

“Quotes from Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain”

Language is powerful. When you are able to name a thing, it moves out of the realm of mystery into concreteness. For too long, culturally responsive teaching has been relegated to this realm of magic and mystery, knowledge that only a select few possess. When we are able to recognize and name a student’s learning moves and not mistake culturally different ways of learning and making meaning for intellectual deficits, we are better able to match those moves with a powerful teaching response. (p.5)

The chronic achievement gap in most American schools has created an epidemic of dependent learners unprepared to do the higher order thinking, creative problem solving and analytical reading and writing called for in the new Common Core State Standards. One of the goals of education is not simply to fill students with facts and information but to help them learn how to learn. (p.12)

For culturally and linguistically diverse students, their opportunities to develop habits of mind and cognitive capacities are limited or non-existent because of educational inequity. The result is their cognitive growth is stunted, leaving them dependent learners, unable to work to their full potential. (p.13)

School practices that emphasize lecture and rote memorization are part of what Martin Haberman (1991) calls a “pedagogy of poverty” that sets students up to leave high school with outdated skills and shallow knowledge. They are able to regurgitate facts and concepts but have difficulty applying this knowledge in new and practical ways. To be able to direct their own lives and define success for themselves, they must be able to think critically and creatively. (p.14)

While the achievement gap has created the epidemic of dependent learners, **culturally responsive teaching** (CRT) is one of our most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the gap. A systematic approach to culturally responsive teaching is the perfect catalyst to stimulate the brain's neuroplasticity so that it grows new brain cells that help students think in more sophisticated ways. (p.15)

A good number of teachers who have asked me about cultural responsiveness think of it as a "bag of tricks." Far from being a bag of tricks, culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical approach firmly rooted in learning theory and cognitive science. When used effectively, culturally responsive pedagogy has the ability to help students build **intellective capacity**. (p.16)

We often talk about the problem of the achievement gap in terms of race-racial relations, issues of oppression and equity-while ironically the solutions for closing students' learning gaps in the classroom lie in tapping into their culture. But just why and how we use culture to close learning gaps remains vague for many teachers and seems counterintuitive for orders who may have been taught not to focus on differences and, instead, be "color-blind."(p.21)

Culture, it turns out, is the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture. Think of culture as software for the brain's hardware. The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. If we want to help dependent learners do more high order thinking and problem solving, then we have to access their brain's cognitive structures to deliver culturally responsive instruction. (p.22)

My grandmother had a saying, “you can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy.” The point is that one’s culture, especially one’s deep cultural roots, is part of how the brain makes sense of the world and helps us function in our environment. This worldview continues to guide our behaviors even when we change our geography. We call these mental models **schema**. (p.23)

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape our responses to certain groups. Implicit bias operates involuntarily, often without one’s awareness or intentional control, which is different from explicit racism. (p.29)

Often, underresourced urban schools are staffed by new teachers or teachers deemed “less effective” (Education Trust, 2006). Highly effective teachers are “rewarded” with teaching assignments to high performing schools or gifted and talented classes. We routinely put the less experienced teachers with the neediest students. No other profession does this. (p.30)

Poverty is not a culture. Most families are trapped in poverty and do not willingly embrace it as a way of life. Most poor families experience generational poverty because of the lack of opportunities for moving out of poverty. Most poor families hold down at least one full-time job. We call these families the working poor. In economics, they refer to it as the *cycle of poverty* – a set of factors or events by which poverty, once started, is likely to continue unless there is strong outside intervention. (p.32)

Deficit thinking defines students and their families by their weaknesses rather than their strengths, suggesting that these weaknesses stem from low intelligence, poor moral character, or inadequate social skills. At its core, the culture of poverty theory says that poor people are responsible for their lot in life because of their individual and collective deficiencies (Collins, 1988). (p.33)

When we look at the stress some students experience in the classroom because they belong to marginalized communities because of race, class, language, or gender, we have to understand their safety-threat detection system is already cued to be on the alert for social and psychological threats based on past experience. (p.45)

Culturally Responsive Brain Rules

1. The brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community.
2. Positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check.
3. Culture guides how we process information.
4. Attention drives learning.
5. All new information must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge in order to be learned.
6. The brain physically grows through challenge and stretch, expanding its ability to do more complex thinking and learning. (p.47)

