Academically Effective + Culturally Responsive = Well Rounded Educator

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What does it mean to be academically effective and culturally responsive? Academically effective and culturally responsive educators are aware of their students’ cultural heritages and incorporate them into lessons based on modern concepts. They build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences or between academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities. They incorporate multicultural information into all subjects and skills routinely taught in schools and draw from a variety of instructional techniques that suit different learning styles.

Somewhere today, a Micronesian student is battling with two extremes, the traditional culture and modern culture. In the classroom, the student faces the unfamiliar. At home, the student faces the familiar. Even though there is a strong Micronesian traditional cultural heritage embedded within the educational context, there seems to be a gap between culture and academics.

The gap exists where there is no blending of modern educational values with Micronesian cultural heritage. On one side, there are those who believe that students should be educated but that they should not be tainted by Western ways to the point where they forget their roots. These people fear that the Micronesian cultural heritage will be devalued as students acquire a modern education. However, there are others who believe that Micronesian students should become educated and have the same opportunities as Western students. They believe that change is inevitable, and Micronesian cultural heritage no longer exists. But when students are taught only the Western way to do things, who do they become?

Can we look at the Micronesian way of life in such a way that we can relate it to the Western way of life? Can they be related so that when students are given a Western textbook, they can say, “Yes, I understand because we do that in our culture,” or “Yes, I can analyze the reading because through the experience of building a canoe with my grandfather, I have acquired analytical skills”? Thus, it is imperative for us, as Micronesian educators teaching a dominant language curriculum within a diverse culture, to continue to ask the question, “Am I academically effective and culturally responsive?” When we ask this question, we recognize the importance of our role as Micronesian educators in an ever-changing society.

Father Francis Hezel, in his article What Should Our Schools Be Doing? captures the essence of the role of culture in the classroom:

Culture is picked up in the environment of the home and community; the school has the task not of teaching culture but of reinforcing it. Culture is not a subject to be learned, but an atmosphere that is exuded in everything that is carried on in the school. It is the environment in which school is conducted. Culture should condition everything that happens in the school and everything that is taught—every subject, every word spoken, and every nuance. . . . Elements of traditional culture such as oral history and language need not be neglected, but they should be taught in such a way that they are consonant with the other goals that education serves: literacy and higher thinking skills, for instance. (Hezel, 2000)

It is necessary to value and develop a sense of pride in our students’ home culture and to regularly provide a platform for them to explore their views about it, so that effective learning of modern Western concepts can take place.

Dr. Patrick Moran is professor of Language Teacher Education at the Graduate Institute of the School of International Training, in Brattleboro, Vermont. In his book Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice, he outlines a model created by David A. Kolb. In 1984, Kolb created a model that suggests that learners go through a cycle of observation, theorizing, and strategizing—experiential learning. The stages of this model occur in sequence:

1. Concrete experience or participation: Learners participate in the experience and are engaged on a number of levels—intellectually, physically, emotionally, spiritually—depending on the nature of the content and the form of experience.

2. Reflective observation or description: Learners pause to reflect on what happened, in order to describe it.
3. Abstract conceptualization or interpretation: Learners assign meaning to the experience by developing explanations or theories based on other sources or from the learners’ own experience.

4. Active experimentation or response: Learners prepare to re-enter experience by devising strategies consistent with personal learning goals, the nature of the content, and the form of experience (Moran, 2001).

This cycle suggests that all learning is experience. In other words, educators can directly or indirectly engage students in traditional culture, relating it to the modern educational concepts learned in class, by knowing about it, knowing why, and knowing oneself. For example, using video, educators can show students how to weave a basket from coconut leaves in the local style and expect them to write a process analysis essay about the steps of weaving a basket. Or better, allow students to demonstrate the steps using the concepts of process analysis. Through the experiential learning cycle, the instructor: (a) gives them directions and allows them to watch the videotape (participation); (b) gives them time to think about it, and, through concept mapping (description), identify its nature; (c) gives them the opportunity to make a meaningful connection (interpretation); (d) expects them to apply what they have learned. By examining how learners focus on these four areas, educators can help them process the modern concepts they’ve learned through cultural topics.

