



Embracing Discomfort: Speaking Out for Cultural Relevance

By Jackie Roehl

I've been Minnesota's 2012 Teacher of the Year for a couple of months now, and people who know me keep asking me the same two questions: "What exactly is culturally relevant teaching, and *why* does a white teacher from an affluent suburb with 82 percent white students even care about this?"

Part of my goal with my new platform is to answer these questions and explain *what* culturally relevant teaching looks like in the classroom. I also hope to show *why* teachers, regardless of their school's racial demographics, need to make it a priority in classrooms, schools, and districts in Minnesota and nationwide.

Culturally relevant teachers do not teach all students the same way in the name of equality. Instead, they create lessons in which students' experiences are discussed and infused in the learning, and in which students have the opportunity to learn by building on their personal backgrounds and academic strengths. Using strategies that allow students to draw on their cultural frames of reference brings personal relevance to a lesson. Since the brain needs emotion and meaning to pay attention, making learning personal and emotional for students can bring about the most lasting lessons.

Until 2004, my English classroom featured students sitting in rows, discussing literature. A few verbal students dominated the dialogue and entertained their classmates. Sound familiar? Discussions focused on the literary merit and style of the work rather than the connections that students could make to their lives. Although I called the discussions Socratic and believed I was teaching my students critical thinking skills, I realized my error once I started working with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, a

professional development-provider based in Syosset, N.Y., that works with urban and suburban schools. Among other revelations, it became clear that only a few students were thinking and performing at their highest levels; many were flying under the radar.

Connecting to the Material

An eight-year journey of study with NUA transformed my teaching. Recently, I attended a two-day seminar with Dr. Yvette Jackson, the chief executive officer of NUA, where she presented an in-depth study of the *what* and *why* of culturally relevant teaching, drawing from her book *The Pedagogy of Confidence*. Even after eight years of work with NUA, this seminar gave me new philosophical insights and classroom applications, proving that teachers cannot become complacent in their practice but must continue to sharpen their skills. The seminars gave me the pedagogy needed to teach students in a manner that captures the overlap of culture, language, and cognition.

Today, visitors entering my classroom will see this overlap and observe students participating in culturally relevant lessons. Students sit in cooperative groups instead of rows and help each other master the day's objective while learning about each other. Visitors will also witness lessons designed with explicit strategies for priming, processing, and retaining for mastery. Today, priming, or building student curiosity and motivation through an anticipatory activity before a lesson, takes more prominence in my classes than it would have in the past. That's because priming activities with the students' cultural backgrounds in mind help students make emotional connections to the material.

Here's an example of a culturally relevant lesson from my classroom on Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." For concept priming to increase student engagement before reading, groups of students created bridge maps to make analogies between types of oppression they see in the world. Sharing ideas in small groups is safer and allows for more students to have a voice. After priming, students processed the poem in chunks through a Directed Reading and Thinking Activity, isolating images and themes. When I use the DRTA strategy, I allow students to either write down ideas or draw images. Providing students a choice in how they process information is another essential component of culturally relevant teaching. Choice allows students to build on their strengths by selecting the strategy that best fits their learning style.

As assessment, or retaining for mastery, students articulated a theme in the poem, showed how Angelou used imagery to enhance that theme, and ultimately connected the poem to

their own lives or the world today. Students first answered the prompt individually by writing their analysis in their notebooks. Only then did I ask students to share their thoughts with the entire class—and when I did, many students shared a variety of perspectives. In a 55-minute period, this full-class discussion lasted just the final 10 minutes, but it was much richer than discussions we'd had in the past.

'Nurturing Each Plant'

Flash back to 10 years ago, before I began my journey with NUA. Remember that the students were sitting in rows with the discussion prompt given to the whole class at the beginning of the hour, without any priming or processing activities. Verbal students who knew how to "do school" jumped right into the discussion. The analysis rarely went as deep as this past year when students discussed how Angelou used oil and diamond imagery to enhance the theme of oppression and economic exploitation of Africa at the hands of colonizers.

All teachers, regardless of their classroom demographics, need culturally relevant teaching because it gets all students to the deepest levels of thinking and the highest levels of personal achievement. Using explicit and engaging strategies will not only help close the racial achievement gap, but also push all students to higher achievement levels and lasting personal connections.

In Minnesota, a state where black and Hispanic students trail their white and Asian counterparts [by some of the largest margins in the nation](#), teachers must work to ensure all students perform at high levels. Closing the achievement gap is an ethical imperative in education today, and a pedagogical shift to culturally relevant teaching and active equity work can help educators reach that goal. No longer can teachers simply value diversity and multiculturalism and continue to teach all students the same way in the name of equality.

A metaphor that helps me understand the difference between equity and equality draws from gardening—a favorite hobby of mine. In the garden, success does not come from caring for each plant in the same way, but from nurturing each plant in the way it specifically needs. My tomatoes and onions are in the same garden, but my tomatoes get more water than my onions because that's what they need.

Academic excellence for all students cannot be reached without educators committed to equity work and examining the structures in their schools that allow for curriculum gaps, tracking, and low expectations for some students. We especially need educators to isolate the role race plays in their school structures and classroom practices even when discussing these issues is uncomfortable. We need to experience discomfort in order to effect real change from the status quo that leaves so many students woefully behind. We need teachers who are uncomfortable with the racial predictability of enrollment in AP courses, of identification in gifted and talented programs, of academic achievement. We need teachers to be uncomfortable enough with the way things are to courageously fight for a more equitable and more just education for students.

I'm not the first to raise a concern about the achievement gap, though as Minnesota Teacher of the Year I plan to add to the growing chorus that argues we can close that gap faster by creating classrooms and developing curriculum that engages students, makes learning explicit, and expects all students to achieve at high levels.

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