

CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING

One Teacher's Journey Through Theory and Practice

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TEACHERS AS BORDER CROSSERS

My experience in education, like the experience of many teachers, is one of crossing cultural borders in schools. As many other Anglo teachers from the middle class have found, the majority of my teaching experience has been one in which I was the only white person in the classroom—first in Mérida, Yucatán, México, where for five years I taught English as a foreign language to secretaries and government clerks, then in South Texas for another five years as a teacher in “one-hundred percent free- and reduced-lunch” rural communities, and finally in downtown Austin, Texas, for the last three years as an urban teacher for “minority” and “low socioeconomic status” children. My particular rite of passage was discovering that my cultural frame was irrelevant and understanding that I needed to learn immediately what was relevant—not to myself, but to my students and the communities in which I worked.

After teaching English as a foreign language in Mérida to adults, my first job teaching children was in Los Fresnos, Texas, a small town about 10 miles from Brownsville and the Mexican border. With an emergency certificate in hand, I struggled to teach as I was taught, through cultural transmission or “banking education” (Freire, 1998b [1970]) that places the teacher as knower and provider of knowledge. Fortunately for me, my assistant principal and mentor took an interest and provided me with bilingual materials, ideas, and encouragement during my first three years in the classroom as we drank coffee many times at a variety of Mexican cafés, fast food joints, and diners. In the end, I became a career teacher because my mentor looked out for me and made sure that I learned one important lesson: I had to begin with the children’s culture—in my particular case, Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American cultures—and build toward academic knowledge from there.

I went through a similar learning curve when I began teaching at Fulmore Middle School in downtown Austin. Assuming new-teacher status, I found myself struggling again with re-imagining the classroom for urban Mexican immigrants, Mexican-American, and African-American sixth

graders who presented different needs, sets of interests, and family situations than I had experienced in South Texas. And again, I found a mentor in the department head, who met with me almost daily and helped me design alternative structures for urban classrooms. These allowed for structured choice that provided a balance between open assignments, which degenerated into chaos, and teacher-directed lessons, which were boring for everyone involved including me.

Even after teaching Mexican, Mexican-American, and African-American students for the last 12 years, I am still left scrounging for materials that work and developing lessons day-to-day in an ongoing attempt to leverage the children’s home cultures into the sphere of academics valued by mainstream culture, and I still continue the search for materials and delivery methods that make for culturally relevant teaching. Culturally relevant teaching—a term I borrow from Gloria Ladson-Billings’s work—is an area of theory/practice that attempts to integrate students’ cultural backgrounds into the classroom with the goal of promoting academic achievement (1994, 1995).

I write this for educators who—like myself—find themselves crossing cultural borders and who could benefit from an understanding of one teacher’s journey into culturally relevant teaching. In order to help teachers negotiate cultural borders, I provide a theoretical frame based on reflexivity, discuss documenting competence and its limits, and provide two units I have developed in which I apply the frame. More specifically: In the first section, I provide a theoretical frame based on reflexivity that discusses notions of synthesis, dialogue, and caring as ways of co-constructing the classroom with children and community. In the second section, I analyze the tendency toward documenting competence of culturally relevant teaching and discuss its limits. In the third section, I frame culturally relevant teaching, from my Anglo middle-class point of view, as existential struggle and transformation in developing competency in my own encounters with Mexican immigrant, Mexican-American, and African-American students.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING AND THREE REFLEXIVE TURNS: SYNTHESIS, DIALOGUE, AND CARING

In bringing reflexivity into the area of culturally relevant teaching, I take a theoretical direction from philosophy and especially ethnography (De Stigter, 1998; Emerson et al., 1995; Foley, 2002), which I use to subordinate several concepts related to theory/practice in culturally relevant teaching. Reflexivity, in its broadest anthropological sense, refers to self-awareness, understanding of the position of teacher or researcher, co-creation of social spaces researched, and awareness of the implications of production and consumption of knowledge as power-laden (Foley, 2002). Douglas Foley's "Critical Ethnography: The Reflexive Turn" provides a useful typology of reflexivity from which I focus on one particular type as a useful construct for culturally relevant teaching: autoethnographic reflexivity.