Culturally responsive teaching is also about empowerment and interrupting teaching practices that keep certain students dependent learners. We have to create the right instructional conditions that stimulate neuron growth and myelination by giving students work that is relevant and focused on problem solving. Just turning up the rigor of instruction or increasing the complexity of content will not stimulate brain growth. (p.49)

Culturally responsive teaching isn't a set of engagement strategies you use on students. Instead, think of it as a mindset, a way of looking at the world. Too often, we focus on only doing something to culturally and linguistically diverse students without changing ourselves, especially when our students are dependent learners who are not able to access their full academic potential on their own. (p.52)

Being responsive to diverse students' needs asks teachers to be mindful and present. That requires reflection. Engaging in reflection helps culturally responsive teachers recognize the beliefs, behaviors, and practices that get in the way of their ability to respond constructively and positively to students. The true power of culturally responsive teaching comes from being comfortable in your own skin because you are not a neutral party in the process. (p.53)

The philosopher Lao Tzu said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, and becoming an effective culturally responsive teacher is a long journey. One challenge is learning how to access and shift your implicit biases. (p.54)

Intention is the starting point for preparing yourself for improving your culturally responsive teaching practice. The act of committing to the process primes your brain and activates your will. The commitment to be an effective educator of culturally diverse dependent learners builds the stamina and courage to persevere when the process gets challenging. (p.55)

Culture is like the air we breathe, permeating all we do. And the hardest culture to examine is often our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem invisible and normal. What feels “normal,” Small (1998) reminds us, is molded by deeply ingrained social habits and ways of valuing and evaluating what we are scarcely aware of. This is what implicit bias is in a nutshell. (p.55)

The old adage we usually hear is that “practice makes perfect.” Based on what we know about neuroplasticity and deliberate practice, we should rephrase that to read, “practice makes permanent.” As you organize yourself for this self-reflective prep work, remember that it is not about being perfect but about creating new neural pathways that shift your default cultural programming as you grow in awareness and skill. (p.69)

Take an inquiry stance. Collect some data on a small group of students rather than trying to assess the class as a whole all at once. Focus in on one or two students we commonly call focal students, to get a more intimate view. Use the data to illuminate unconscious patterns in your interactions. Spend about a week or two tracking the quality of the interactions with your dependent learners, especially those that are culturally and linguistically diverse. (p.82)

Try “kidwatching.” Literacy educator, Yetta Goodman popularized the term in the 1980s as part of a literacy strategy, but the practice has its roots in Montessori and multicultural education. Rather than try to notice every student everyday, you select 3 – 5 students to watch over the course of a week and make notes about each student. (p.83)

Kleinfeld identified two elements that when put together increased the engagement and effort of students who had disengaged because they were English learners and felt like outsiders in the classroom: *personal warmth* coupled with what she called *active demandingness*. (p.97)

Often we misinterpret a student’s self-doubt or negative mindset as a lack of engagement or motivation when we see him exhibiting those common symptoms – zoning out, acting up, or shutting down in class. We then focus on trying to increase engagement with high energy starters such as *call and response* that aren’t connected to deeper learning, hoping that it flips some internal switch for the student, leading to a more positive academic mindset, which will in turn transform their academic performance. In reality, we have it backward. (p.110)

Too often, we think of a student’s academic mindset as a personal choice or an extension of his family’s failure to value education. In reality, schools do a lot more to influence a negative academic mindset than we’d like to admit sometimes. Most schools still have structural inequities that are predictive of who will be a high achiever and who will be a low achiever along racial lines. (p.112)

The internal scripts students develop that turn into a negative academic mindset or low engagement in the classroom are a result of the everyday microaggressions they encounter. Microaggressions are those small seemingly innocuous brief verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that send hostile, derogatory, denigrating, and hurtful messages to people of color. They are not overt, racist actions, but small, nonverbal snubs, dismissive looks, gestures, and a condescending tone of voice (Kohli & Solarzano 2012; Sue et al., 2007) that our neuroception has learned to pick up. (p.112)

Our ultimate goal as culturally responsive teachers is to help dependent learners learn how to learn. We want them to have the ability to size up any task, map out a strategy for completing it and then execute the plan. That's what independent learners do. (p.122)