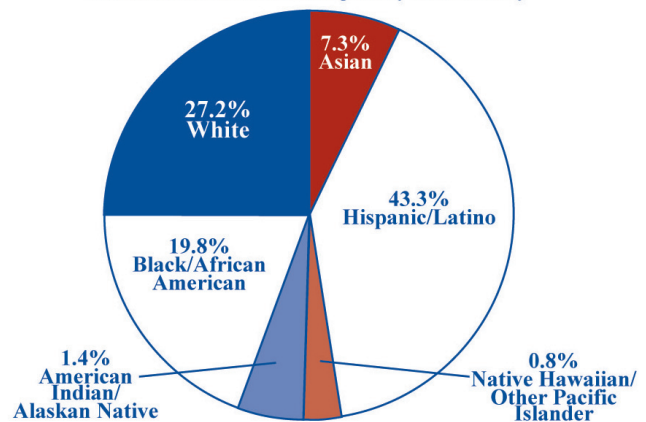# Culturally Relevant Practice

This digest explores issues of culture and culturally relevant practice in adult education programs and suggests strategies for educators. It highlights studies that identify issues of cultural difference, and provides recommendations for making the practice of adult education more culturally relevant.

In 2004-2005, the total enrollment of learners in federally funded adult education programs was 2,581,281 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2006). Of this number, 72.6 percent of learners identified themselves as Asian, African American, Hispanic, or Native American. Clearly, learners of diverse racial and ethnic cultures make up the majority of the population attending adult education. This has implications for effective delivery of adult education services.

Guy (1999) defines culture as "shared values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and language use within a social group" (p. 7). Dominant culture refers to the culture of a social group that historically holds greater advantages, access, and power in society than other groups (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Over the past 500 years, Western European culture has been a dominant world culture. Historically, members of nondominant cultures tend to have limited power in social, political, and religious contexts (West, 1993, as cited in Guy, 1999). Guy suggests that African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans are often affected by the "cultural mismatch between the learning environment and their own cultural history" (p. 5). When learners and educators do not share the same culture, differing beliefs, assumptions, and values can lead to misunderstandings and to cultural dissonance between instructors and learners as well as among various groups of learners.

Adult educators have opportunities to provide culturally based instruction to help learners gain greater control of their lives (Guy, 1999). A call for educators to reflect on the degree to which their practice is culturally relevant should not be interpreted as meaning that educators are unaware or insensitive to learners and their cultural differences (Imel, 1995). Rather, it should serve as a reminder to educators of the importance of understanding the role that one's culture plays in the learning environment.

State-Adminstered Adult Education Programs
2004-2005 Enrollment of Participants by Race/Ethnicity

- 27.2% White
- 7.3% Asian
- 43.3% Hispanic/Latino
- 19.8% Black/African American
- 1.4% American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 0.8% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

Source: U.S. Department of Education
Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2006

Defining Culturally Relevant Practice

Culturally relevant practice refers to the ability to work well and communicate effectively with individuals from various cultural groups. It means learning new patterns of behavior and applying them in appropriate settings. In an educational setting, cultural relevance refers to staff attitudes, instructional practices, and institutional policies that are responsive to the learning needs and styles of a diverse student population. For example, teachers who respectfully refer to learners' cultures and use classroom materials that represent their histories and cultures are using an inclusive approach that values and recognizes the diverse heritage of learners. Instructional strategies that incorporate the cultural norms of learners de-emphasize a preference for one culture over another.

The Need for Culturally Relevant Practice

The number of studies in adult education related to racial groups is limited (Guy, 1999; Imel, 1995). Hispanic Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the United States. Relatively little research has been conducted in adult education related to Hispanics and cultural issues; in fact, the few studies of Hispanics as adult learners employ a deficit perspective to interpret their learning experiences (Jeria, 1999).

One study that explores issues of culture in adult education is *Struggles of Getting an Education: Issues of Power, Culture, and Difference for Mexican Americans of the Southwest* (Sparks, 2002). Sparks captures the experiences of 30 Mexican American adults,

born in the United States, who lacked a high school diploma or equivalency and who had previously participated in adult education programs. She investigates the social, economic, and political forces that interact with motivation and desire of learners, and documents the experiences of learners who chose not to continue in adult education classes. The study found that learners perceived "conflict, not only in schools but in other social settings," and perceived "limited access to resources, isolation from the mainstream culture, and differential treatment in work, social, and other environments" (Sparks, 2002, p. 33).

Sparks found that, in comparing participants' educational experiences as youths and adults, there were three common factors: teachers' attitudes, academic quality, and cultural respect. Participants reported that, both as youths and adults, they often felt that programs did not address their educational goals and disregarded their cultural heritage. Although these are subjective views, when participants believed this to be the case, they often chose to leave programs. In doing so, they were not rejecting education in general but programs that they considered inappropriate to their needs and unsupportive of their cultural identities and values.