Autoethnographic reflexivity, when applied to classroom experiences, refers to a teacher-student and student-teacher way of knowing based on interaction and dialogue that serves to transform both sides of the relationship. The use of autoethnographic reflexivity repositions the teacher in important ways:

First, being a dialogic knower or witness to a cultural scene positions the ethnographer [teacher] as a much less imperial authoritative knower. Second, it obligates the researcher [teacher] to embrace her/his personal indebtedness and responsibility toward other individuals. (Foley, 2002, 475)

It is this autoethnographic reflexivity, though already implicit in much of the literature about culturally relevant teaching, that I want to make explicit as necessary for teachers who enact culturally relevant teaching, especially for white middle-class teachers crossing cultural borders who find themselves teaching children of color. It is autoethnographic reflexivity in the teacher-student and student-teacher relationship that I use to draw together three distinct "reflexive turns" concerning the co-creation of the classroom spaces among teacher, students, and community. These three reflexive turns are: (1) the synthesis of child and curriculum with community, (2) Freirian transformational dialogue, and (3) feminist theories of caring.

Synthesis

The first reflexive turn in culturally relevant teaching requires an understanding of learning and thinking as synthesis. In the first synthesis, culturally relevant teaching focuses on the synthesis of children's cultural experiences and interests with the classroom curriculum. Rather than holding the children's cultural experiences and interests to one side and the classroom curriculum to another, learning and thinking—if they transcend abstract trickery or meaningless memorization—integrate the students' cultural experiences and interests with the classroom curriculum (Dewey, 1990 [1902]; Dewey, 1997 [1916]; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, 1992). John Dewey's *The Child and the Curriculum* (1990 [1902]) provides a description of this first necessary synthesis

of teacher and student, which favors neither child-centered nor teacher-centered instruction. Taking the cultural experiences and interests of the child as "self-explanatory or self-contained is inevitably to result in indulgence and spoiling" (1990 [1902], 193). Subject matter curriculum provides a map that gives "the benefits of the results of others' explorations without the waste of energy and loss of time involved in wanderings" (199). Thinking and learning, it follows, require the synthesis of child and subject matter. In the second synthesis, I argue that teachers and students go one step further—the synthesis required in thinking and learning is one of child, curriculum, and the community, which is "a resource of enormous importance" (Moll, 1992, 21) that includes but is not limited to children, teachers, parents, administrators, and other community members.

Of particular importance for culturally relevant teaching is the problem that arises when children's cultural experiences and interests conflict severely with academic school culture in terms of social class, ethnicity, or language. More often than not, the school's culture represents the dominant social class, ethnicity, and language, while the students' experiences—especially in the case of students labeled low socioeconomic status, at-risk, minority, or limited English proficiency—represent those from dominated groups that are systematically "denied access to high status positions within the institutional structure of society" (Cummins, 1986, 22).

Culturally relevant teaching—in its most general sense—draws on and reinvigorates this notion of thinking and learning as synthesis of child, curriculum, and community for children coming from marginalized and dominated social groups. The mission of the teacher in culturally relevant teaching becomes one of creating conditions in which the cultural experiences and interests of children from dominated cultures become synthesized with the curriculum and community in order to "provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 476). Given that learning and thinking never take place in an apolitical vacuum (Apple, 1979) and that notions of universal psychology and childhood are outdated, the first reflexive turn in culturally relevant teaching requires the teacher, through materials and delivery strategies, to engage in the endless struggle of synthesizing child, curriculum, and community.

Dialogue

The second reflexive turn required in culturally relevant teaching is dialogue. Dialogue represents a way of knowing that co-creates intersubjectivity and common understandings (Freire, 1998a [1969]; Freire, 1998b [1970]; Collins, 1990). This dialogue can be used to overcome differences between dominant and dominated groups "as a means for the transformation of both" (Freire, 1998b [1970], 163). Dialogue as a way of knowing hopes that listening, conversing, and living together provide a method of overcoming differences between dominant and dominated social groups in the formation of solidarity:

there will be in the living *with* the oppressed, knowing oneself to be one of them—only with a different perception of real-

ity—that one will understand the ways of being and behaving of the oppressed that reflect diverse forms of the structure of domination. (1998b, 56–57)

This living *with* and its resultant critical thinking, when applied to classroom theory/practice, allows for the ongoing synthesis of child, curriculum, and community required in the first section.

