

Is it Possible? Culturally Responsive Teaching in a Virtual Classroom

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) articulated and defined culturally relevant pedagogy as being comprised of three components:

1. Student Learning - The students' intellectual growth and moral development, but also their ability to problem solve and reason.
2. Cultural Competence - Skills that support students to affirm and appreciate their culture of origin while developing fluency in at least one other culture.
3. Critical Consciousness - The ability to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems, especially those that result in societal inequalities.

Geneva Gay (2010), a professor of education at the University of Washington, defines culturally responsive teaching as “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students.” Essentially, both of these definitions provide directional support for educators in empowering their students. While effective educators intuitively understand that relationships are at the heart of creating a pathway to learning, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) helps to define the necessity of this for underserved populations of students and begins to support teachers in understanding how to penetrate existing barriers in order to propel all students forward. Within this context, culturally responsive teaching needs to continue to be defined for all educators, but also redefined in light of the impact of COVID. Educators need to be given a toolbox to support them in understanding best practices, methods for implementation and time for reflection on their evolving CRT pedagogy.

Keywords: Online Education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Methods for Implementation

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Introduction

COVID-19 changed the landscape of higher education. Professors were forced to adapt to online instruction. Zoom became a platform everyone was familiar with and professors learned to adjust instruction to ensure that courses were still valuable. Furthermore, teacher educators had to learn new ways to model instruction for their teacher candidates within a virtual context.

Now that we are several years past the forced virtual teaching that COVID ushered in, it is evident that virtual instruction is here to stay. During the pandemic, it was clear that inequities existed for various students and that these disparities were exacerbated by the conditions created during COVID. In the ensuing years, educators have had opportunities to both reflect on and to improve practices to ensure that all students are given the resources and support to be successful. A large component of this focuses on what educators can do to create engaging environments that are structured for student success.

Literature Review

Even prior to COVID-19, distance learning was the fastest growing mode of learning. (Vaughan et al., 2013) However, all modes of distance (synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid) learning exploded with the COVID pandemic. As such, a review of the literature is more essential than ever in understanding how best to utilize the online platform.

Design of Online Learning Courses

Prior to students enrolling in the course, an online professor must invest substantial time into designing and organizing the online course in a manner that is conducive to student learning and success. Garrison states, “Designing a blended learning experience should start with organizing the content and activities. In addition, clear objectives for content and performance expectations will ensure a productive educational experience...it is crucial that the course outline, assignments, and grading rubric be posted well before the course begins” (35).

Finally, the online professor needs to lean on student feedback for continued reflection on their practices and organization of the Learning Management System (LMS), syllabus, and tentative schedule in order to promote continual improvement (Garrison, 43).

Successful Student Qualities

The online student must possess certain qualities to be successful within this modality. Prior research has demonstrated that student self-motivation is essential (Fedynich, Bradley, & Bradley, 2015). Furthermore, the online student benefits by maintaining a system of organization within their online courses (Hong and Jung, 2011).

High Impact Practices

Virtual learning is often viewed from a deficit perspective; however, continued research and pedagogical exploration is proving that virtual learning is not only a matter of convenience, but also an option for rigorous learning opportunities (Montelongo, 2019).

High impact practices for the online classroom include, but are not limited to allowing opportunities for student reflection and instructing using various modes and mediums for content delivery (short videos, podcasts, guest speakers, infographics as well as other avenues of sharing content).

Furthermore, it is essential that the professor be accessible via email, zoom office hours or other avenues of connecting in order for students to feel engaged, cared for and supported in their learning. Relationships are essential to the success of the virtual classroom (Fink, 2016).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in an Online Modality

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) articulated and defined culturally relevant pedagogy as being comprised of three components:

1. Student Learning - The students' intellectual growth and moral development, but also their ability to problem solve and reason.
2. Cultural Competence - Skills that support students to affirm and appreciate their culture of origin while developing fluency in at least one other culture.
3. Critical Consciousness - The ability to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems, especially those that result in societal inequalities.

Within this framework, virtual instructors must strive to meet these demands within diverse modalities. This can prove to be more challenging within the limitations of an online environment; however, with intentional efforts, these limitations can be overcome.

Pedagogy must be included that supports an understanding of various learning styles as well as various communication styles. Some specific strategies to consider include: video introductions, weekly overviews/agendas, video grade feedback, and synchronous live meetings (Montelongo, 2019).