Sheared (1999) cites a 1994 California study documenting the perspective of African Americans and the intersection of culture and education. She found that African Americans were more likely to participate in adult basic education (ABE) classes when they believed that their histories, culture, and perspectives mattered to program administrators and teachers. Learners tended to participate "when they 'connected' with the teacher, the students, and the program goals," and persisted when program staff acknowledged their lived experiences (Sheared, 1999, p. 38).

Elements of Culturally Relevant Practice

Teachers and administrators who miss opportunities to promote cultural awareness and understanding may unknowingly contribute to the nonparticipation of adult learners. Sparks (2002) recommends that educators examine adult education programs for practices that potentially limit equitable access, quality, and respect for all learners and that they research and critique adult basic education and English literacy programs from the perspective of nondominant groups.

Trumbull and Pacheco (2005) reviewed K-12 teaching standards in every state and summarized state standards related to teachers' cultural competencies. The culturally competent teacher

- Develops cultural awareness;
- Provides high-level, challenging, culturally relevant curriculum and instruction;
- Makes classroom assessment equitable and valid for all students;
- Builds and expands the language proficiency and literacy skills of native English speakers;
- Addresses the oral language needs and literacy skills of English language learners;
- Maintains high expectations for all students;
- Recognizes and prevents institutional, cultural, and individual racism within the school; and
- Recognizes and addresses unequal power relationships in the school community.

One model that can assist instructors in viewing the classroom from a culturally relevant perspective outlines four elements to examine: *the instructor's cultural identity, the learners' cultural identity, an inclusive curriculum,* and *instructional methods and processes* (Marchisani & Adams, 1992, as cited in Guy, 1999). This digest explores each on the following pages.

The Instructor's Cultural Identity

Instructors should reflect on their own cultural identities (e.g., their assumptions, behaviors, and values), and how their beliefs and attitudes can influence the learning environment. In an ERIC Research Digest, Corley (2003) reviewed the literature on poverty and racism related to literacy and cited several studies with recommended action steps. One recommendation for teachers who identify themselves as white is to "think through whiteness" and what it means to be a member of the dominant culture (Frankenberg, 1993; Shore, 1998). Teachers can reflect on their own culture and classroom practices related to cultural relevance. For example, teachers can use journaling as a reflective tool to think about culturally relevant strategies.

Journal Writing
Teachers can use a double-entry journal to capture their thoughts and ideas. Double-entry journals provide space with two columns, which can be created simply by drawing a line down the middle of a page. On the left side of the journal, teachers can write a quote they have read about culture or culturally relevant practices. In the corresponding position on the right-hand side of the page, teachers can write reflections about the quote, using any rhetorical style. Taylor (1995) suggests the following prompts for journal writing:

- *What behaviors, traits, and characteristics among certain ethnic groups make me uncomfortable?*
- *Do I "tune out" people who speak differently from me?*
- *Do I have higher expectations for students of one race over another?*
- *How does my value system agree or conflict with those of certain ethnic or cultural groups?*
- *What can I do to make a conscientious effort to learn about different cultures?*

Teachers who use journaling as a self-examination tool often can reflect on their knowledge about culturally relevant teaching and ways to value their students as capable learners. This process also may help teachers acknowledge the impact of their culture on their teaching practice, including their culture's influence on the choices and judgments made in the classroom.

Professional Development with Other Instructors
Another way for instructors to develop self-awareness is through professional development with other instructors (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Universities and professional organizations offer courses, workshops, and seminars on multicultural education that incorporate developing cultural self-awareness. Educators can also engage in site-based professional development activities such as facilitated discussions and sharing of journals. Exploring identity can evoke painful experiences and unresolved negative feelings, so it is important that an experienced facilitator lead the activity and establish an environment of trust and acceptance while not avoiding important issues (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005).

The Learners' Cultural Identity

Instructors should learn about learners' cultures and backgrounds. Bourdieu (1983) emphasizes the importance of understanding that learners bring cultural capital to the classroom that may be different from the teacher's culture and from the dominant culture. Learners bring skills and learning styles to the classroom that conventional assessment schemes are not designed to capture. Teachers and learners carry into the classroom their cultural backgrounds, which influence their perceptions of each other, and together students and teachers unconsciously construct "an environment of meanings enacted in individual and group behaviors, of conflict and accommodation, rejection and acceptance, alienation and withdrawal" (Spindler & Spindler, 1994). Suggestions for moving towards a better understanding of cultures include learning about norms, social practices, native languages, attitudes about schooling and educational achievement, and expectations of teacher-student instructional interaction.

McGroarty (1993) posits that some learners may expect teachers to behave in an authoritarian role and may not expect a teacher to ask learners to move around the room for a class activity, a strategy that adult educators employ. On the other hand, teachers may expect learners to easily express their personal opinions, ask questions, and take initiative. Conflicting expectations of teacher-student roles can be avoided when teachers and learners take the time to understand each other.

Portfolios of Disempowered Groups
Educators can use collections of essays and documents that tell concrete stories and aspects of a group's culture (Ziegahn, 2001). Using portfolios may help to acknowledge that marginalized groups have cultures, languages, and moral codes that are viable social practices (Nieto, 1992, as cited in Corley, 2003).