With the use of dialogue for synthesis, teaching becomes culturally relevant through a collaborative effort that stresses interaction of dominant and dominated cultures as an additive process for both groups (Cummins, 1986). Through this process of adding one another's cultural experiences, students from the dominated culture critically manipulate norms of the dominant culture—such as academic language and achievement—for the ends of social change without losing ties with their communities, while teachers from the dominant group might take on a cultural frame of reference that—through an imaginative leap—echoes and supports in significant ways that of the dominated group. Lisa Delpit describes such a critical manipulation of the dominant culture's codes of power in relation to teaching African-American students, which insists on the dominant culture's "skills within the context of critical and creative thinking" (1986, 384). Delpit's emphasis on the critical examination and manipulation of dominant cultures moves toward grounding theory about culturally relevant teaching within specific learning communities, their needs, and their practices rather than using a programmatic or "universal" set of ideas assumed to be best practice for all children.

Caring

The third reflexive turn required in culturally relevant teaching is the feminist notion of caring. Here I use the word caring specifically to refer to feminist work most associated with Nell Noddings (1984). The ethic of care represents another way of knowing (Collins, 1990; Goldstein, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Noddings, 1984) that co-creates common understandings of reality. The caring relationship "involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference and into another's" (Noddings in Goldstein, 1998, 247). This intermingling of frames of reference requires that "the one caring meets the cared for with engrossment...with full attention and with receptivity to his perspective and situation" (Goldstein, 2002, 12). This notion of engrossment leads to displacement, which is "when the one-caring is feeling with the cared-for, fully receiving him, his motives—his motives become her motives" (Goldstein, 2002, 13).

Caring relationships in the classroom "encourage students to work within a collective structure" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 60) that focuses on developing a community or family feel:

Patricia Hillard [a teacher in Ladson-Billings's study] defines her relationship with the students as that of an extended family. Each year the school year begins with the shaping of an 'undefined contract.'...the students form 'extended family groups' within the classroom and even make up names

for the families. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 62)

Furthermore, teachers engaging in culturally relevant teaching cultivate "relationships beyond the boundaries of the classroom" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 64) that move toward church, recreation, and home.

DOCUMENTING COMPETENCY AND ITS LIMITS

While the theory behind culturally relevant teaching—synthesis of children and curriculum with community, intersubjectivity and common understanding through dialogue, and feminist understandings of caring—form a backdrop on which culturally relevant teaching takes place, many studies related to culturally relevant teaching have turned to documenting specific examples of competency. The challenge of culturally relevant teaching, it seems, lies not in discussing the theoretical ideal but rather in enacting those ideas with a classroom full of students (for studies that document approaches to or versions of what I broadly term culturally relevant teaching, see Fairbanks, 1998a; Fairbanks, 1998b; Henry, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, 1992; Moll & González, 1994; Nee-Benham, 1997; Scheurich, 1998; Robinson, 1998).

Documenting Competency

Rather than provide a review of the literature—which is beyond the scope of this article—let me describe representative studies of culturally relevant teaching that demonstrate the area's tendency toward "documenting competency" (Moll, 1992). The literature, in a general sense, divides along the following categories, for which I provide an example of each: working with language minority students, accommodating cultural differences in the classroom, bringing students' lives into the classroom, and providing profiles of culturally relevant teachers. While these categories overlap one another (for instance, studies that focus on cultural differences will also provide a study of teachers, or those that focus on language minority students might also attempt to bring students' lives into the classroom), I provide categories for studies and apply them based on a representative emphasis of the studies I discuss.