The Use of Technology Tools

Faculty teaching online need to invest time in understanding the technology tools available to enhance their instruction and increase student engagement (Montelongo, 2019). While the Learning Management System provides a foundation and shell for the course, this should not be the lone form of technology use in an online course.

Theoretical Framework

This work is situated within the framework of the Community of Inquiry (CoI). Within this framework, the learning experience is defined by three presences: cognitive, social, and teaching (Garrison et al., 2000).

The cognitive presence is defined as the meaning making through discourse, reflection and critical thinking. Social presence is the creating of a safe learning environment characterized by the building of a community where all participants feel safe and comfortable to share and ask questions. Finally, the teaching presence consists of several components. First, is the design and organization of the learning experience. Next is the design of the learning experience to provide opportunities for discourse and engagement among the students and between the student and teacher. Finally, is the direct instruction from the teacher to share their expertise.

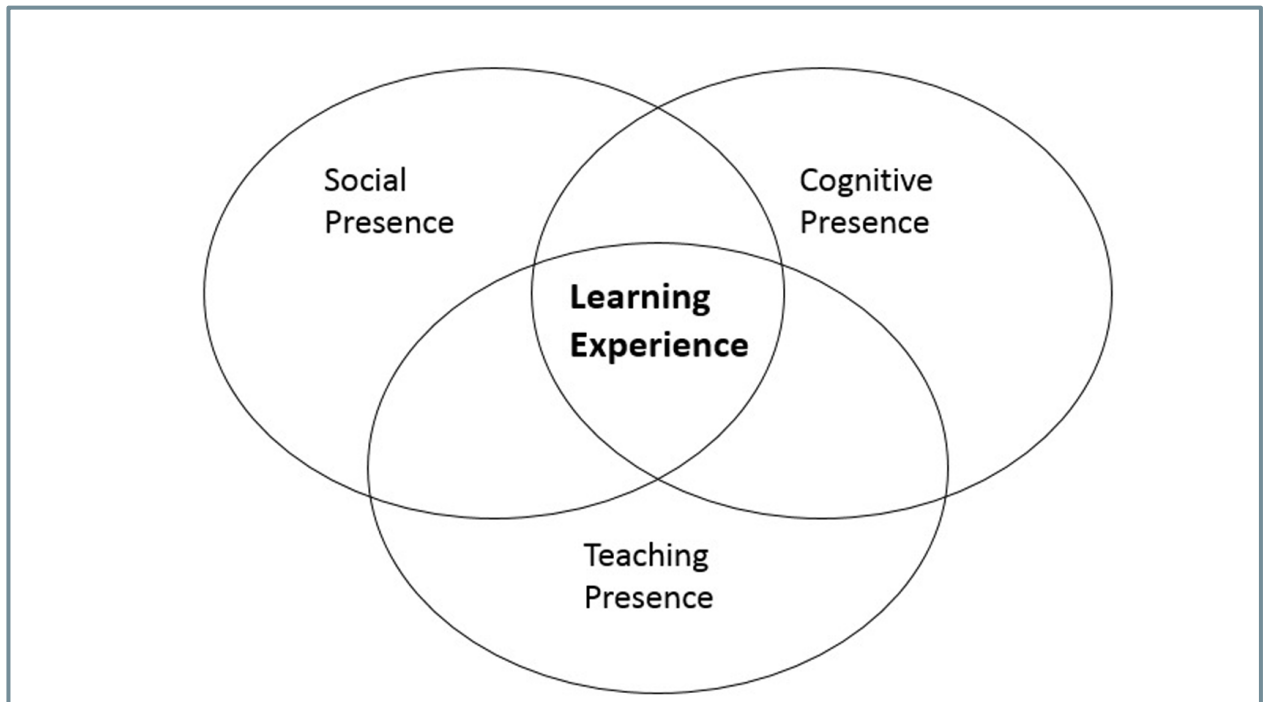


Figure 1: Community of Inquiry Framework

Structuring the Virtual Classroom

Utilizing the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Figure 1) can support educators in their design of online learning experiences. Pedagogy must be included that supports an understanding of various learning styles as well as various communication styles.

