

Relevance Matters: Culturally Responsive Teaching in the ELA Classroom

by **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 most successfully when new information is linked to what they already know.

"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*, by Tyrone C. Howard



The concept of culturally responsive teaching was introduced by education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings and built upon by author and educator Geneva Gay. It incorporates attributes and knowledge from each student's cultural background into instructional strategies and curricula 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 conducive 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 that will increase their engagement and improve outcomes.

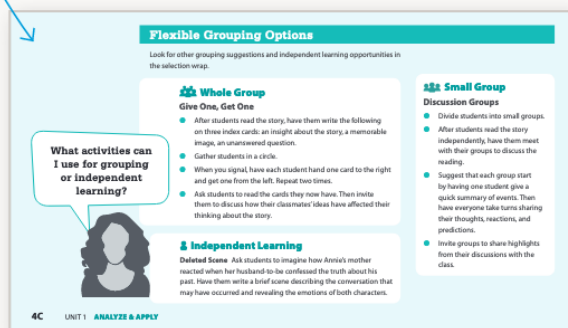
Create a Conducive Learning Environment

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

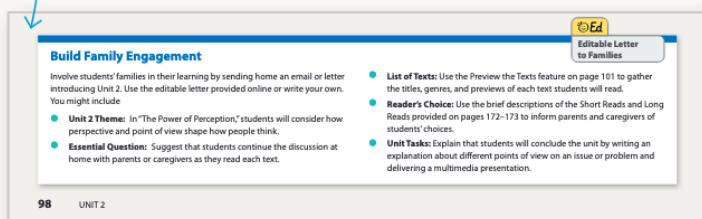
- **A fundamental belief in the ability of all students to learn.** Educators must have high expectations for every student, accompanied by a set of positive attitudes about them.
- **A wide range of curricular content.** Education scholar Rudine Sims Bishop suggests that literature should provide “mirrors and windows” for all children. In other words, students should have access to characters that look like them and settings that look like their communities. They should also read texts that help them 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, paired activities, 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 asked to come to classrooms to share stories, give historical overviews of a community, offer supports, and provide cultural bridges between the larger community and the school community.



Into Literature's **Table of Contents** reflects the wide range of cultures and experiences that students bring to the classroom. The program's flexibility allows for you to include additional texts that will speak to your students.



Flexible Grouping Options help you offer students a range of ways to interact with each other and with the text.



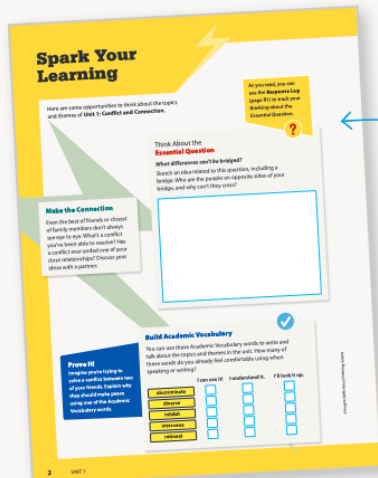
Build Family Engagement notes at the beginning of each unit include a link to an editable letter that can help you make connections with students' households.

Relevance Matters

Follow Best Practices

Culturally responsive teaching is multifaceted. It's not focused solely on curriculum materials or on an instructional style, and it can't be achieved by following a set of steps. The following practices can help you create a more relevant classroom:

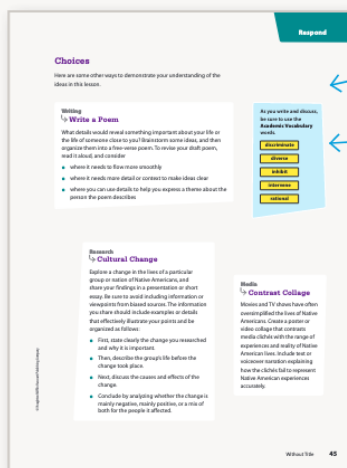
- **Activate students' prior knowledge.** This might include asking students what they know about a particular theme or concept, and connecting that to the lesson you're introducing. For example, before you begin a story about a character adjusting to life in the United States, you might ask students to think about when they've encountered a new environment.
- **Make learning contextual.** When discussing a text that is from or about another time, place, or culture, encourage students to connect it to their lives or the current moment. Try asking questions such as: "What do you think Anne Frank would say if she were here today?"
- **Consider your classroom setup.** One of the ways to communicate to students that they matter is to reflect them in the classroom environment. Ask yourself: Are there texts by authors of different races visible in the classroom? 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.



Spark Your Learning activities help connect students' experiences to the topic and Essential Question.



Engage Your Brain activities at the beginning of each selection connect students' experiences to the text they're about to read.



Choices activities at the end of each lesson encourage students to make connections between what they've just read and the world around them.

Activities throughout *Into Literature* provide students opportunities to tell about their preferences and beliefs.

- **Discuss social and political issues.** Help students discuss and learn about current issues that are germane 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 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 literature in a variety of ways and to help each other do so. If students speak more than one language, allow them to use languages other than English and, when possible without putting them on the spot, to share vocabulary.
- **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, or 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 continually interacting with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and realities, and where every student feels respected, important, and proud.



The essay **The Most Important Subject Is You** by Carol Jago includes "Tips for Talking About Controversial Issues," which provide guidelines for discussion.



Engage Your Brain activities, **Choices** activities, and **Media Projects** encourage students to connect popular culture to literature.