Working with language minority students. Luis Moll's "Bilingual Classroom Studies and Community Analysis: Some Recent Trends" focuses on connecting children's "funds of knowledge" at home to bilingual classrooms in schools so as to avoid a deficit view of bilingual children that accompanies basic skills instruction (1992). Children's funds of knowledge refers to "the sociocultural dynamics of the children's households, especially on how these households function as part of a wider, changing economy, and how they distribute resources of all types through the creation of strategic social ties and networks" (Moll, 1992, 21). The study then presents a teacher who, informed by the researchers' ethnographic field notes concerning the community's funds of knowledge, creates a dual language-learning curriculum. This curriculum is based on construction work—a topic taken from the homes

of the children—which includes studying the architecture of different cultures, constructing a model of a dwelling, bringing in a speaker from the community, and researching a topic related to construction work. The purpose of tapping into bilingual children's funds of knowledge is to support language acquisition in the first and second languages and to create spaces for advanced academic work with language minority students. While students' funds of knowledge are important in all culturally relevant teaching, Moll reminds us that they are especially important in working with students whose home language is not English.

Accommodating cultural difference in the classroom. Annette Henry's "Literacy, Black Self-Representation, and Cultural Practice in an Elementary Classroom: Implications for Teaching Children of African-Caribbean Heritage" (1996) emphasizes accommodating African-Caribbean children's culture in the classroom. Using a both/and pedagogy for teaching dominant cultural codes through the children's African-Caribbean cultural lens, the teachers in the study used "orature—which includes rap, sermons, humor, proverbs, and so forth" (123), the ring shout with "torsos swaying, feet tapping, hands clapping...singing and chanting in call-and-response" (123), and Jamaican dialect along with standard English to include and represent African-Caribbean children's cultures in the classroom. The point of accommodating the children's culture, according to Henry, is to "foster Black students' membership in North American society with a sense of self-identity as people of African descent" (129).

Bringing students' lives into the classroom. In Colleen Fairbanks's article "Imagining Neighborhoods: Social Worlds of Urban Adolescents," the author uses the classroom as a space for dialogue between teachers and students in order to "open the classroom to students' lived experiences and the possibility for negotiated classroom interactions" (1998b, 135). Fairbanks provides a variety of writing formats such as journal entries, formal assignments, and projects that "were embedded within other classroom activities which dealt with overall themes of study and arose from discussion of readings" (136). Students' writing explored their understandings of neighborhood, social, and personal questions; the meaning of political agency; and lived experiences "describing their lives in their own and others' language" (153) as a way of co-creating the classroom in order to "create lovely things—together" (155).

Providing profiles. Ladson-Billings's *Dreamkeepers* (1994) provides extensive profiles of teachers who enact culturally relevant teaching. From her profiles of teacher-Dreamkeepers, she finds that culturally relevant teaching represents a complex of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors internalized by experienced teachers. The teachers in the study, for example, often live in the communities where they teach and are visible members of that community, hold the teaching profession in high esteem, show self-esteem through their physical dress and polished mannerisms, believe teaching is an art that allows all children to learn when it is practiced successfully, and see students as community members with valu-

able knowledge to offer in the classroom. Additionally, these teachers work to develop relationships with their students, see students in classrooms as co-constructors of knowledge rather than as recipients of time-honored canons, focus on critical thinking in relation to materials presented, ensure that students develop necessary academic skills for continued schooling, and create a standard for excellence while respecting students' differences. Most interestingly, practitioners of culturally relevant teaching use an eclectic mix of methods tailored to their specific children that range from child-centered to teacher-centered.

Limits

From a discussion recorded in "Introducing the M-CLASS"—the introduction to *Inside City Schools*—Walter Wood raises the central question that confronts those who personally wish to enact teaching that is culturally relevant:

How do we bridge what we are talking about as good practices and the realities of my classroom—the lack of furniture, the lack of materials, and sometimes the discipline we have to put up with?...Sometimes I think that we intellectualize, and then we go back to the real world and get away from it very quickly. (Warshauer Freedman, 1999, 17)

What is often missing in the victory stories inherent in documenting competency of culturally relevant teaching are the personal struggles and transformations necessary to become the type of teacher who succeeds in crossing borders reflexively—providing the necessary synthesis, making spaces for dialogue with students and community, or taking the risks involved in caring. Most of the victory stories concerning culturally relevant teaching, which often describe the attitudes, practices, and ways of knowing of veteran teachers, pretend these teachers come into being fully made—like Athena being born fully formed from Zeus's head.

