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Engaging in Culturally Relevant Teaching: Lessons From the Field

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Lessons From the Field

Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) is a popular topic for discussion and research, and it continues to gain more traction through practical application in classrooms worldwide. Certainly, as many teachers look around their classrooms, they recognize that demographics are changing, and student populations are becoming increasingly more diverse. It is more likely than ever that teachers will not look like or have the same cultural or linguistic background as many of their students.¹ This means that some

students will be entering classrooms with valuable learning strategies developed within their home communities, but these strategies may be very different from what their teachers are accustomed to using.

As mid-career Adventist educators, we (the authors of this article) have each experienced unique opportunities to be challenged, to reflect, and to continuously grow in our approaches to CRT. It has been both a journey of discovery and a reminder to approach CRT from a posture of humility. We have come to recognize the importance of owning our own cultural identities and acknowledging

their impact on how we think, teach, and live.

We also value spiritual development and believe that the Adventist teacher has a unique calling and privilege to help students integrate their faith, learning, and life with rigor and perspective. As Adventist educators, we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that all students are provided with a redemptive education, one in which they are treated with dignity and respect while being encouraged to become “thinkers, not mere reflectors of

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Charissa Boyd demonstrating multilingual language instruction.

other people’s thought.”² Therefore, we must go beyond stereotypes and assumptions about ourselves and others to proceed with purposeful action. Culturally Relevant Teaching provides one avenue we can use to immerse ourselves in this work.

While how this is implemented will look different around the globe, we will share our experiences as teachers who have worked in a wide range of educational settings in the United States and other countries. The tips provided in this article have been drawn from core concepts, implementation strategies, and lessons learned while in the field. Throughout the article we will include our own personal experiences as we discuss the tips. These tips are foundational to the successful implementation of CRT by Adventist educators, and emerge from three interrelated

foundational components of culturally relevant teaching—setting, curriculum, and engagement.

What Is Culturally Relevant Teaching?

So, what is Culturally Relevant Teaching, exactly? CRT is a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings to describe “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”³ It was birthed out of Ladson-Billings’ research to identify what made American public school teachers successful within low socio-economic, primarily African American school districts. Through her research, she identified three core criteria of CRT: Students must do the following: (1) experience academic success; (2) maintain or develop cultural competence; and (3) develop a critical consciousness through which they can challenge the status quo of the current social order.⁴

Tip 1. Consider the setting.

Globally, a growing number of classrooms contain students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Positioned within both school and community contexts, educators must ensure that this dual context is reflected in their work. They can do so by honoring the history and voice of communities represented in their classrooms through reinforcing their commitment to excellence and high expectations, and through integrating students’ home languages within the classroom.⁵ Since communities differ, it is the teacher’s responsibility to assess and evaluate his or her setting through careful observation, listening, dialogue, and reflection. And, since the setting will change with each new school year or semester, this type of reflection must be ongoing.

Tip 2. Make peace with your own identity.

In order to understand and identify with others, a teacher needs to understand himself or herself. We (the authors) each committed to exploring our individual identities, knowing that we would be teaching students whose experiences differed from our own. A primary way that we have done this work is to come to terms with our own racial and ethnic identities (see Sidebar 1). Once a teacher has committed to self-reflection and identity work, he or she is well-positioned to incorporate the other elements of CRT.

Tip 3. Embrace and maintain high expectations for both academics and behavior.

I (CG) start each school year having high expectations of my students. It is maintaining those expectations throughout the year that often poses a challenge. In order to maintain this as a priority, I’ve found a few practices helpful:

- First, establish a connection between the commitment to excellence

Sidebar 1. Reflections

Charissa's Reflection

It was during my Master's studies that I first began exploring my racial identity as a white American. For most of my life, I had generally avoided the topic of my own race, going even so far as refusing to enter my race on census forms or job applications. But as I prepared to teach immigrant students, I realized that the face my students would see every day at the front of their classroom was a white face, and I would be immediately classified in their minds accordingly. What did it mean, then, to be white?

