

Applying Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Online Learning

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Abstract

Despite the prevalence of online learning in higher education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is limited literature about what constitutes effective culturally relevant and responsive online teaching. While online education has revolutionized learning by increasing educational access and opportunities to students, it has also led to an increase in classroom diversity, leaving instructors to struggle with how to create and foster a culturally relevant and responsive learning environment. In this paper, as an online educator who teaches graduate level Education courses, I examine culturally relevant pedagogy and reflect on my practices that focus on diversity, equity, and social justice. I will conclude by sharing strategies that educators can utilize in creating culturally relevant and responsive online courses.

Keywords: Culturally relevant pedagogy, online learning, culturally responsive teaching

As a racial minority educator, one of the greatest outcomes of becoming an educator has been experiencing a sense of empowerment when I teach and assess my students through culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. Growing up in Canada as a young Iranian girl, I often struggled to identify myself in the curriculum, an educational experience that I often refer to as an *education without mirrors*, and that impact even extended into my life as a graduate student. Throughout my educational journey, I never had an instructor or curriculum that reflected my culture and ethnicity. It has been years since I sat in a classroom to learn about a world that was so different than my own, longing to find familiarity and a sense of belonging. Today, as an educator, I have made it a priority to provide my students with opportunities to tap into their diverse cultural backgrounds and use their lived experiences as a bridge to make sense of the content they are learning. While I reflect on my own experiences as a minority student, I recognize and value the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and the clear relationship between culture and learning.

Despite the prevalence of online learning in higher education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is limited literature about what constitutes effective culturally relevant and responsive online teaching (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). While online education has revolutionized learning by increasing educational access and opportunities to students, it has also led to an increase in classroom diversity, leaving instructors to struggle with how to create and foster a culturally relevant and responsive learning environment (Borrero et al., 2021). In this paper, as an online educator who teaches graduate level Education courses, I examine culturally relevant pedagogy and reflect on my practices that focus on diversity, equity, and social justice. I will discuss how culturally relevant pedagogy conceptualizes the relationship between education

and social justice and will conclude by sharing strategies that educators can utilize in creating culturally relevant and responsive online courses.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy

In an online environment, culturally relevant pedagogy positions the students' cultural identity and background at the core of learning experience while encouraging the student to utilize their cultural knowledge and experiences while learning new content. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) states that culturally responsive teaching is "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically because it uses cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a theoretical framework that states, in order to promote a more nurturing learning experience, educators must ensure they offer opportunities for students to connect their cultural backgrounds to the content (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). This framework enforces that culturally relevant pedagogy "not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 469).

Gay (2002), an advocate of culturally relevant pedagogy extends Ladson-Billings' framework to discuss culturally responsive teaching and presents educators with strategies on how to improve the performances of culturally diverse students.

Using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits of teaching them more effectively, it is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal and are learned more easily. (Gay, 2002, p. 106)

Culturally responsive pedagogy is an asset pedagogy intended to encourage teaching practices that focus on the students' experiences and prior knowledge. Gay (2000, 2002) discusses three components of culturally responsive teaching: cultural competence; critical consciousness; and engaging academic success. According to Gay (2002, 2013) culturally competent teachers incorporate cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of culturally diverse students in their curriculum. Furthermore, culturally competent teachers value diversity and provide opportunities for students to integrate their experiences in their work. Klump and McNeir (2005) discuss the importance of utilizing the student identities and cultural background to develop an open and expressive learning environment, so that students feel comfortable discussing their own experiences. They add, "being culturally relevant is more than being respectful, empathetic, or sensitive. Accompanying actions, such as having high expectations for students and ensuring that these expectations are realized, are what make a difference" (Klump & McNeir, 2005, p. 11).

One of the main principles of culturally relevant pedagogy is that teachers must uphold high expectations for their students' achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Advocates of culturally responsive pedagogy believe that students bring with them knowledge and experience that is often rooted in their culture (González & Moll, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Thus, teachers must value their knowledge and experiences by providing them opportunities to apply this knowledge to their learning. This empowers students knowing that their teacher values their

cultural background and life experiences yet has high expectation for their achievement (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Howard (2003) argues that culturally diverse students often bring “cultural capital to the classroom”, which is often very different from the conventional norms and teacher’s own culture (p. 197). He explains that a student’s cultural capital is composed of their values, lived experiences, knowledge and behaviours that helps them in navigating culture. He argues that culturally diverse students may be at a great disadvantage if they are learning in an environment where their cultural background and experiences are disregarded. He states that “one of the central tenets of culturally relevant teaching is a rejection of deficit-based thinking about culturally diverse students” (p. 197). Furthermore, in order for educators to become culturally relevant, they must be genuine and critically reflect on their positionality (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers must also recognize the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and the clear relationship between culture and learning. Moreover, teachers must be knowledgeable about culturally relevant pedagogy and find ways to incorporate learners’ cultural background into their pedagogical practices.