As a teacher who forged routines, methods, and materials, I speak from experience when I say that, even with all the studies that document culturally relevant teaching, the micro-mechanics of enacting it always come down to the lives of the students in the room; the teacher's willingness to experiment; knowledge and respect for the parents and children of the community; the development and availability of culturally relevant materials; and the teacher's ability to forge relationships with students, competent teachers in the school, and community members. In the schools in rural and urban minority, at-risk, limited English proficiency, and low socioeconomic status communities that I worked in for the last eight years after teaching in Mexico for five years, many teachers I knew didn't experience these victory narratives so interesting to university researchers. In contrast, many either figured out a way to manage in a sort of nonfunctioning purgatory, or they simply left the profession—sometimes burned out after having finally gained competence. Others, like myself, struggled and transformed themselves while developing the particular classroom structures that allowed

for culturally relevant teaching to take place. None of the teachers I know—even the very best ones I’ve met—could characterize their experience within the frame of the victory story.

MY JOURNEY: STRUGGLE AND TRANSFORMATION

Synthesis, Dialogue, and Caring Experienced

Rather than me teaching my expert knowledge, the students and community taught me in those difficult years—first in South Texas and then in inner-city Austin—that I had to change in order to connect with students who saw me as a “new teacher” in the community who (probably like many of the new teachers they had seen over the last years) would leave immediately for a more comfortable position teaching in the suburbs. I had to continually wonder, probe, ask myself: “What do the students know and want to learn about? What types of activities will they participate in? What types of authority, academic or disciplinary, will they accept from me?” And, after a few hopeless days of constantly questioning my own competence and purposes, I occasionally made discoveries of materials and strategies that worked, and suddenly, the students were working and learning—*synthesizing* academic material and their cultural experiences.

After a particularly upsetting incident when I separated two girls who were fighting in the stairwell, I discovered that one of the girls—who was supposed to be inside my second period class—had been bitten on the cheek. I put my arms around her while she cried, “She bit me...that fucking bitch bit me.” I then told another student to get the nurse and went back into the classroom. There, a boy said, “Sir, you don’t look too good.” I responded to the whole class, “Do you think I don’t care what happens to you?” For the rest of the class, we discussed ourselves, what had happened, and gangs in the school. I learned a lot from making myself available for *dialogue*.

When I first arrived in Austin, I taught bilingual fourth grade in a position that was later closed. But for roughly the first six weeks of school, I had an adorable group of 15 kids. After the second day of school, when I was walking the kids out to the entrance for pick-up, I felt a little hand wrap around mine. Amalia, who was a soft-spoken under-aged girl, turned to me and hugged me before she got in the car with her mother. Her mother and I waved at each other, and I felt a tenderness for her that I didn’t have the privilege of experiencing again until I recently became a father. She and the other members of that group taught me that *caring* makes the institution of school a different place.

Two Units I’ve Developed Along the Way

So what does my teaching look like when it is based on long-term learning from students who have different backgrounds from mine? What does it look like when I apply my ideas in the classroom? To answer that question, I offer a few units I’ve developed over the years that fit into culturally relevant teaching. The part played by synthesis, dialogue, and caring, though not always explicit in each unit, comes to the surface here and there throughout while I focus on the struggles and the will to transform that make the classroom a

source of pride and accomplishment for myself, a place where we—teachers, students, community—overcome difficulty.

1. *Children’s Language, Culture, and Community: South Texas Legends (three weeks).*

I started working on this unit my first year as a public school teacher. After I made friends with the assistant principal based on shared interests in Hispanic-American literature, he became my mentor. During my first year in the classroom teaching sixth grade children, he watched as I struggled through lesson planning, trying to teach traditionally without much luck. After several conversations, he gave me a bilingual resource that I have since found of inestimable value in teaching Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American students: *Stories That Must Not Die* (Sauvageau, 1989). Just as the students were tiring of my reliance on authoritative teaching and discipline, through the friendship and conversations with my mentor I took the first steps in developing this unit, which I taught in different ways over the next eight years. Here I’ll provide a collage of the ways I approached this unit.