For me, understanding myself as a white teacher required both thorough research on the racial experiences of non-whites and a search for my own white identity. I spent a considerable amount of time uncovering the stories of my ancestors from Europe, Mexico, and Africa. They traveled by boat or walked across borders. Some came for economic opportunity or religious freedom. Others came through no choice of their own. Some became U.S. citizens, some chose not to, others were not allowed to. Taking the time to explore how I came to be here has given me a vivid understanding of how my success is deeply rooted in the "success" of those who came before me and the loss of those who came before and alongside of them.

Throughout this journey, I needed to find heroes in white anti-racist activists, people who could demonstrate for me what an identity rooted in justice and social transformation looks like. I found those people in historical figures like Jane Addams,¹ modern educators like Gary R. Howard,² even in my own great-grandmother Eunice Klopfenstein. They modeled a whiteness of which I can be proud.

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Charity's Reflection

I grew up curious about my racial identity. While one side of my family line could be traced to the early 1400s in Spain and through Mexico into the United States, the other could not be traced past my mother's closed adoption. Due to the assimilationist approach to immigration at the time, my grandparents ensured that the Spanish language did not get passed on to their children. This meant that while some traditional Hispanic cultural components remained, I was taught how to benefit from what researchers now define as "white privilege." When I began my teaching career, students of color quickly classified me as white. They refused to acknowledge my Hispanic heritage until I had built a trust relationship with them.

For me, then, not being able to define my racial and ethnic identity has made it difficult to make peace with it. While I have found much joy in having my primary identity be that of a Christian, in an effort to learn more, I took a DNA test recently. It reaffirmed my Spanish and Mexican roots, expanded my identity to include Native American bloodlines, and deeply challenged me by identifying a 30 percent English/Irish heritage. The results brought forward a more focused dissonance as I seek to bring together what others have already seen me to be with who I see myself to be personally and professionally.

within the local cultural and community history and the high expectations being set for students.

- Second, keep expectations visible. Designate a prominent space in your classroom where you display curriculum standards that apply to the content being taught. The behavior code of conduct should also be visible. One way to do this is to laminate a large version of your classroom code of conduct (written in student-friendly language), and have all students sign it. Display it along with motivational quotes.

- Third, be consistent. Use rubrics to evaluate assignments so that all student work is assessed using the same criteria. This will mean teaching for mastery while providing instructional scaffolding for those who need it. For behavior codes of conduct, hold students (and yourself!) accountable when the code of conduct is broken.

Research tells us that teacher expectations have a significant influence on student performance, both positively and negatively.⁶ Seventh-day Adventist educators have a unique opportunity to live out the foundational biblical belief that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and that "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do."⁷ In many public schools in the United States, students of color are overrepresented in special-education classrooms⁸ and underrepresented in advanced-placement classes and gifted-education programs.⁹ In contrast, many students in Adventist schools have limited access to such services, and therefore teachers and administrators must advocate for and support those students who need additional resources (special education, advanced placement, and gifted-education programs), keep the bar set high, and scaffold students' learning for rigorous and successful goal attainment.

Tip 4. Embrace multilingualism.

In my personal experience, I (CB) quickly learned that one of the most powerful tools for creating a culturally relevant classroom environment is to integrate the native languages of my students into the studies in every way possible. Even the implementation of simple steps in this direction gave my students permission to show pride in their heritage and to be their whole selves, not just their “English-language selves,” in my classroom. Students who initially refused to speak at all started participating in classroom discussions when they realized that their voice/language was not going to be silenced.

There are multiple ways to incorporate your students’ native languages into day-to-day classroom activities:

- Multilingual word walls and bulletin boards.¹⁰
- Scaffolding tasks (allowing students to use their native languages for tasks like online research, note taking, first drafts of writing assignments, etc.).¹¹
- Dual language and translation projects.¹²
- Language study (comparing vocabulary words in multiple languages or setting aside a week or a month for learning specific words and phrases in the native language of one or more of the students).¹³

These strategies can be used in classrooms containing several students who speak different languages, and even in classrooms that have only a few students. The language-rich environment that results from multilingual word walls, bulletin boards, or dual-language projects will benefit all learners, even native English speakers.¹⁴

Tip 5. Examine curriculum and learning materials for bias.

Examining the curriculum from a culturally relevant teaching perspective will help teachers engage students in critical thinking, encourage them to invest in intentional opportu-



Charity Garcia demonstrating Circles of Interest to help students communicate in various social settings.

nities for every student to develop his or her voice, and empower all students to engage with education as a way to seek justice and reconciliation.