Culturally responsive teaching encompasses principles of social justice pedagogy because one of the main goals of culturally relevant pedagogy is to provide students with learning opportunities regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity or first language (Bassey, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Social justice pedagogy focuses on the importance of creating equitable learning environments and providing marginalized students with the tools to help them battle oppression and affect change (Bell, 1997). In a study conducted by Sheets (1995), the researcher worked on building a community among Latino at-risk students and found that culturally relevant pedagogy played an instrumental role in cultivating the students’ ethnic identities and encouraging them to engage in discussions around social and political issues. These students who were considered at-risk of academic failure, were later transformed to a gifted program. Esposito and Swain (2009) state “one of the main links between culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education is the ethic of caring” (p. 39) The authors argue that educators who utilize culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education, do so in a “spirit of democratic caring” (p. 39) to liberate and empower marginalized students.

According to Ladson-Billing (1995c) in addition to achieving academic success and cultural competence, students must develop a comprehensive understanding of sociopolitical issues in order to critique and change cultural norms and inequalities. In her study, she states that when she visited classrooms, her goal was to “to examine both the political and the practical” (p. 15) and adds “I wanted to see not only why a certain kind of teaching helped the students to be more successful academically but also how this kind of teaching supported and encouraged students to use their prior knowledge to make sense of the world and to work toward improving it” (p. 15). It is evident that the culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy share overlapping tenets, as culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on raising students’ consciousness about issues of social injustice and empowering them to engage in social justice initiatives and create change within their communities.

Online Pedagogy

Online pedagogy has earned increasing attention over the past few years as the growth of online programs and student enrollment continues to rise (Ndibalema, 2022). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many higher education institutions to undergo radical transformation and digitalize education in a short period of time. In as little as two weeks, the education systems from elementary to higher education were forced to completely transform their material and methods of instruction to a format that was suitable for online delivery (Mishra et al., 2020; Mustapha et al., 2021). With the start of the pandemic, online learning became the sole platform for education in many parts of the world, as it allowed learners and instructors to interact without being in the same physical space (Shea, 2020).

For many years academics defined online learning simply as an innovative approach to delivering educational material on a computer using internet as the medium (Berge, 1999; Carliner, 1999; Khan, 1997). Over the years as online learning has become prevalent, increasing flexibility of access, from anywhere in the world and allowing “participants to collapse time and space” (Ally, 2009, p. 2), many academics have argued that online learning should involve more than simply presenting material using the web; the learner and the learning process should be the focus of educators and online curriculum developers must ensure they provide opportunities for learners to interact with the content, their instructor and other learners (Ally, 2009; Anderson (2008; Archambault et al., 2022; Greenhow et al., 2022). In order to support online students through the learning process, instructors must incorporate different learning theories and be available to offer support in order for students to “acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” (Ally, 2004, p. 45).

According to Anderson (2008) many learning theories such as behaviorist, cognitivist, constructivist, and connectivist theories, can contribute significantly to the design of online courses, stating that “behaviorist strategies can be used to teach the facts (what), cognitivist strategies the principles and processes (how), and constructivist strategies the real-life and personal applications that contextualize learning” (p. 24). Anderson (2008) explains that an effective online pedagogy should encompass four overlapping components which include learner-centered, knowledge-centered, community-centered, and assessment-centered learning. Archambault et al. (2022) support this notion and offer another framework for online pedagogy by stating the foundational components of online pedagogy should encompass five pillars which have roots in different learning theories and are based on the principles of learner-centeredness, constructivism, and situated learning. They explain “these pillars include the ability to (a) Build Relationships and Community, (b) Incorporate Active Learning, (c) Leverage Learner Agency, (d) Embrace Mastery Learning, and (e) Personalize the Learning Process” (p. 178).

According to Anderson (2008) online instructors must recognize and acknowledge students’ prior knowledge and create a learning environment that is cognizant of different cultural aspects. They must strive to create a safe and encouraging learning environment where students are encouraged to share their lived experiences and connect the course content to their culture and prior knowledge (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). Anderson (2008) posits online pedagogy should be knowledge-centered and since the internet provides learners with many opportunities to gather limitless information which can be overwhelming for learners, online instructors must direct

students and help them locate the information they need and use it to create meaningful connections to their pre-existing knowledge.