I usually started the unit using teacher-led discussions concerning Mexican and Mexican-American legends and folklore: *La Llorona* or the Sobbing Woman, *La Lechuza* or the Jealous Barn Owl, *los curanderos* or faith-healers, *mal de ojo* or the evil eye, and *remedios caseros* or home remedies. After having the students respond to these broad topics in small groups, they shared their understandings as a whole group.

- A *lechuza* is an evil lady who can change into an owl. Once one came and landed on our house, and my Dad got the shotgun and shot at it. They say that the *lechuza* means death for someone in the family.
- *Mal de ojo* is when someone gives a compliment, like to a baby. Then they have to touch him or that’s bad, *mal de ojo*, like envy. But it’s a lot of other things too...
- *La Llorona*...she’s the lady that killed her kids and drowned herself in the river. She walks along the river looking for her dead children...

After activating what the children know, we read round robin, in pairs, and silently, doing three-sentence summaries of what was read and identifying the characters from the discussion of our readings. Every section of reading is followed by telling stories that the children know, and telling stories is often followed by more reading in fluid movements following the mood of the group. If the stories that the kids exchange are engaging, we’ll story swap the whole class period. If there aren’t a bunch of storytellers in class, we’ll read more from the book. During this sharing of legends, student experts emerge in each class, and on occasion, I’ve pulled them from class so they can share stories with other classes during the day. Since the materials I use are often bilingual, the Spanish-speaking children often request to read the legends in their home language, or they ask me to do it for them. Usually toward the beginning of the unit, I invite one of the expert storytellers’ parents to join us—because the child gets the stories from the parents. On several occasions, the parents’ visits turn into a listening treat in which the

class hears legend after legend for an entire class period.

As the unit progresses, I expand the notion of legends, moving from culturally specific South Texas legends to a general definition of legends. I also accept urban legends and neighborhood scary stories so that all students, even those few without a Mexican-American background, can participate. I contribute by sharing legends from books that I've read or from the Internet—freely sharing during the sessions—and children bring in legends from books and the Internet also. One standard homework assignment that I have given in the past is for students to find an example of a legend either in the library or on the Internet that they could share with the group. This differs from story swapping in that it requires students to move toward written legends that are presented in a more literary form. Children then summarize on a note card the written legend they found and present it to the class.

In order to provide an incentive for active listening, I monitor students as they listen to others' presentations of legends and provide them with a listening grade, or I have the students summarize each of the legends presented using the same three-sentence format described above. I use web sites such as "The Moon Lit Road" (Dominey, 2002), link them to my Internet site, and have the children read from or listen to legends on the site in the computer lab for several days, filling out "Evidence of Reading" forms that require a variety of reading skills including sequencing events, summarizing, inferring, and predicting.

After engaging the students in their home culture and language for several weeks in the ways mentioned above, I assign a culminating project. One of the projects that I did several years ago required the students to become ethnographers and tape-record stories from the community. This ethnography project required students to find an elder in the community—a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or elderly family friend—and interview them about the community, the "old days," and legends they know. One interesting scary story, narrated by the student's grandmother, follows.

My mother always told me to stay away from the [irrigation] canals when we played, but of course we didn't. We thought that the parents were always worried about silliness....we always went to the canals to play. In the summer, we went swimming and we had all types of games that we would play along them—like water games and ball games, you know, child's play. But the parents would always get mad when they found out, because they knew that sometimes children drowned in the canal.

Well...we kept playing, and one time we met a new kid—a kid we had never seen at school. Anyways, we asked him his name, and he said it was Enrique. Enrique liked to swim in the canal, but he also played all types of games like *busca-busca* [hide and seek]....We played together for a long time every day, maybe a month. Then one day we walked down Enrique's street, and he told us where he lived. He went inside.

After that we didn't see Enrique for a long time...when we went by his house, an old lady said we should stop playing games with her. "Enrique died a long time ago," she cried. When we asked some of the other neighbors about the old lady and Enrique, they said that Enrique had drowned in the canal...we had played with him every day for a month.