The initial success of an online learning environment is determined long before the first class session with the professor and students. The professor must invest substantial time in ensuring that the class is organized in a user-friendly method. Garrison states, “Designing a blended learning experience should start with organizing the content and activities. In addition, clear objectives for content and performance expectations will ensure a productive educational experience...it is crucial that the course outline, assignments, and grading rubric be posted well before the course begins” (35).

Students enrolled in online modalities benefit from professors that are highly responsive to emails and that create time for virtual meetings as needed. Finally, the online educator needs to lean on student feedback for continued reflection on their practices and organization of the Learning Management System (LMS), syllabus, and tentative schedule in order to promote continual improvement (Garrison, 43).

Best Practices for Culturally Responsive Teaching in a Virtual Classroom

Virtual learning is often viewed from a deficit perspective; however, continued research and pedagogical exploration is proving that virtual learning is not only a matter of convenience, but also an option for rigorous learning opportunities (Montelongo, 2019). Virtual instruction can successfully implement culturally relevant teaching practices as well. An initial place to start is to consider ways to build a community of learners, both between students and between student and teacher.

Building a community of learners is essential to creating an environment that provides rich learning experiences and opportunities for student growth. Many of the typical ways that educators utilize in traditional settings to build relationships can be modified for the virtual classroom.

Ice breakers can be incorporated to allow students opportunities to get to know one another. Whole class group ice breakers have a place, however, the researcher has discovered that using small breakout rooms lowers the affective filter of students and helps to foster student relationships.

Student to student and professor to student relationships are also fostered during the informal minutes prior to class and at the close of class. Additionally, breakout rooms can be used to mix and mingle students throughout the course in order to nurture discussions and allow students to learn from each other (Dean & Wagnon, 2024).

Routines and Procedures

Routines and procedures are essential to the success of an online class. According to Pamela Cantor, our brains are “prediction machines that like order” (2020). Students of all ages benefit from understanding the patterns and expectations of the class. During the first class, the instructor can support the students by discussing the organization of the LMS, sharing the best methods and times for contacting the instructor for support and help, and by sharing the basic structures and routines of the class including how class time will be spent, how work will be turned in, and how student collaboration will be facilitated.

Below are some additional structures and routines that may benefit the online class:

Use of Time Before and After Zoom/Online Platform

The time before the online class begins is prime time to greet students and support the students in feeling comfortable with an instructor that they won’t likely ever see in person. This time prior to class and again at the end of class is also a time for students to ask questions that they may not feel comfortable asking in a group or are more private in nature.

Use of Camera

In a virtual environment, teaching to blank black boxes is the lowest form of teaching. The researcher strongly believes online teaching can never be optimal without the routine use of cameras to foster relationships, to hold students accountable for learning, and to give the instructor visual cues as to how the students are responding to the presented material.

For example, the use of cameras allows the instructor to gauge the class’ understanding of the concept being taught. Nodding heads, smiles, and tilted heads all support an instructor in assessing the understanding of a class and help the teacher make in-the-moment instructional decisions.

The camera also acts to build routines for certain instructional strategies. In the researcher’s class, when I have students complete a quick write or other individual activities that require time to process, I have my students turn off their cameras. They are instructed to turn on their cameras again once they have completed the assignment. This simple routine acts as a great

tool for the instructor to allow adequate time for students to complete various tasks while also giving students time to process without the added pressure of having the camera on.

Guest Speakers

Maintaining engagement and interest in the online class takes extra effort. The routine of inviting in guest speakers from time to time can allow students to learn from others. Guest speakers will present and engage students in ways that differ from the routine instruction and help maintain interest in the content of the course.

Expert Question & Answer Time

In most classes, students are more engaged when their own questions guide instruction. Time is well spent to devote instructional time to allowing for question and answer sessions with an expert panel. When I taught 8th grade English, we studied the Holocaust and read both *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Night*. As a culminating activity, a panel of Holocaust survivors came in and shared with students. While this was in a traditional classroom, these types of activities still hold value in the online modality.

In my current role as a teacher educator, my student teachers benefit from planned time to ask questions to a panel of practitioners about the day-to-day questions they have as they learn to manage a class, design a lesson plan, and balance all of their responsibilities.