Community-centred learning is a vital component of online learning, and a well-designed online course will provide learners the opportunity to work collaboratively in creating new knowledge. This will also help students feel a sense of community and share a strong sense of belonging as they build trust and contribute to the community of learning (Anderson, 2008; Archambault et al., 2022). Another essential component of online learning is an assessment-centered learning environment in which students are provided with formative and summative evaluation and feedback that help motivate and inform them. Online instructors should also provide self-assessment opportunities where students can reflectively assess their own learning (Anderson, 2008; Means, 2022).

While majority of the research on online education has focused on process rather than content, some scholars like Valcarlos et al. (2020) argue that emphasis on process rather than the content, risks “rendering invisible political, economic, social, and cultural elements of online education. Presently, most descriptions and theorizations of online education do not incorporate social justice perspectives or aims” (p. 346). Although the works of Freire’s (1970; 2018) have had a significant impact on higher education, scholars in the field of online education have just recently started extending critical and anti-oppressive pedagogies to online learning, acknowledging that in order to address social inequalities and seek social justice, these pedagogies must be applied to online learning (Baran et al., 2011; Valcarlos et al., 2020). Valcarlos et al. (2020) argue that online educators can enact anti-oppressive pedagogies to their online classrooms. According to Valcarlos et al. (2020) “Anti-oppressive online educators sought to legitimate students’ epistemologies, foster reflection and discussion, establish expectations of critical awareness, and democratize educator and student roles” (p. 352). They argue that online educators can enact anti-oppressive pedagogies by encouraging students to incorporate personal narratives, emotions, lived experiences and their culture to the course content. Lai and Lu (2009) argue that to challenge the dominate ways of knowing, personal narratives and stories are particularly important for marginalized students to challenge the dominate ways of knowing in online learning environments. Other studies have also shown that acknowledging and attending to students’ cultures is a crucial element for online students’ learning process. Hirtle (2011) designed an online course that acknowledged and incorporated the students’ indigenous backgrounds and experiences and encouraged connections to land, spirit, and community.

Putting Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Practice in Online Courses

Reflexivity has had a number of implications on my pedagogical practices as it has led me to new insights influencing how I design, teach and deliver culturally relevant courses. Reflexivity has been defined in many ways, but a recent study by (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022) states that reflexivity is comprised of “a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes” (p. 2). Researchers have suggested that the practice of reflexivity should be continuous, which means it should be applied and exercised through every stage of the research process (Barrett et al., 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Reflexivity has been a powerful tool in my practice, as it has encouraged me to engage in deep questioning about my preconceived assumptions and be prepared to shift beyond self-reflexivity

and consider other perspectives. Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) advise researchers to “Embrace your subjectivity; abandon objectivity as a foundational goal and embrace the power of your subjectivity through meaningful reflexivity practices” (p. 92). As a researcher and educator, I recognize the value of my subjectivity and through reflexive practices, I also look beyond my own unique experiences and consider my students’ “subjectivities, relationships, approaches and contexts” (Denniston, 2023, p. 85). As a minority educator and researcher, reflexivity has helped me recognize that learning becomes more meaningful when educators apply the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy and acknowledge students’ cultures and lived experiences, while preparing them to navigate issues of social justice.

Course Development

The creation of a culturally relevant and responsive online course should begin early during the course development phase. Online courses must be developed to stage students and their experiences at the centre of the course, giving students a voice and a platform to share their experiences and tap on their cultural and lived experiences (Brown et al., 2019; Wlodkowski et al., 1995). To foster a sense of belonging, instructors must first create introductory units highlighting the importance of culture by encouraging students to introduce themselves and share their professional and personal backgrounds. Instructors can also share their own cultural background to help set a culturally responsive tone and invite students to do the same. Through dialogue and sharing their cultural identities, students can gain confidence and feel comfortable in their inclusive learning environment (Woodley et al., 2017). In my online courses, I also apply Lehman and Conceição’s (2010) introductory activity called “Where in the world are you” which is very useful for online classes, considering students join in from different provinces, countries and even continents. Through this activity, students are encouraged to share a photo and explain where in the world they are which helps them connect to other learners, their cultures and helps create a more personal and welcoming learning environment. As the instructor, this activity helps me learn about each student’s geographical location, so I incorporate and discuss current affairs of each certain region and provide students with opportunities to connect over shared experiences.

Setting Clear Expectations

Another important aspect of a culturally responsive online teaching is for educators to establish clear guidelines for a respectful online conduct. It is important that instructors share these guidelines with students early in the course, so they are informed how to engage in respectful and scholarly dialogues with their peers, while acknowledging diversity and understanding that people learn in different ways. This is particularly important in culturally relevant online courses because one of the main objectives is to help students develop socio-cultural consciousness and critical perspectives as they connect their own lived experiences and culture to their peers. In an online course, it is important that students are reminded to check their tones before publishing a post understanding there is a person behind the words. In many courses, students are asked to address questions around race and diversity for the first time in an online discussion setting. This sometimes creates an uncertainty among the participants; hence educators must be prepared to stay involved and engaged while students navigate the topic in an honest yet respectful dialogue (Bunner, 2017).