Textbooks or other provided learning materials used to teach in Adventist schools are often examined and approved by the union or division office and mandated for use. Even so, it is necessary for teachers to review the resources for bias or omitted perspectives. When teachers use these curriculum resources without taking the time to examine them for bias, they may miss valuable opportunities for students to engage in critical conversation and to experience empowerment. I (CG) made this mistake my first-year teaching World War II history to Navajo middle school students. I read aloud the textbook’s one paragraph on Navajo Code Talkers and spent less than five minutes on the topic. Subsequent student am-

bivalence clearly indicated that I had missed a valuable opportunity for these middle schoolers to feel empowered by their tribe’s pivotal role in the outcome of the war. I began to realize that Navajo Code Talkers were not just part of “Navajo history”; they were part of *United States history*. After learning this lesson, I adjusted future unit planning—not only for World War II but also when dealing with other concepts such as Manifest Destiny.

Tip 6. Seek out multiple perspectives.

Closely related to Tip No. 5, teachers should examine curriculum materials from multiple perspectives. Where he or she identifies bias in curriculum documents, it is the teacher’s responsibility to include other perspectives—particularly the

ones that otherwise would not be part of the conversation. This is especially important when seeking to understand the community in which the school exists from a strengths-based perspective (identifying positive assets within a community such as people and resources) rather than from a deficit model (seeing only what the community lacks).¹⁵

I (CG) have found developing a strengths-based community-asset map¹⁶ to be invaluable—highlighting museums, historical landmarks, businesses owned by active community supporters and students’ family members, community-development organizations, key stakeholders, and more. I recommend that teachers make friends with the local librarian, who can also be a good resource. He or she will either be able to locate primary or secondary resources within your topic/content area or connect you to people who can.

Teachers should keep in mind that the more often students see the faces of people from many different cultures at the front of their classroom, the more they will be able to see reflections of themselves within the educational culture. When given the choice, I (CB) have purposefully sought substitute teachers, teacher’s assistants, and guest speakers whose cultures and experiences were similar to those of my students. These people provided learning opportunities for my students that I would never have been able to provide.

Tip 7. Commit to using a variety of processes for learning.

Along with a setting and curriculum that meet the needs of a diverse classroom, the methods and strategies used to engage students in the process of learning are equally influenced by culture. Students’ cultures shape the way they interact with one another, teachers, and the learning material. And although no student can be completely defined by his or her culture, it is wise for teachers to familiarize themselves with some of the ways that culture manifests itself in the classroom and

influences how students think about the learning process and how they actually learn.

The cultural values of individualism and collectivism shape how students involve themselves in the learning process. While individualist cultures emphasize individual success and personal choice, collectivist cultures focus on relationships and the advancement of the group.¹⁷ A teacher may find that students who come from more collectivist cultures (which make up the majority of the world’s populations) tend to listen rather than speak, thrive during cooperative tasks, and express interest in social-skills development as part of their education. Those from more individualistic cultures tend to be galvanized by personal achievement, dialogue, and competition. Since teachers will have students from collectivist and individualistic cultures, both types of learning tasks must be incorporated into classroom instruction to accommodate the needs of all students.

I (CB) learned that students from collectivist cultures often responded to my questions with silence. Using an active pause (“wait time”)¹⁸ gives students time to think before responding, a behavior that is highly valued within their culture. Putting them in small groups or calling on them by name also makes it more likely they will be comfortable participating in classroom discussions.¹⁹

Tip 8. Engage students in critical thinking and dialogue to build cultural capital.

When they recognize that the formal curriculum can be a source of bias, educators are better able to critically assess the materials they are teaching. But more than that, including students in this analysis is a powerful learning tactic. In her landmark study, Gloria Ladson-Billings²⁰ found that excellent teachers of African American students engaged them in a review of their textbooks.

In this way, although the required curricula are used, students get to critically engage with them in ways that are empowering. This approach works well for all students, giving them the opportunity to study a topic from multiple points of view. They also get to think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of an argument while building and refining their own point of view.

