

Culturally Inclusive Teaching and Learning That Engages the Whole Student

Cynthia Gadsden

Tennessee State University

Abstract

College and university students are diverse learners with nuanced learning needs. Reliance on traditional teaching and learning approaches are often ill-suited for students from groups and communities with a communal or cultural focus. Such groups rely heavily on personal, significant relationships. These students arrive at school with a wealth of knowledge, experiences, and concerns that often go unacknowledged and unmet by faculty. A lack of understanding of students from diverse cultural groups can adversely affect their classroom learning experience. Faculty who include culturally inclusive projects and assignments in their teaching methods are able to address the learning needs of all students. HBCU's have traditionally fused African American culture and academics. Yet, culturally inclusive assignments, culturally responsive pedagogy, and a focus on funds of knowledge can help students bridge the divide between their home and academic lives. This creates an inviting learning environment for all students in any academic setting.

Keywords: culturally inclusive teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, funds of knowledge, HBCU, whole student learning, African-American, people of color

Introduction

Each year colleges and universities work to provide new and returning students with a welcoming, safe environment where they can learn and grow as scholars and individuals. Yet, several unrecognized factors can derail their best efforts. In fact, some of the long-standing academic traditions and practices that administrators and faculty rely on may have the opposite effect and leave a portion of students feeling unwelcomed and unwanted. Students who are accustomed to receiving strong familial, cultural, and community support and nurturing can find the traditional academic perspective that focuses heavily on individual achievement to be cold

and inflexible. Such feelings can strongly influence the success both academically and socially of these students.

Diverse Learners & Learning Needs

As a professor at an HBCU in Tennessee, I have had first-hand experience with students from African American and/or immigrant families who are the first in their families to attend college. They feel a tremendous amount of pressure to succeed. In addition, students from families where the household is focused on daily needs, (e.g. rent, car payment, food, etc) rather than college are dealing with a different type of pressure. While the individual situations may differ, these students' needs for support and an understanding of the communal focus of their cultures and households is essential to their success.

Faculty who teach at HBCUs may be in a better position to understand such pressures, since they may have experienced similar challenges when they attended college. Moreover, they may identify with the cultural and familial experiences of many of their students. As a result, they may readily recognize their students' needs and challenges, as well as ways to address them. Additionally, smaller class sizes, one-on-one counseling, accessibility of role and life models, and mentoring opportunities are a few of the ways that students form connection and community with faculty and other students. Conversely, some students attending predominately white institutions (PWIs), and large public or private universities that do not provide these opportunities can experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. Yet, faculty from various institutions can address students' learning and social needs through small group activities, individual student sessions, (e.g., check-in and mentoring time), culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally inclusive assignments (Eppard et al., 2021; Howard & Terry, 2011).

Professors who provide culturally inclusive projects and assignments can help every student feel valued as individuals and connected to others who have similar life experiences. Such assignments provide opportunities for students to share and celebrate all of who they are. Through culturally inclusive assignments students can share the personal challenges and triumphs of their family, including single parenthood, dealing with depression, lack of education, or personal sacrifices. Assignments that incorporated students' recollections, memories, and stories concerning the significant people, places, and events in their lives can help them view their lives, families, and experiences with fresh insight. Also, such assignments can encourage connection around shared values within a classroom of individuals with diverse learning needs.

For instance, an Art Appreciation assignment related to “Art and Value” asked students to discuss their family’s most prized art object. The assignment asked them to describe the object, where it came from, and why it was valued by their family. Few of the objects the students described were expensive or museum caliber artworks. Instead, they were cherished keepsakes, placeholders of family memories, and connections between the past and present. Also, the prized objects were quite varied ranging from the humorous to the heartbreaking and included textiles, pottery, clothing, etc. For example, one student told the story of a pair of pink baby sneakers that were a gift from her father when she was an infant a few weeks before his unexpected death. The tiny sneakers lived on her dresser and were objects of remembrance for she and memory for her mother. Another student talked about an ordinary looking but cherished bowl that was passed from generation to generation because it had belonged to her great grandmother. In each case students were able to discuss not only the prized object, but also the ideals, (e.g., legacy, love, family) that were of value to their family.

