



Relevance Matters: Culturally Responsive Teaching in the ELA Classroom

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Let's be clear—relevance matters!

“Culturally responsive pedagogy is situated in a framework that recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that diverse students bring to schools, and seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing students’ academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well-being.”

—From *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America’s Classrooms*, Tyrone C. Howard

As educators, we want students who are excited to learn and engaged in the work. But many students are disconnected, turned off to education because they don’t see school as related to who they are and the world they inhabit. That’s where culturally responsive teaching comes in. It’s an approach that uses the experiences and strengths of a diverse student body to make school more relevant, and it’s backed by research that shows that people learn more successfully when new information is linked to what they already know.

The concept of culturally responsive teaching was introduced by education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings and built upon by Geneva Gay. It incorporates attributes and knowledge from students’ cultural background into instructional strategies and curriculum in order to improve educational outcomes. A key element is a learning environment that values the strengths students bring into classrooms rather than focusing on deficits. Students are encouraged to use familiar ways of speaking, thinking, knowing, and analyzing in order to learn new content and ideas.

By creating a culturally responsive learning environment, offering relevant content, and following best practices in your pedagogy, you can help students make connections between their lives in the world and their lives at school. Those connections will increase their engagement and improve outcomes.

Create a Relevant Learning Environment

Culturally responsive teaching depends on learning environments that affirm our students and helps them feel included, validated, valued, and safe. The following elements are crucial.

- **A fundamental belief in the ability of all students to learn.**
Educators must have high expectations for every student, regardless of background, accompanied by a set of positive attitudes and dispositions toward them.
- **A wide range of curricular content.** Education scholar Rudine Sims Bishop suggests that literature should provide mirrors and windows for all children. In other words, students should have access to characters and settings that look like them and their communities. They should also read texts that encourage them to look outward and learn about others' worlds.
- **Dynamic instruction.** Students learn in a multitude of ways so teaching strategies should be dynamic and diverse. Students should have whole-group instruction, pair-share, and small-group activities that require them to share, discuss, disagree, and think individually and collectively. Students should be allowed a multitude of ways to participate and demonstrate mastery of content.
- **Community involvement.** Parents, caregivers, grandparents, and community members should be invited to come to classrooms to share stories, give historical overviews of a community and changes that have happened over time, offer support, share immigration stories, and provide cultural bridges between the larger community and the school community.



ACTIVITIES

To engage in more culturally responsive approaches, have students:

- Write about their families and interests
- Turn & talk about relevance to a new concept or topic
- Draft “I am from” poems
- Create “All about Me” posters
- Participate in Student of the Week bulletin boards
- Write their own autobiographies and read those of classmates
- Bring in artifacts about themselves or their family

Follow Best Practices

Culturally responsive teaching is multi-faceted. It’s not focused solely on curriculum materials or instructional style and can’t be achieved by following a set of steps. The following practices can help you create a more relevant classroom.

- **Activate students’ prior knowledge.** Ask students what they may know about a particular theme or concept that is being introduced and connect that to the lesson you are introducing. For example, before you begin a story about a family, you might ask students to describe their own families.
- **Make learning contextual.** When discussing a literary or informational text from another time, place, or culture, encourage students to connect the text to their lives or the current moment.
- **Consider your classroom set up.** One of the ways to communicate to students that they matter is for them to see themselves reflected in the classroom environment. Ask yourself: Are there works by authors of different races in the classroom library? Is the LGBTQ community represented? Are different languages and countries displayed? Are people with disabilities seen?
- **Form relationships.** Connecting to students as people is vital to culturally responsive teaching. Learning about students’ interests, likes, dislikes, family members, and aspirations are all ways to build relationships. And remember to share about yourself. The best relationships are mutual, built on transparency and trust.



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- **Discuss social and political issues.** Help students discuss and learn about current issues that matter to them, including immigration, community-police relations, environmental concerns, women's rights, and race relations. The goal is not to tell students what to think, but to teach them how to become informed and how to engage in respectful dialogue.
- **Tap into students' cultural capital.** Seek ways for students to use and share the skills, knowledge, and strengths they bring to the classroom. Give students opportunities to respond to texts in a variety of ways and help each other to do so. If students speak more than one language, allow them to use languages other than English.
- **Incorporate popular culture.** Connect the music, movies, and other media students are interested in to the content of the classroom. For some students, video games, fashion, and sports are automatic ways to grab their attention and connect to their interests.



“In classrooms where culturally responsive teaching is practiced, we often see an increase in students’ effort and a rise in participation. Most importantly, we see students grow as learners. Our ultimate goal is to create cultural democracies in our classrooms, where students are continuously interacting with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and realities, and where every student feels respected, important, and proud.”

– Dr. Tyrone C. Howard

