

# We're All in This Together:

## Four Tips for a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

### CULTURE & DIVERSITY

When I started teaching more than eight years ago, the cultural diversity within my classroom surprised me. My coursework did not prepare me for the student from Germany who wanted to share his heritage or the minority students who posed thought-provoking questions about historical events. Over the years, I have embraced these students and my own minority background.

Today's classrooms are even more diverse, mirroring the changes in American society. More than half of the students in these classrooms are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). They need culturally responsive instruction that allows them to recognize and understand their own culture, while building knowledge from that cultural base. These four tips will help you create and maintain a culturally responsive learning environment in your classroom.

#### **1. Develop critical cultural consciousness (Gay, 2002).**

Know, understand, and reflect on your own biases so you can reveal and analyze how your

cultural background influences your behavior in the classroom (Ford, Stuart, & Vakil, 2014). Then minimize the negative impact of those biases. Also, an important part of understanding biases is to know that your cultural norms are not absolute. Your culture may think that a student speaking over you during a conversation, which is referred to as "overlapping speech," is rude; however, this may be how the student's family engages in conversation at home. Some ways to understand and reflect on your biases is to take a self-reflection assessment, write an autobiography, or keep a journal about your actions. After engaging in reflective practices, participate in culturally responsive training.

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## 2. Learn as much as you can about your students' cultural backgrounds.

Using this knowledge, build authentic relationships with families and community members. Make an effort to understand students' origins, religion, food, traditions, history, and other cultural information. Invite one or more students to have lunch with you and ask questions about their home life. Listen to their personal stories and find a way to relate this information to instruction. Meet with and invite family and community members into the classroom to give presentations about customs and events and make an effort to participate in culture-specific events within the community.

## 3. Integrate effective instructional strategies to promote academic success.

Try to understand students' prior knowledge and use this information to construct lessons. Using students' personal information will likely encourage their investment in your lessons. Include books, movies, songs, and various materials that are representative of diverse cultures, making sure to include cultures that both represent and differ from the students in your classroom. Use cooperative grouping to support social interactions and collective learning that most CLD students enjoy (Azziz, 2009). Students can participate in activities like a Graffiti Wall. This requires students to write or draw everything they know about a given topic in their group on chart paper to share with the class. Also, lean on the strengths of faculty members who already are well-versed in cultural responsiveness. If you know ESL instructors who have knowledge about one or more cultures, encourage them to share their advice through collaborative lesson planning and instruction. Solicit input from your CLD students to make the environment more comfortable for learning.

## 4. Monitor and evaluate progress.

Help increase student achievement by integrating progress monitoring for formative assessments. Track student progress regularly and encourage students to keep track of their own

achievements. Effective culturally responsive teachers set up clear and measurable objectives at the outset of lessons and units. Students can then match their personal goals to the overall objectives and track their progress.

When I realized that CLD students were becoming more prevalent in classrooms, I knew I needed to understand and include my students' backgrounds in my instruction to increase their academic performance. After much practice and numerous failed attempts, I have learned to use these tips. Incorporating them, along with additional resources, will help you avoid the mistakes I made and better respond to the needs of your CLD students. 🍎

## References

- Azziz, R. (2009). *Turning it around: Strategies for working with culturally diverse students* [Slide presentation]. Retrieved from [http://www.indiana.edu/~equity/docs/Strategies\\_for\\_Working\\_with\\_Culturally\\_Diverse\\_Students\\_\\_Renae\\_Azziz.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~equity/docs/Strategies_for_Working_with_Culturally_Diverse_Students__Renae_Azziz.pdf)
- Ford, B. A., Stuart, D. H., & Vakil, S. (2014). Culturally responsive teaching in the 21st century inclusive classroom. *Journal of the International Association of Special Education, 15*(2), 56–62.
- Gay, G. (2002). Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: Setting the stage. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 15*(6), 613–629.

## Resources

### Books

- *Teaching Urban Learners: Culturally Responsive Strategies for Developing Academic and Behavioral Competence*, by G. Cartledge and Y. Lo (2006).
- *Developing Critical Cultural Competence: A Guide for 21st-Century Educators*, by J. E. Cooper, Y. He, and B. B. Levin (2011).
- *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2nd ed.), by G. Gay (2010).
- *Culturally Responsive Standards-Based Teaching* (2nd ed.), by S. Saifer, K. Edwards, D. Ellis, L. Ko, & A. Stuczynski (2010).

### Online

- **National Educational Association Online Resources for Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Instruction:** [nea.org/home/16723.htm](http://nea.org/home/16723.htm)



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