Learning and The Lived Experience

Culturally inclusive assignments have the ability to illustrate to students within a class that they share commonalities of culture and life experiences, (e.g., African American, strong immediate and extended family units, several siblings, being raised by a mother/mother figure who works outside the home, a family that is facing or has faced financial and economic challenges, etc). Such examples of common experience are undergirded by the premise that “all contexts are nested” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 229). Rather than adopting the limited view of each student as simply an undergraduate at a university, each person can instead be viewed by faculty through the lens of their lived experience. This more nuanced vantage point affords a look at every student as an individual within a classroom and explores each lived experience as a nested experience. For instance, each student belongs to a family structure, has participated in a k-12 educational system, and perhaps has even had a significant religious or spiritual experience. Yet, they each bring the full spectrum of their experiences to every classroom, which is situated within an academic discipline, department, and college that is within a university environment where personal friendships, acquaintances, and social group interactions occur. As with the students, the instructor’s lived experience is also layered and nested. As a result, each classroom offers a rich, treasure trove of accumulated contextual knowledge through lived experiences.

This opportunity for deep seated sense making can be described as “the black box of human cognitive processing” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 225).

Recognizing the Power of Relationship

The personal and formal relationships that individuals form are key elements of the lived experience. Social capital theory relates to the influence and impact of a social network (Kim & Schneider, 2005). While a social network bears some similarity to an individual’s personal network, some key differences exist. For example, social capital theory says that “valued resources and expertise [that] are embedded within social networks and that it is through these ties that one gains access to and can make use of resources to effect change” (Penuel et al, 2009). Significant and influential members of a student’s social network offer a range of valuable knowledge and wisdom that has resulted in not simply change, but transformation. As a result, students should not be forced to minimize such essential aspects of their lives and well-being.

Social learning theory offers the perspective that says that individuals learn through interacting with and watching others (Bandura, 1971). Through such interactions, individuals learn what actions will result in beneficial or disadvantageous outcomes (Bandura, 1971). Often such opportunities to learn occur within the context of a relationship. These relationships offer an opportunity to not only witness and model behavior, but also allow for soliciting and offering advice, answering questions, and providing encouragement and support. Educators who are willing to develop their knowledge and understanding of various cultures take important steps toward engaging with and forming meaningful relationships with their students (Nash, 2018). Through such relationships students will feel less isolated, more connected, and better able to learn and engage with the course subject matter, faculty, and their fellow students.

Cultural Inclusiveness – Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Yet, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) moves beyond simply knowing and understanding various cultures. Instead, it involves “expanding the ways in which [educators] think about the various dimensions of culture and how they shape every aspect of schooling and professional practice” (Sullivan & A’Vant, 2009, p.9). Moreover, CRP allows educators to address the diverse learning needs of all students in a classroom environment and provides a bridge between home and school (Richards et al., 2007).

Faculty who incorporate culturally inclusive learning opportunities in their courses allow and acknowledge various funds of knowledge (Rodriguez, 2013) that encourage student-scholars

to share non-academically related parts of their lives and to talk about the people, relationships, and events that are important to them (Brown et al., 2019). Unfortunately, too often students are taught that such conversations are inappropriate in an academic environment. Students from community-based cultures often have formed significant and essential familial and cultural relationships that support their overall well-being and survival in settings that can be intimidating and less than welcoming. They are frequently encouraged to minimize or compartmentalize these relationships to achieve success in the academic world. This perception is detrimental for these students, since it is through these relationships that they have learned certain behaviors, been offered unconditional love and support, and have witnessed selfless acts of love, caring, and kindness. Often these relationships have taught and shown students how to be successful (Yu, 2022).

