands of Common Core and cultivate our students' analytical thinking and writing skills, but we also sustain their linguistic and cultural diversity.

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Making Connections: A Message in the Music

Brian Pew

In a recent unit on Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis" with my New York City 10th graders, my students and I infused contemporary culture with the experiences of a young Middle Eastern girl during the Iranian revolution. The summative assessment required students to react to the protagonist's, Marji, choice of music throughout the novel. I also charged students with creating a playlist of contemporary music that one could smuggle to someone in a similar situation of oppression today.

Throughout the unit my students boldly reacted to oppressive forces brought down upon the Iranian people. "Ah, hell no!" was a common refrain heard throughout my room. My students' vernacular generated lists gathered on chart paper throughout the room where we gathered "Ah hell no!" moments. As we progressed through our reading, we developed a resource, in the form of a shared list, which helped us generate song ideas for playlists.

Throughout the text, Marji mentions Michael Jackson, Kim Wilde, and Iron Maiden. I exposed my students to this music as we read and analyzed how some of the songs helped Marji in her struggle to deal with the oppressive government that was making her life difficult.. The decades old music was met with jeers and a couple more "hell no" moments, but eventually we all experienced the cathartic relief of stress through music. Then, as my students worked on their own playlists, they introduced me to Drake, Nas, Kanye West, Iggy Azalea, The Weekend, Kendrick Lamar, Jamila Woods and Ghostface Killah. One learner, Brandon, who had to this point been reluctant to participate in my class, was one of the students who asked if he could share a few tracks from his playlist. He then proceeded to play Run DMC's "Tricky" explaining that if he wanted to help people who were oppressed today with music he would need to teach them about Hip Hop's roots. He wanted to show everyone his running-man too, which he did in class as kids chanted: "It's Tricky to rock a rhyme, to rock a rhyme that's right on time."

In their written reflections at the end of the unit, my students expressed an understanding of Marji's connection with music. Students had to provide a justification for each of their selected songs. Allowing students to bring their own music into our literature unit was a culturally sustaining practice as it helped to both increase student performance and center their identities: my students became personally invested in Marji's struggle. Students' engagement and comprehension increased more than I have seen before.

The Power of Language in the Classroom

Cyrene Crooms

"You let us speak Spanish here." These were the words that my fourth grade student shared with me in our reading group. This statement caught me off guard. What did she mean that I let her and her group members speak Spanish, their primary language? I slowly began to realize that my small office that was transformed into a classroom for upper-elementary labeled "at-risk" readers was a safe space for my students to be themselves. I would soon discover that my classroom was one of the few locations in our school, which enrolled 35% of an English Language Learner (ELLs) student population, where students' home languages were welcomed. In reality, most of our students spoke at least one other language and/or dialect as soon as they saw their loved ones in the schoolyard. They were all multilingual and multicultural learners.

During another small group session with my readers, a child encouraged her classmate to explain his ideas in Spanish. We were discussing the unfortunate circumstances of the protagonist in *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli. The narrator described how the myth of Maniac Magee had come about. I decided to ask the inquisitive learners if they could add their own interpretation to how myths emerge and proliferate. A male student, who was often very outspoken in non-academic content areas but less so in class, decided to participate. As he struggled to make a connection to a popular myth in Mexican culture, one of my female students assuredly said to him, "Say it in Spanish!" The young man continued to try to express his ideas by saying, "Como se..." Unfortunately, this student was unable to retrieve the memory that he wanted to convey. Despite his inability to articulate his connection, the often-reticent readers and speakers in class became engaged and confident learners.

Our book talks about Maniac Magee debunked myths about my so-called "at-risk" English Language Learners. We had complex and difficult conversations about race, class, immigration, homelessness, being orphaned, and other sensitive issues. The same students who were deemed "below proficient" and "in need of remediation" became deep thinkers and multilingual communicators. In my small office-turned-classroom, my students and I developed a safe space to learn and be ourselves. I became more than just the "reading teacher" and they became more than just "struggling readers." We WERE readers, thinkers, and communicators. These two vignettes from my experiences as a literacy interventionist, encapsulates one of many ways I cultivate culturally sustaining pedagogy in my practice with my students. The most fascinating part of these events was that it all started with my students' belief that I would let them speak Spanish in our classroom.