Culturally competent teaching

Heriberto Godina, PhD, University of Texas at El Paso

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/heriberto_godina/7/
Culturally Competent Teaching

How much does an individual need to know about a given cultural group to be considered culturally competent in working with students of that group? Ideas about cultural competence continue to be informed through different perspectives upon a shared definition of culture that includes, but is not limited to, perceptions about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language, and dialect. Cultural competence implies sensitivity toward issues of culture in conjunction with a social service, such as the medical profession, which has begun to reassess negative assumptions related to folk healing or curanderismo, or with the legal profession, which has reassessed negative characterizations of minorities through critical race theory. At its most basic, cultural competence means respecting cultural differences in one’s professional practice, much more than it does knowing a great deal about the particulars of a given cultural group.

Cultural competence has been a fairly recent innovation with roots in health and mental health services, as reported by Terry L. Cross, Barbara J. Bazron, Karl W. Dennis, and Marcasa R. Isaacs. In education, culturally competent teaching has been discussed through the similar concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally appropriate instruction. For English language learners, culturally competent teaching would require a teacher’s basic acknowledgment and respect for his or her student’s home language and the cultural differences they bring to the
classroom. Teachers tapping into an authentic understanding of culture would more likely benefit from successful learning experiences for their students, who would then be meaningfully integrated within their own learning community. Teachers who engage in culturally competent teaching are able to show how their instructional approaches correspond to their levels of awareness about cultural differences. Students similarly have to be understood from the perspective of cultural competence in their engagement at school. Gloria Ladson-Billings has observed how African American students are responsible for negotiating both their ties to their peer groups and the academic demands that reflect the attitudes and attributes of the dominant White culture. She argues that curricula should relate closely to the background experiences of minority students and not create a dilemma for students who may have to choose between their peer groups and academic success. Signithia Fordham and John Ögbe have similarly explained the dilemma of cultural inversion for African American students, who may view academic success as the “burden of actin’ White.” One way of understanding how culturally competent teaching can unfold in the classroom is to analyze where it could best be implemented.

Constructivist and Transmission Orientations

Classroom instruction can unfold from either a constructivist or transmission orientation. In a constructivist approach, the negotiation of meaning between the teacher and student becomes an important aspect of instruction. Culturally competent teaching can be more readily embedded within the classroom when constructivism is practiced. Some constructivist practices, such as the funds-of-knowledge approach, place a greater emphasis and value upon the student’s background culture, which, in turn, helps the teacher and student to connect to and shape subsequent intellectual activities in and outside the classroom. Another example could include a critical literacy approach, as advocated by Paulo Freire, which reflects a similar constructivist approach that negotiates meaning as a trajectory that can also lend insight into an authentic interpretation of social justice. There exists considerable evidence on how shifting the curriculum focus between either a minority or majority student perspective results in differentiated outcomes. For example, Linda Spears-Bunton found that White students became uncomfortably challenged in interpreting a shared reading of an African American text, and, conversely, African American students in the same class grew more fluent in their discussions about the reading. Previously, when the readings covered content that the White students were comfortable with, African American students had a more difficult time participating in discussion. It stands to reason that culturally competent instruction would result in a better engagement with the classroom material when background contexts and schemas can be activated from students’ prior experiences, as reported by Margaret S. Steffensen, Chitra Joag-Dev, and Richard Anderson.

Culturally competent instruction can also be specifically centered around a cultural curriculum and can be exemplified through earlier efforts on instruction about African culture for African American students, as suggested by Molefi Kete Asante. Similarly, this can be done when centering instruction around Mexican ancestry for Mexican American students. It is important to recognize, however, that merely including ethnic or heritage materials in the curriculum may not be sufficient to overcome issues arising from a lack of opportunity, historical oppression, or long-term inequities. It is the meaning of cultural differences that must be considered, rather than the differences themselves. The latter must be handled lightly and deftly in order to prevent stereotyping. Constructivist practices seem to be a better fit for recognizing the potential that culturally competent teaching has to offer.

In contrast, a transmission-based approach, such as that promoted by curriculum designs such as those inherent in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, pushes instruction toward the other side of the continuum through the enforcement of standardized tests that resonate with a similarly standardized curriculum. Transmission instruction tends toward a generalizable quality that suggests a one-size-fits-all approach. Lisa Delpit has articulated how classrooms are a microcosm of the wider society and reflective of a culture of power that stigmatizes the participation of minority students, who become subordinated. This occurs when standards are defined largely by the dominant culture. For English language learners, participation in the culture of power requires not only understanding the language of the dominant culture but also understanding the pragmatic behavior implicitly used within the language sanctioned by the dominant culture. Students benefit from being explicitly taught how to navigate through the framework of a culture that may be insensitive to
their conceptualizations of reality. A transmission-based approach more readily embraces an assimilative stance toward education for the culturally diverse student. Both approaches have their pitfalls and merits, and both entail considerations about how students comprehend meaning within the curriculum. Specifically, a constructivist approach moves away from the parameters defined by the culture of power and can risk diminishing a student’s engagement with opportunities for social mobility; and a transmission approach infuses inauthentic interpretations of literacy for students who are basically prepared for standardized testing. Thus, culturally competent teaching can be different along different sides of this continuum and can strike a medium whereby students benefit from becoming familiar with both opportunities for upward social mobility and those that recognize the unique individual qualities that allow students a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Culturally competent instruction can also go beyond whether or not the language of the classroom is English. It also entails teacher understandings of how students differ in their communicative patterns. Kathryn Hu-Bei Au studied Hawaiian school children and found that their speech patterns engaged a narrative talk story, which to the unperceptive teacher might be characterized as “noisy interruptions.” When instruction for Hawaiian children facilitated their disposition for talk story, reading achievement increased. In another anthropological study of Puerto Rican children in New York, Ana Celia Zentella found that the use of code switching among English-Spanish speakers contained a greater complexity than had been ascertained before. Code switching could greatly enhance comprehension and could be used for a variety of school purposes. Zentella’s findings helped to dispel negative perceptions about the use of code switching among English language learners. One of the shared features from these anthropological studies exemplifies how culturally competent teaching seeks to bridge practices learned at home with those of the classroom. However, an important criterion for teachers validating culturally competent instruction requires not limiting these findings to categorize particular ethnic or racial groups of students, but rather understanding the limits of essentialism. This term, explained by Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow, refers to the problematic tendency to view social groups as inherently similar entities. Teachers should look beyond the inherently limited environmental scope of previous research. In this sense, culture can be realized as a dynamic force that is in a constant state of change and can be redefined through the trajectory of time and the intersection of gender and class.

Conclusion

Returning to the original question regarding how much a teacher needs to know about a given culture in order to be a good teacher, clearly a deeper knowledge is preferable to shallow knowledge. Most of all, however, the teacher must recognize the importance of the cultural underpinnings of curriculum, any curriculum, and the fact that teaching methodologies influence the degree to which he or she becomes culturally competent. The importance of adequate teacher preparation programs focusing on culture cannot be overemphasized. The work of Ana María Villegas and Tamara
Lucas in this connection is particularly useful in shaping the content of such programs.

_Heriberto Godina_

See also Credentialing Foreign-Trained Teachers; Language and Identity; Multicultural Education; Ogbu, John; Teacher Qualifications

**Further Readings**