Speaking and Writing Activities
Educators can design activities such as dialogue journals, family trees, life journeys, and photo collections to elicit cultural norms and practices of learners (e.g., comparing parenting styles and values of Vietnamese cultures to those of the mainstream culture). This activity allows learners to provide valuable information to teachers without devaluing their cultures (Quintero, 1994).

An Inclusive Curriculum

Instructors should ensure that the curriculum does not contain stereotypical material (Sheared, 1994, as cited in Guy, 1999), but represents and connects to learners' experiences (Guy, 1999). Corley (2003) suggests questioning the ways in which texts have been constructed, considering the purpose of the texts and the motives of the authors, and exploring alternative readings, considering what has been included and what has been left out. James Banks describes four approaches that educators use to integrate cultural content into the curriculum (Banks, 1994).

1. *Contributions Approach*. Teachers using this approach select books and activities that celebrate holidays and heroes by incorporating discrete cultural elements—for example, reading about the accomplishments and contributions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in January to commemorate his birthday. The contributions approach does not include materials and discussions on cultural issues as part of the curriculum.

Four Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum
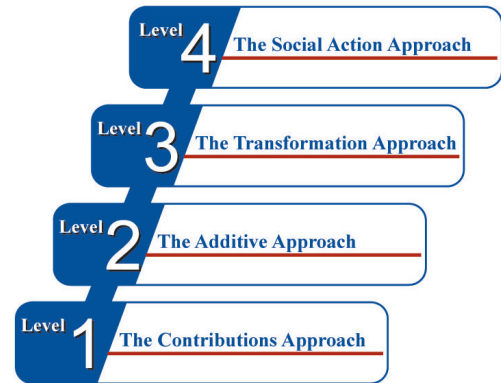
Source: James A. Banks, 1994

2. *Additive Approach*. Some teachers add specific readings or a specific unit to the curriculum, such as articles by and about people from diverse cultures. This approach does not change the basic structure of the curriculum; it is simply an add-on to the standard curriculum. Activities such as reading about Brazilian customs, sampling Brazilian food, listening to Brazilian music, and learning about Brazilian geography all help students learn about a specific culture; however, these activities do not necessarily present issues from the perspective of Brazilians, and they do not propel learners toward action.

3. *Transformation Approach.* Teachers help students view concepts, issues, and problems from multiple ethnic perspectives. This approach changes the goals and structure of the curriculum and introduces learners to issues from the perspectives of different groups—for example, viewing colonialism and the westward expansion of the U.S. through the eyes of Native Americans, or viewing World War II from the perspective of Japanese Americans.

4. *Social Action Approach*. Teachers and learners collaboratively make decisions based on concepts, issues, and problems for social change and problem solving. This approach builds on the transformation approach with activities for social change. An example might be learning about and discussing the life of César Chávez and then writing letters to legislators to express opinions about the rights of farm workers.

Instructional Methods and Processes

Instructors should encourage learner participation and ensure that instructional methods and processes center on sharing of power, and sharing the responsibility for learning, with learners (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996, and Tisdell, 1993, as cited in Corley, 2003). Sparks (2002) and Jeria (1999) recommend that educators recognize that, traditionally, the role of the teacher has been to socialize students into the dominant culture. They suggest that educators begin investigating how the role might be changed to one of supporting the genuine needs of students through a critique of the teacher's role as social agent. Educators can construct and maintain supportive learning environments, acknowledging and accepting diverse perspectives offered by learners and emphasizing multiple interpretations (Corley, 2003).

Facilitation of Learning
Providing learners with opportunities to clarify their own attitudes and values may help build mutual respect among group members (Corley, 2003).

Collaborative Group Learning
In group settings, learners may be more open to listen to others, accept alternative views, challenge and question others, negotiate ideas, and care for group participants (Imel & Tisdell, 1996, as cited in Ziegahn, 2001).

Computer-Assisted Learning
Learners may consider using computers and other technology-based devices to share stories related to personal and group cultural identities as more welcoming and safe than a face-to-face classroom context (Coombs, 1993, as cited in Ziegahn, 2001).

Conclusion

Administrators and teachers can serve as agents of change to ensure a culturally relevant environment for learners. Practitioners who self-reflect on their own behaviors and examine the policies and practices of their organization take steps in acknowledging cultural differences and responding affirmatively. Creating a culturally relevant learning environment can help adult learners feel comfortable in adult education because their cultures and histories are valued and respected. In turn, they are more likely to persist in their learning and meet their educational goals.

Selected Resources

The following are selected resources related to culturally relevant practice. Some sources are intended as resources for K-12 educators; however, the content is relevant for educators of all age groups.

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE)
www.crede.org

Culturally Responsive Teaching
www.intime.uni.edu/multiculture/curriculum/culture/Teaching.htm

The Education Alliance
www.alliance.brown.edu

The Knowledge Loom
www.knowledgeloom.org/crt/index.jsp

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