Breaks, Brain Breaks, and Activity Changes

Learning is optimized when we allow a time for general breaks to stretch and go to the restroom as well as brain breaks to re energize our learning. Depending on our age, we can only actively process information for 12-20 minutes. In a typical middle school period, the brain processes for 12-15 minutes before it cycles down for 10 minutes (Hammond, 2015). This is an important consideration in the traditional classroom, but vital in the virtual classroom as well.

There are many benefits to planned breaks and changes in activities. Switching up what we do in class eases exhaustion levels, lowers frustration levels and helps to refresh the mind for new learning (Immordino-Yang, et al, 2012).

Simple breaks that allow for movement, whether to allow for a bathroom break or an incorporated activity, increases blood flow to the brain, which helps with attention and focus. Research shows that students learn more quickly after they have exercised. In one study, students learned vocabulary words 20% faster after exercising (Schmidt-Kassow et al., 2013).

Additionally, the brain is attracted to novelty. The brain stays alert when there is a certain amount of change within the structure of the class. Sometimes, the modifications can be very simple. Perhaps you tend to use Google Slides and decide to incorporate Pear Deck for a lesson or rather than using the chat feature in Google, you use mentimeter to gather responses.

Here are some links to activities that allow for brain breaks:

- <https://quickdraw.withgoogle.com/>

This application prompts users to sketch, on their phone or other device, simple images. While the user is sketching, the application will guess what has been drawn. This provides a quick and easy break for students and can also be used to introduce the topic of sketch noting:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2e5Sm5xisw>

There are many videos like this on youtube. This is a Name that Tune Activity and can be used in a variety of ways in a virtual classroom. Use it as a quick entry activity, brain break, or transitional activity:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZdO2e8K29o>

This video walks students through a three-minute instructional video to create an origami butterfly:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1Ndym-IsQg>

This video is a short meditation that may be useful to embed within an online class as well. Incorporating breaks into the online class will support students' attention level and engagement and is an important component to the successful lesson planning of online educators.

Have Fun Structuring Your Online Class

Online teaching allows for flexibility in course delivery. One strategy that has been successful for the researcher is to structure my teaching schedule to have two synchronous courses followed by an asynchronous course. While I understand that this may not be possible for all situations, as educators, we should be comfortable in trying out new pathways to teaching.

My students have enjoyed that we meet as a community two times in a row and interact together and see one another; however, they appreciate that every third session is asynchronous. This allows them some flexibility as to when they complete the work and gives them a break from being online.

To keep students organized during our asynchronous sessions, I provide Google Slides similar to what they are accustomed to seeing during our synchronous sessions; however, they are also given a link to a Google Form. This Google form is utilized to gather their answers to questions I have embedded throughout the asynchronous Google slides.

Pedagogical Practices and Choices

The pedagogical practices and choices designed by the online educator are essential to promoting a CRT environment. Some methods are easy to implement. Instructors can incorporate readings from various perspectives and cultures as well as using the zoom background to showcase various images and art from a multitude of cultures. (AVID, 2022). However, other ideas may take more planning.

Voice and Choice

Voice and choice are important in all types of learning, but must not be ignored in the online class. Voice and choice allow students the freedom to explore topics of interest to them while staying within the guidelines provided by the instructor. Voice and choice also allow students

to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways from traditional assessments to project based learning opportunities. Allowing students agency in this way supports culturally responsive teaching.

Build Vocabulary

Inequities in academic settings often stem from a student's differing access and understanding of academic vocabulary. According to the Common Core State Standards, "It is widely accepted among researchers that the difference in students' vocabulary levels is a key factor in disparities in academic achievement ... but that vocabulary instruction has been neither frequent nor systematic in most schools" (2014).

The culturally responsive teacher, whether in a face-to-face or virtual setting, will invest time in supporting students in the development of academic vocabulary. Wordle and Tagul are wonderful tools that can support both instructor and student in targeting academic vocabulary. These sites create word clouds from documents. The more often a word is used, the larger it appears within the word cloud. Teachers can use this to create a visual of important vocabulary words that should be pre-taught to students before delving into a complex text. Furthermore, students may find these sites supportive of their writing in identifying word choices that they may overuse in their academic writing. Please continue reading for a sample of vocabulary acquisition strategies that can be helpful in many learning environments.

KIM Strategy.

This strategy utilizes the acronym KIM to support the learning of new vocabulary.

- K - Key Vocabulary
- I - Important information/user-friendly definition
- M - Visual that acts as a memory device

Then students should write a context-rich sentence to show understanding of the vocabulary word.