Instructor Engagement

One of the ways to foster a culturally responsive online environment is through instructor presence and engagement. In a face-to-face classroom, students and instructors can see and talk to each other and through verbal and non-verbal cues, students can receive feedback and stay engaged. In an asynchronous online course however, students must wait before receiving feedback, but if instructors are engaged and present regularly, students receive feedback promptly which can help them gain reassurance that they understand the content appropriately (Fendler, 2021; Kranzow, 2013). Timely feedback and instructor presence are key elements to student learning and student engagement in an online course (Schutt et al., 2009). Relationships between the instructor and students are a critical factor in creating a culturally responsive environment (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). As an instructor I often share with my students some personal information about my own cultural background and lived experiences, to help them connect with me and help them feel a sense of belonging which often encourages them to share their cultural background and lived experiences as well.

Course Content

To foster a culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, educators must create courses with content and learning activities that reflect the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds and allows them to connect the content to their lived experiences. Students understand and absorb the content more effectively when they can relate the content to their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds (Sanczyk, 2021). Therefore, in order to foster a culturally relevant online environment, instructors must contextualise the course content and activities to the learners' cultural background. By contextualizing the course content, it helps make the content more relevant to the student and their communities. This also illustrates examples of ways they can extend and apply their knowledge to their everyday lives while taking ownership of their own learning. For example, when teaching a graduate course in a Master of Educational Leadership program, I ensure the course material are selected through a culturally relevant lens, so that the literature is inclusive and written by diverse scholars (Hamdan & Coloma, 2022). This allows students to hear the voices of marginalized groups and communities, reflect on their own experiences, connect those experiences to conventional topics and attach meaning to the content they are learning in the course.

Culturally Relevant Assessments

Another key aspect of culturally relevant and responsive teaching is creating culturally relevant assessment tools that allow students to demonstrate their learning through different approaches, welcoming them to explore and create meaning through their own narratives. Culturally relevant assessments involve linkages between the student's cultural background and lived experiences and have shown to decrease the marginalization of students from historically marginalized groups (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). According to Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) culturally inclusive assessments decrease the marginalization of students of minority and underrepresented groups hence, by providing students with different ways to demonstrate their competence is one way to increase equity. They argue that,

Assessment, if not done with equity in mind, privileges and validates certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, can hinder the validation of multiple means

of demonstration, and can reinforce within students the false notion that they do not belong in higher education. (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 5)

One way to create culturally relevant online courses is by designing assessments where students are encouraged to engage in reflective and critical inquiry. Through such assessments, they are given an opportunity to make sense of the newly acquired knowledge while reflecting critically on their own cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Central to culturally relevant pedagogy is to help students think critically about issues of social justice and develop consciousness regarding social issues in their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Sleeter, 2012). Through activities that encourage reflection, students foster a sense of agency while feeling involved in issues of social justice that effect their communities. In doing so, online instructors encourage and guide students to become advocates for the dismantling of social injustices in their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Assessments in a culturally relevant course should not be limited to traditional written essays, but could be in the form of arts-based assessment where students can demonstrate their knowledge and competence through poetry, art, video, audio creating. According to Singer-Freeman et al. (2019) “poor alignment between assessments and competencies can reveal false achievement gaps if differences in grades reflect differences in prior preparation or confidence rather than current mastery” (p. 1). For example, when teaching a graduate course in a Master of Educational Leadership program, I provide students with the option to complete a traditional written assignment or create a non-traditional arts-based creative work such as visual; arts-integrated; arts-informed; poetic; photopoetic; oral; technologically supported; or performative, to showcase their learning. Each of these assessments, have a unique assessment metrics which have been designed with specific criteria that align with the learning objectives. These assessment metrics help assure quality, simplify the process of providing students with feedback and ensuring the grading is consistent. By incorporating arts-based assessments, instructors can allow students to explore content and showcase their learning in a multitude of ways (Reif & Grant, 2010)

Conclusion

The pandemic forced many educators to transition from face-to-face classrooms to online teaching without much preparation, framework, or guidelines to support their online teaching. In order to promote and offer full equity, social justice and inclusion, online instructors must strive to create equitable and inclusive learning environments. They must recognize the importance and value of culturally relevant pedagogy in meeting the needs of diverse learners. Furthermore, online instructors must acknowledge that in order to create culturally relevant and responsive courses and learning environments, they do not necessarily require specific technology or tools, rather they must focus on building connections and relationships with students and create an inclusive and caring learning community, through culturally relevant content and assessments.

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