An Introduction to Culturally Responsive Teaching

by Ray Gonzales

Have you ever wondered why your teaching approach and activities are a hit with students in one class but fall flat with another group of students? Or why your students did miserably on a test you were sure they were going to pass with flying colors? More importantly, how do you react to these situations? Do you get very discouraged, or worse, tend to place the blame on your students?

Out of the blue a few years ago, an opportunity presented itself to me, an opportunity that would ultimately help me to better comprehend the situations described above and provide me with a proactive approach that would help me address them directly. As Coordinator of the American English Language Program (AELP), an EAP program, at my community college, I was surprised when the Dean of Science, Math and Engineering came into my office one day at the end of the Fall 2013 semester and asked if I would be co-PI (primary investigator) of an AAC&U grant project (we were awarded the grant several months later) focused on improving the retention and success of under-represented minorities and women in STEM courses. The AELP was to be involved because a learning community pairing the highest level EAP writing course and Introduction to Programming (CS 140) would be formed as one component of the grant project.

However, I soon discovered that one of the other components of the grant was to incorporate something called Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) into STEM courses as a way to achieve the overall grant goals mentioned above. Despite my MA in TESOL and having taught EFL and EAP for almost twenty years, I could not recall if I had ever been exposed to CRT. Yes, I did take that Intercultural Communication course in graduate school, but, well, that was quite a while ago. My teaching since then had been focused on the academic reading strategies, vocabulary lists, language features, etc. my students needed to master in order to succeed in their credit courses. I had not consciously incorporated culture into my teaching, other than selecting readings, videos, and other content related to a variety of ethnicities and countries.

I knew that some of my AELP colleagues already had backgrounds in cross-cultural communication and related fields, so I decided to assemble a team of interested AELP faculty to conceptualize CRT for the purposes of the grant and later to "operationalize" it for use by the college's STEM faculty. I soon learned a great deal about "classroom cultures" and CRT from my AELP colleagues on the "CRT Team." Our literature review as well as attendance at AAC&U sponsored workshops/institutes shed further light on CRT.   Here are some relevant points regarding classroom culture, in general:

- Both we, the instructors, and our students bring into the classroom multiple cultures influenced by our ethnicity (the most common understanding of culture) ,our gender,

       age/generation, social life, hobbies, family and work situations, and previous educational/teaching experiences, to name a few;

- The cultural "lenses" we and our students see the world through influence…
    - our teaching decisions regarding activities, content, assessment, etc.;
    - our students' receptiveness to and performance in class activities.
- Thus, it is important to…
    - be conscious of our own cultural tendencies, biases, etc.;
    - avoid preconceptions of any kind about our students (we think we may know them, but we really don't!);
    - identify which of our students' "cultures" or "identities" are most salient in their lives.

If we remain ignorant of these points, there is little hope of ever teaching in a culturally responsive way or of effectively addressing the conundrums mentioned in the first paragraph.

So what can we do to reach our students more profoundly and consistently? Here are some basic "CRT Principles":

- First and foremost, know who your students are and what might affect their success in your classes.
- Establish high expectations but send a strong message that you are going to help them meet those expectations.
- Build student confidence early through sufficient scaffolding and "easy", low-stakes quizzes, activities, etc.
- Provide multiple avenues to success. For instance, allow students to have some say in which course assessments will weigh most heavily in their grades; create multiple types of course outcome assessments that play better to the various strengths your diverse students bring to the classroom.
- Connect content and skills to students' lives.
- Vary your teaching strategies, activities, etc.
- Create a "safe space" for learning, in which students feel comfortable taking risks. Learning occurs more effectively when students know their identities and performance will not be belittled by the instructor or classmates. Ice breakers, sharing your own learning experiences and challenges, and establishing appreciation of the various cultures in the classroom are a few ways to create this "safe space."

These principles reveal that CRT is really about doing all that can be done to help students succeed (without watering down the course outcomes or expectations). In fact, CRT was born out of the disturbing gaps in achievement between dominant culture students and immigrant, ethnic minority students that still persist today. A definition of CRT from Geneva Gay, one of the preeminent scholars in the field, also reveals the connection between CRT and student success: "Using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more

appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students." (Gay, 2000).

This definition implies that CRT is more than a set of principles. It is actually a process. This becomes clear in examining how our CRT grant team "operationalized" CRT to be applied in the classroom. My colleague, Dr. Mary Owens, proposed two roles for the instructor: ethnographer and navigator. As classroom ethnographers, we observe and gather data about our students without any preconceived notions about them.

The first step in the process is gathering data about our students. Many of us already do this through demographic surveys we administer at the beginning of the semester. We may ask questions about what courses they have taken / are taking, their work hours (if any), and their hobbies and topics of interest. It is also important to determine as best as possible how well our students are responding to our teaching styles and progressing in terms of meeting the course outcomes. We all give assignments and administer quizzes and tests, which are the traditional measures. An additional tool is the classroom assessment technique (CAT), of which there are many types. These are mostly simple and quick surveys to gauge what is working or not working in our lessons. The most common one is the "one-minute paper" in which we ask variations of the following questions, "What part of today's class did you find helpful or useful?" / "What part of today's class did you find confusing or difficult?" The results will surprise you more than you think! What you thought most students were understanding with little difficulty may turn out to be a topic you need to spend much more time on.

The second step in the process is to use the "data" we collect in surveys, CATs, and other methods to "navigate" our students to success. We do this by making adjustments to our teaching. These adjustments can range from making minor tweaks to classroom management and activities, to selecting content more culturally relevant to our students, to creating completely different assessments of student performance. The adjustments are guided by the ethnographic data we gather.

CRT, as our grant team has conceptualized it, however, is not just a two-step process. It is theoretically a never-ending (until the end of the semester, of course!) recursive process because we need to continually assess the effectiveness of our adjustments with additional rounds of surveys and CATs to "dig deeper" into any difficulties our students are encountering, if necessary. Also, some adjustments will work fine while others will need to be tinkered with or discarded.

Is CRT easy to apply? It really depends on how far one wants to take it. It does require some extra work in the form "data gathering," reflecting on the data, and making those "navigational adjustments." However, many of us already conduct surveys, and most CATs take very little time to create. If we really want to know our students well, though, we will have them see us during office hours to ask individualized questions to get "better data." Twenty students each coming for a mandatory 10 minute office hour visit... Now we're talking serious time commitment! "Data analysis" time will depend on how much data one gathers. It's the classroom adjustments that can potentially take a great deal of time and effort to plan and implement. I suggest starting with a scaled down CRT plan if you are considering applying it to your class for the first time. For example, start with a simple

demographic survey at the beginning of the semester and plan in advance when to administer several "one-minute papers" during the rest of the semester, whether at periodic intervals or at places in the curriculum where you expect students to have difficulties with particular language features, skills, or assignments. Write brief summary/reflections of your data results, conclusions, planned adjustments, and results of adjustments.   Keeping such records is important in that it they can become collections of evidence-based "wisdom" on which to make future adjustments.

Is success guaranteed? Of course not! Culture by definition is a constantly moving target. Our students' "cultures" are always shifting as a result of changes in their lives. There are also simply too many factors impacting student success; as veteran instructors know, we have little control over many of them. However, Culturally Responsive Teaching, as conceptualized above, at least provides a theoretical and practical framework to recognize the complex cultural environments that always exist in our classrooms and to systematically guide our students towards success.

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Work Cited:

Gay, Geneva. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, Practice,* Teaching College Press, 2000.