Getting to Know the Whole Student

The assignment “My Social Network” illustrates the significance of the relationships described above. Designed for STEM students the assignment asked them to consider the influence of their social network on their choice of major/career. Through a series of questions similar to those listed below professors can get acquainted with their students as individuals in a process called “digging knowledge out” (Nash, 2018, p.162).

- Who are the people (other than family) that are part of your social network, (ex—scientists, mentors, teachers, peers, advisors, etc)?
 1. Make a list.
 2. Write 3-6 words that describe them.
 3. Create a text portrait. On a group portrait outline, label each figure by name and the words that described them. [Note: A group portrait outline is simply the outline several figures in a group portrait.]
- Consider and respond to the following questions regarding the individuals you identified:
 - Why are these individuals (and these relationships) important to you?
 - What do these people *give you* through these relationships?
 - What do *you give* them through these relationships?

Such assignments help students gain self-knowledge by identifying and considering each of their influential relationships and the part each person played in their choice of major and career. In turn, faculty learn more about their students as individuals and their aspirations for

their prospective careers. Through this knowledge professor can tailor course content and assignments in ways that better support their students' needs.

Culture & Learning Preferences

Some scholars believe that “culture, ethnicity, class, and gender play important roles in shaping the learning preferences and styles of students” (Anderson, 1995, p. 70). As such, certain types of learning environments and assignments, (i.e., peer to peer teaching, group teaching and learning, collaborative learning, and hands-on learning) may better support specific styles of learning. Questions such as “How does the inclusion of the factors of gender, race, culture, and class affect what we know about, or how we think about, teaching and learning and the styles associated with each?” (Anderson, 1995, p. 70), particularly when attempting to design significant and engaging learning experiences for a diverse population of students. Differing learning preferences and strengths are an appropriate consideration in the classroom for an array of students, but particularly for those whose cultural backgrounds differ from the traditional Western style of teaching and learning.

Students are astute observers, and they have developed a keen ability to interpret and evaluate people's motives and actions. As a result, the familial, cultural, and communal relationships they form are not only meaningful and significant, but also powerfully influential (Yu, 2022). As they watch and listen, students are also learning about the world and how to *be* in it from these important relationships. Through these personal interactions, (i.e., asking and answering questions, making observations, casual conversations, offering support, providing guidance, and sharing stories,) knowledge and values are consistently transmitted. It is important that educators recognize and acknowledge these important relationships and how they can and have contributed to their students learning experience (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Yu, 2022).

For students attending an HBCU, culture is embedded in the fabric of the academic and social environment. Many find it beneficial to learn and study at colleges and universities with a long history of celebrating the history and future of African American and/or other communal cultures, traditions, and values. CRP and culturally influenced course content offer an additional layer of support to the environment that HBCUs provide. Additionally, scholars have found that “this cultural approach aims to enhance students' self-esteem, critical thinking skills, and eventually to impact students' academic achievement” (Yu, 2022, p.136), which can benefit every student.

Conclusion

While high school graduation is a significant transitional marker for young adults, it is not necessarily a measure of their emotional maturity as responsible adults. While physically they have made the transition to college, emotionally they may still require constant nurturing, comfort, and support. Based on societal and cultural norms college students are perceived as young adults. Yet, many still need the continuous loving, nurturing, and supportive presence of the significant relationships in their lives, particularly students belonging to groups and communities that are communal and culturally focused.

Faculty who teach with CRP, cultural inclusiveness, and funds of knowledge in mind allow these students to bridge their home lives and their academic lives. Course projects and classroom assignments that merge the various aspects of a student's life allow them to acknowledge their back story, (i.e., the people, relationships, and values that are important to them, and why). Moreover, by incorporating culture, personal experiences, and other aspects of students' lives into their course content faculty can meet the diversity of needs in the classroom and make learning more meaningful for all students.

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Author Biography

Dr. Cynthia Gadsden is Assistant Professor of Art History at Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee. Her research explores the visual arts, the lived experience, and knowledge transfer across generations via culture, relationships, and story. She teaches courses in art history and African American visual art, culture, and film.