2. *Bringing Lives into the Classroom: The Reflective Essay*

I had always been a better teacher of literature than of writing—as language arts teachers often prove themselves to be more interested in one side or the other of the reading-writing split. And working in South Texas didn't always help—we were forced to do at least two TAAS (Texas state standardized tests) essays per six weeks on prompts assigned by the department head. While I'm embarrassed to admit that I taught prescribed writing for five years in a row, at the same time I reserve a space of pride that 93 percent of the students in our 100 percent low socioeconomic status school passed state standards on the conventions of writing in the standard academic essay. But at best, I feel ambivalent of this type of "success"—the formal testing type—knowing that a lot was lost using prescriptive methods to respond to prompts.


When I came to Austin and began working in a "majority minority," "inner-city" middle school with approximately "75% of the students on free and reduced lunch," I found a new department head who challenged the prescriptive way that I was teaching the state essay. He argued, ceaselessly, that I needed to let students choose their topics while manipulating the modes of discourse on the TAAS test. Using topic generation and narrowing, student examples of successful TAAS essays, and newspaper articles as models, I took the plunge rather successfully into the world of choice—of course, with the coaching and feedback of my new mentor. The persuasive letters, I found, began to be about problems in the school or housing projects, and we later delivered them to the indicated recipients. Children revised and edited the drafts, making suggestions of where to expand or delete, where to add dialogue, and where to fix sentence errors, and they word-processed and printed out two copies of their papers: the first for grading and the second to be stapled together in class packets for independent reading later. The packets of student essays became a favorite read during independent reading time.

But it was not until I discovered Linda Rief's "life graphs" and "neighborhood maps" (1992) that students began making choices that showed depth of reflection and voice despite lacking mechanics. What developed out of the life graphs and neighborhood maps turned into a recurring assignment of writing reflective and personal essays after using extensive pre-writing scenarios.

I begin this unit by sharing a humorous personal essay

ally relevant teaching, including my own experiments. Border crossing, reflexivity, and culturally relevant teaching represent a movement toward legitimization of the cultural other in American cultural life in the same way that the Spanish colonial society legitimized the indigenous other. After all, we still live in the historical remnants of the colonizer-colonized relationship, and schools are important sites of social reproduction in a U.S. regime based on merit, consumerism, work, and self-reliance (Apple, 1979). Through the lenses of the colonizer-colonized relationship, social reproduction, and regime, we see the tricky game we play when we attempt to legitimate cultural others in our schools, our lessons, and our children's minds: To whose benefit is the legitimization of the other found in culturally relevant teaching?

There are several interpretations of the legitimization of the cultural other inherent in border crossing, reflexivity, and culturally relevant teaching. On one side, radical skeptics argue that the move toward legitimization of the other is but symbolic, that there is, in fact, no difference between the regime before and after its new legitimate culture(s). The powers that be have merely repositioned themselves around different idols in making power legitimate for a different type of oppression. On the other side, the liberal practitioner argues that this reorganization and repositioning of power around new idols of the cultural other make for change, betterment, and progress. Perhaps, in this view, the synthesis, dialogue, and caring that accompanied this shift of cultural idols *actually changed* schools for the better, allowing for more inclusion and making the society a better place.

I argue that in this dangerously conservative political climate, we need to see radical skeptics and liberals as complementary. While liberals can learn from radical skeptics concerning the traps of legitimization and the difficulty of working the colonized-colonizer relationship in a critical way, radical skeptics need to set foot in a school and see how children respond in concrete classroom circumstances to the liberal pedagogy represented in culturally relevant teaching. Even though the liberal pedagogy that legitimizes cultural difference is limited in its possibility, what are the alternatives in real classrooms of our dominant institutions at present? What can be accomplished in the institution of school as it exists in the present? How do we respond in practice to the demands we face in our classrooms? I argue that culturally relevant teaching, which *de facto* is a part of legitimizing the cultural other, represents an important concrete plan that requires more attention in public education. Culturally relevant teaching, like the kind I discuss and explore, represents the best stance for white teachers working with children of color within a dominant social order. 

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