

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the UDL Connection

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Abstract

As our schools become increasingly culturally diverse, it is critical for us to design learning environments that not only honor learner variability but also cultural variability. All students must feel a deep and authentic connection to education and the learning environments in which they invest their time and efforts. We know that we can design flexible and accessible learning environments through the UDL framework, but we can take our UDL implementation to the next level and create culturally accessible learning environments through the UDL framework as well.

Keywords

Culture, cultural variability, culturally responsive teaching, funds of knowledge, UDL

INTRODUCTION

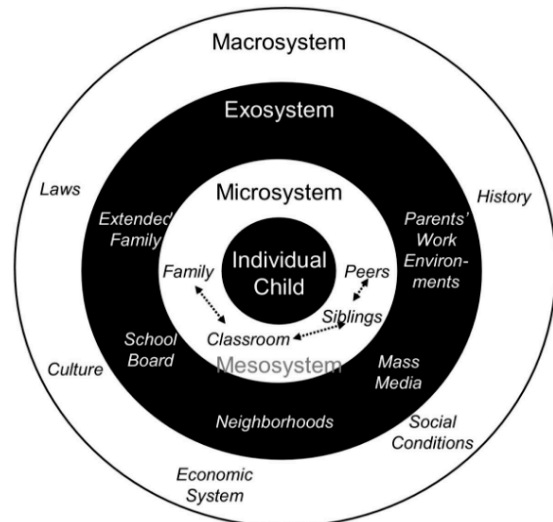
Virtually all of our behavior, all of our language choices, all of our interactions with others are ruled by culture. Culture is complex, organic and dynamic in nature, and it must never be reduced to a single facet of identity such as race or ethnicity. Culture is multi-layered and also includes concepts such as gender and gender identity, familial structure, social class, geography, socioeconomic status, mental health, and religion. When many cultures come together in a learning environment, educators must be able to rise to the occasion of honoring the cultures from which students come. Educational Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1996) insists that “learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources” (p.4). Bruner’s theory of education and cognition is not the only one that lends such credence to culture. Earlier models such as Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model organizes cognitive development into layers of complex systems, and all of those systems are enveloped and influenced by what he calls the *macrosystem*, defined as the culture in which a child develops (Eggen & Kauchak, 2016, p. 39). As such, if we truly endeavor to create expert learners who are knowledgeable and resourceful we must begin with instruction that honors the cultural resources and knowledge students already possess.

BACKGROUND

It goes by many names: *culturally relevant pedagogy*, *culturally sensitive teaching*, and *culturally centered instruction*. For the purposes of this study, the term *culturally responsive teaching* will be the term of choice. Dr. Geneva Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as “Using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspec-

tives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 31). She goes on to clarify it further in a two-part definition: “Content about the histories, heritages, contributions, perspectives and experiences of different ethnic groups and individuals, taught in diverse ways, is essential to culturally responsive teaching” (p. 127). This two part definition addresses both content presented in the learning environment and pedagogy, or the way that content is presented. By its very nature, this definition challenges educators to go beyond isolated activities that center solely on content or designated ethnic heritage months. This definition demands that the diversity represented in our learning environments find representation in course curriculum and that the cultural variability be supported with flexible and varied instruction.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological of Human Development



Funds of Knowledge

In addition to understanding the complexity of culture and the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching, educators must also understand the term *funds of knowledge* and how it fits into culturally responsive teaching. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) conducted extensive qualitative anthropological research to create home and school connections in a community of Latino students who were struggling to find success in their schools. In this research study, they created a point of distinction between prior knowledge and funds of knowledge. Prior knowledge is related to cognition; it is *what* students know, and it has a

singular location: the student. Funds of knowledge is “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Funds of knowledge is related to anthropology and culture; it is *how* and *why* students know what they know, and it has many locations: community, family, and social and religious groups.

THE UDL CONNECTION

The Universal Design for Learning framework developed by CAST is by far the most comprehensive and proactive approach for supporting learner variability. The framework can also help teachers address cultural variability in the learning environment. According to Geneva Gay (2010), teachers must support cultural diversity through content, but that content must be taught in diverse ways in order to support cultural variability (p.127). The three driving principles of the UDL framework provide the diverse approaches that culturally responsive teaching requires: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression.

If teachers build in regular opportunities for students to share information about their families, values, lifestyles, approaches and world views, that data can be used to design learning environments that more effectively recruit student interest, minimize threats and distractions, foster collaboration and community, and facilitate personal coping skills and strategies. If teachers can design activities and dialogues that dig into student funds of knowledge, that data can be used to build in options for language that honor what students want to talk about and how they want to talk about it. Teachers can use student funds of knowledge to support the transfer and generalization of skills and knowledge gained in the classroom, and in doing so, bridge the gap that exists for so many students between what is valued at home and what is valued at school. In addition to supporting these integral components of the engagement and representation principals, the data gathered from activities and dialogues designed to reveal levels of culture and funds of knowledge can also be utilized to support various checkpoints within student action and expression. When teachers and students gain awareness and understanding of vital cultural student data such as tempo of work, preference for collaboration or competition, eye contact, non-verbal communication, and concept of time, teachers can design learning environments that provide more *meaningful* ways to respond to and navigate through information, that lend value to the talents a family traditions associated with expression and communication, and that help students set goals that are meaningful and connected to their values.

A Note of Importance

Universal Design for Learning and culturally responsive teaching are not synonymous. Implementing and designing with the UDL framework does not create learning environments that are inherently culturally responsive. They are not one in the same, but they do, *by definition*, need one another. Culturally responsive teaching insists on honoring

variability, the very hallmark of Universal Design for Learning. Universal Design for Learning depends on knowing students and developing strong positive relationships with them so that we might honor the kind of learners they already are and, through the framework, move them closer to being expert learners. In finding the connections between culturally responsive teaching and Universal Design for Learning, we can build mirrors into our learning environments where students see themselves reflected, and we can build windows into our learning environments where students can gain insight and connection to the world around them. In doing so, we help students establish deep connections to education and maximize individual potential.

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