In a traditional setting, flash cards work great for this exercise and become a study tool to support students in learning the new vocabulary words. However, this can also be utilized virtually by creating the KIM graphic organizer within a google document or google slides. Students can work on this independently or within small groups.

Fruyer Model.

The Fruyer Model is another valuable tool for academic vocabulary instruction. This particular strategy works best with larger concepts since students must include a definition and facts/characteristics, but also examples and non-examples.

As with the KIM strategy, this can be adapted to be used within google docs or slides. Students could collaborate on slides and present their information out to the whole class to learn various concepts within a unit.

These strategies and many others are important to utilize in instruction to support all students in having access to the curriculum. Eric Jensen, shares, "Vocabulary instruction for adolescents shows not only increases in gray matter but that the increased density of gray matter was correlated with higher vocabulary test scores" (2016).

Engagement Strategies

Maintaining student engagement in an online setting takes diligent effort. Traditional learning settings provide plenty of challenges to engagement; however, the virtual student is at home with all of the distractions of family, friends, and the access to their own environment. Furthermore, distractions via technology are always present. Students can be present in the classroom, while playing video games, answering emails, texting and browsing the internet. Instructors must do their best to hold students accountable and engaged despite all of these challenges.

Gestures.

The use of gestures is still a viable option for the online classroom. If students are using their cameras, they can visually show you their hand gestures; however, they will also have the option of showing you a virtual thumbs up or an emoticon to interact with the content and questions posed by the instructor.

Scavenger Hunt.

Incorporating activities that allow for movement within an online class keeps students alert. Even in adult classes, the use of a scavenger hunt can be incorporated for various purposes. For example, an instructor can place small groups of students in break out rooms and task them with finding out what they have in common. Once they have decided on something they have in common, they must find an item in their house that symbolizes the commonality. This can be repeated with discussions on what characteristics are different within the group. These ideas can also be adapted to coincide with the course content.

Use of the Chat Feature.

The chat feature allows for student interaction. Instructors can have students respond to a warm up question, rate their level of agreement to various statements, and ask questions privately to the instructor.

Google Slides for Groups.

Google slides allow for small group and whole class collaboration. Students can be placed in breakout rooms to create Google slides as directed by the instructor. The teacher can also create Google slides and assign individuals specific slides to complete. Google slides are a simple way to facilitate engagement and accountability within a lesson.

Technology Tools

Technology tools offer today's educators great options to support student engagement within virtual learning. While no one can be an expert in all of the tech options available, each educator can become adept at several that serve their context.

Mentimeter.

This is a tool I began using during COVID. There are so many varieties of ways to engage students and gather information with this tool. Mentimeter can create word clouds based on student answers, create rankings and scales, as well as making use of the multiple choice and open-ended format.

What Else?

Other technology tools that are supportive of online learning include Kahoot, Edpuzzle, Jamboard, Quizizz, and Flipgrid. There are endless possibilities with more tools being developed daily. Educators should strive to master a few new tools every few months to continue to aid students in engagement and to increase the novelty of presentation and accountability methods (Dean & Wagnon, 2024) .

Appropriate Assessments for Online Learning

Assessment in the online classroom is still vital for the instructor to make instructional decisions throughout the course. Please read below for ideas that extend beyond the traditional test and quiz.

Oral Presentations.

Think fast paced. Students present on a brief topic to the class in 5 minutes or less utilizing 15 slides.

Digital One Pager.

Students create some type of visual presentation to share what they understand about the assigned topic. This could be a google slide, graphic organizer, word cloud, or other type of visual representation. Students could also do a one-page written reflection.

Recorded Small Group Sessions.

Students can be assigned to meet in small groups to collaborate and discuss assignments. These sessions can be recorded and sent to the instructor (Dean & Wagnon, 2024).

Conclusions

Virtual instruction necessitates the delivery of culturally responsive strategies. This pedagogy is responsive to student needs and affirming of student cultures. CRT also supports the motivation of students and supports critical thinking. The virtual culturally responsive teacher must be continually reflective of their practices and seek the feedback of their students in order to create meaningful learning experiences that hold the promise of rigor, strong collaborations and the sharing of ideas. The virtual classroom holds the potential to be all of this and more with the intentionality of the instructor and the engagement of the student.

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