Another way to involve students in culturally relevant learning experiences is to assist them in developing critical consciousness about their attitudes toward learning particular information. Many of my (CG) students at the second-chance workforce development academy balked at learning Standard English. It was, of course, necessary for their academic success; however, it felt fake or forced to them at best. I needed a different tactic. By knowing about the settings within which they functioned, I could engage students in critical-thinking activities related to their circles of interest. We drew large circles on the whiteboard for each student, and usually identified at least two domains in which they were already successful. They knew how to stay safe on the street, how to navigate conversations with family by using dialect or another language to communicate in different social settings, and so on. The circle they did not yet know how to access fully was the work world. So, we built on their understanding of code switching²¹—a social-theory term for adapting forms of communication to meet the environment—and helped them learn Standard English in order to reach their employment goals.

Tip 9. Redefine the roles of teacher and student.

Rooted in the dialogic teaching approach (an approach that relies on conversation to help stimulate and extend students’ thinking) is the idea that students should begin to “take on roles and responsibilities that have been traditionally reserved for the teachers.”²² This requires that

teachers value the knowledge students bring to the classroom and consider themselves to be learners along with their students.

For me (CB), repositioning myself into the role of teacher-learner, not just teacher, was challenging. As I eased into the role, I experienced discomfort. I quite liked being the most knowledgeable person in the classroom. But the rewards I gained from letting go of my expert status at key moments were worthwhile. Instead of correcting what at first glance looked like errors, I observed, asked questions, and learned.

For example, I noticed one student in math class counting by threes (rather than, say, twos or fives or tens), and I felt confused about why she was not using an easier skip counting strategy. “I notice that you’re counting by threes. Tell me more about what you’re doing here,” I said. The student next to her joined the conversation. “She was in 3rd grade in Honduras, and when we’re in 3rd grade [in Honduras], we’re learning our times tables. That’s how we practice them.” The discussion continued for several minutes, as students shared the many ways they were taught math in their home countries. Making space for this important dialogue gifted me with a clearer picture of the content, teaching styles, and strategies with which my students were already familiar, and gave me ideas for incorporating their previous experiences into later lessons.

Redefining the role of teacher and student has challenged both of us (CB and CG). Initially, I (CG) found it easier to hand off the teacher role to another expert from the community than to embrace what I felt was a “messier” student-as-teacher way of learning. However, the reward has been worth it! In an interdisciplinary America’s Westward Expansion unit (one that was remade to correct the

mistakes acknowledged earlier), I joined both Navajo and white students as we grappled together with issues relating to expansion, removal, justice, God, and religion. One of the most moving and humbling moments in my teaching career came when one of my Navajo 5th-grade students made a decision toward reconciliation. He had been struggling with deep anger as we learned more about the ill treatment of the Navajo people during the “Long Walk” from their land in what is now Arizona to eastern New Mexico and their stay at Fort Sumner,²³ and yet he had also been journeying with us as a class toward justice and reconciliation. While on a field trip to Fort Sumner, he looked at us solemnly and said, “I place this arrowhead on this memorial because arrowheads are weapons, and I’m not going to fight white people anymore.” I’m still in touch with that particular student. I can testify that he was serious about his commitment. He continues to work toward justice for Navajo people, and now as a young adult, his work is not driven by hatred.

Summary

The journey toward culturally relevant teaching may require foundational shifts in the way we view ourselves and our students, and may require us to adopt different strategies in order to achieve maximum impact on student success. It is not enough to simply *say* that we are all human and all loved equally by God; we must be intentional in our planning as we put these words into action. CRT does not mean engaging in celebratory multiculturalism²⁴ (emphasis on celebrating food, holidays, or traditions) or incorporating race into the curriculum while continuing to teach from the same viewpoint and using the same strategies. It requires sustainable and rigorous reflection on our ways of thinking and being. We must help our students push back against dominant, often negative, narratives about people regardless of their background

by encouraging them to develop resilience. In every country there is a dominant culture that interacts with a minority culture, and sadly, these interactions are not always positive. Our students need to learn to live in multiple environments—their home community, the dominant community, and an increasingly blended, diverse world. As you explore what CRT will look like in your classroom, we hope you will benefit from learning from our experiences—not only our successes but also our “teachable moments.” ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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