Consider my 2004 experience in a college level study skills classroom:

It’s 9:00 a.m., and the instructor begins her study skills class by making eye contact and greeting her students. Once she has established rapport with her students, the instructor writes her goal and objectives on the board, so that students know what to expect in the remaining 50 minutes of the class time. Next, the instructor explains the lesson. Being culturally sensitive, the instructor explains the modern concept of time management to her students through an analysis of comparing “Micronesian time” to “Western time.” Students chuckle as they recognize that “Micronesian time” refers to Micronesians attending an event an hour later than scheduled. On hearing that “Western time” means being on time, not coming an hour late, the students laugh harder because they recognize the difference. They recognize that Micronesians’ concept of time is different from non-Micronesians, who tend to be more serious about time. After they recognize the difference, they are expected to identify the pros and cons of Micronesian Time and Western Time through their study skills journals. It should be noted that most of the student responses indicated that they were more responsive to learn about Western Time Management after it was related to their concept of time. In fact, students of this study skills class came on time every day afterward, but took their time working on their assignments.

Finally, culturally responsive educators integrate traditional ways of learning into their teaching through the
following: (adapted from the “Guidelines for Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers for Alaska’s Schools,” adopted by the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators, Anchorage, Alaska, February 2, 1999).

- Understanding that culture changes, educators need to maintain the continuity of the past in ways that relate to the goals of the educational institution and to continue to learn about the traditional culture.

For example, Educators must continually reassess their teaching methods and include traditional values in their lessons. The traditional Micronesian values of respect, group work, and visual observation should be considered during lesson planning and classroom management.

- Being aware that culture is a complex process, educators need to guide students through the process of adaptation.

For example, educators should guide and teach students using the steps of experiential learning.

- Knowing the dynamics of diversity, educators must be sensitive to the different needs that exist in the classroom and provide ways to help learners express themselves.

For example, educators should acknowledge students’ backgrounds and employ a variety of strategies to allow them to be confident in their schoolwork. One strategy that has proven effective in helping students to be confident is the active student-teacher conference with follow-ups.

- Recognizing the importance of using older community members as resources and ensuring the preservation of past knowledge, educators need to consult with them frequently.

For example, educators should invite traditional leaders to be part of the curriculum and discuss ways to include traditional values and concepts in academic lessons.

- Being aware of the challenges of teaching in a changing world, educators need to prepare academic lessons with the goals of the institution and traditional values in mind.

For example, educators should identify effective strategies to use in the classroom based on students’ ethnic backgrounds and skills. One strategy that can be used is to provide examples and anecdotes taken from everyday Micronesian life and compare them with the modern concepts discussed in class. When comparisons are made, they help students create a mental picture and have a better understanding, which leads them to make informed decisions about what to apply in their learning.

Furthermore, culturally knowledgeable students are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and the traditions of their societies through the following:

- Knowing the rich history of their islands and their own genealogy and family history, students can better live their lives in accordance with traditional ways and integrate them into everyday situations.

For example, students can be assigned to write and read about their family history through journal writing or as part of an academic presentation.

- Noticing that culture is always changing, students can better reflect on the choices they make in everyday living, maintain their traditional values, and relate them to their understanding of the world around them.

For example, students can be given the opportunity to reflect on how modern educational principles relate to their traditional values through the various methods employed in the classroom. One method often used is journal writing, during which students write down their thoughts about a lesson immediately after it is taught, and tell how the lesson relates to their Micronesian values.

- Being aware of the importance of preserving cultural traditions, students can pass on these traditions through oral and written communication.

For example, through the four skills employed in any classroom, students are given topics drawn from their traditional culture to write, read, and speak about.

- Knowing that they have roles to assume in their society, students need to practice their traditional responsibilities in their surrounding environment.

For example, using modern concepts blended with traditional strategies, students conduct class projects that allow them to exercise their traditional duties of serving the community. One such project would be to conduct a study on societal customs and propose ways to preserve them through active community meetings.

- Recognizing the changes affecting behavior, students should be aware of the value of respecting the past and the older members of the community, and the importance of using them as resources to survive in a changing society.

For example, students can be asked to consult with elders on a traditional topic (“What should today’s Micronesian be more concerned about and why?”), which would require them to exercise their analysis and communication skills.

Thus, as educators, if we are called to respond culturally and be academically effective in our teaching, then we must consider the many different elements in the culture, both new and old. What follows after we have considered these elements is a well-prepared lesson that employs both the modern and traditional perspectives vital to the growth of young Micronesian making the transition into an unknown future.

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