WRITE THE WORLD

Creating a Culturally Responsive Writing Classroom

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Culturally responsive instruction is an "asset-based pedagogy… that incorporate[s] students' cultural identities and lived experiences into the classroom as tools for effective instruction" (Domzalski, 2022).

"Culture.. is the way that every brain makes sense of the world," writes education and neuroscience scholar Zaretta L. Hammond in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. "That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture. Think of culture as software for the brain's hardware. The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. If we want to help… learners do more higher order thinking and problem solving, then we have to access their brain's cognitive structures to deliver culturally responsive instruction" (2015, p. 22).

Equity in the Writing Classroom

Across the United States, writing education remains mired in inequity, with students attending suburban schools outperforming those in urban and rural districts (NCES, 2011). A 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study of United States reading proficiency revealed a marked decline in student performance from 2019, with students in urban schools experiencing drops of six to sixteen points, and large city schools demonstrating an average drop of three points.

Much of traditional curricula in United States writing classrooms is Eurocentric, centering voices, experiences, and a literary canon that do not reflect the identities and lives of diverse student populations (Hollins, 2020). And when content feels irrelevant, it can negate student engagement, precluding intrinsic motivation, reinforcing a fixed mindset, or perpetuating what Carnegie Mellon University describes as a "sense of fatalism" that, when carried over from high school writing, "may impede [the] ability to perform effectively" in college (2023).

When students do not feel seen or accepted in the classroom, or reflected in curricular content, they may experience anxiety that impedes their ability to persist in cognitive challenges. In students from underserved populations, for example, stereotype threat, or "the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about [one's] racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group" can further "reduce academic focus and performance" (UC Boulder, 2023). Curricula, policies, and instructional practices that perpetuate discrimination can,

additionally, position schools as sites of trauma or retraumatization (Gaffney, 2019) working biologically against students' capacity for learning.

Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Implications

"Recent research has suggested… that middle school students with learning disabilities often view academic situations as threatening, even exhibiting physiological stress responses upon entering a room where they will be asked to read," add Universal Design for Learning (UDL) scholars, who focus on multimodal learning for students with a range of differences and needs. "While more successful readers tend to show mild anxiety when asked to read aloud, students with a history of reading difficulties show elevated heart rates and other indicators of stress even before being given instructions" (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014, p. 58). For many young people whose identities are traditionally marginalized, anxiety permeates literacy instruction.

Across the board, a fight-or-flight response impedes higher cognitive function and working memory, attenuating students' ability to engage meaningfully with content and knowledge acquisition tasks (Damasio, 2005; Mascolo, et al, 2011). Stereotype threat, outlined above, can incite or exacerbate the psychological burden of "impression management," or the "processes by which people control how they are perceived by others" (Leary, 2001)--for example, a neurodivergent student's "masking" to present as neurotypical (Marschall, 2022); a student with a physical disability pushing their limits to appear able-bodied; a new teacher's sharing stories about their dissertation to establish credibility among more tenured colleagues. Such efforts are at times conscious, at times unconscious, but rooted across the board in a desire to achieve acceptance, validation, and belonging.

In the writing classroom, such processes may look like code-switching—using a vernacular, diction, or other verbal and nonverbal communication patterns that align with the non-marginalized or perceptibly favored culture in a given context. For example, BIPOC students may avoid use of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) around teachers, perceiving that use of the dialect will reinforce negative stereotypes—a valid concern, as data collected by the Brookings Institute from 68,930 United States teachers and 1.5 million non-teachers showed that "30% of respondents (including both teachers

and non-teachers) expressed explicit pro-white/anti-Black bias and 77% expressed implicit pro-white/anti-Black bias," with teachers and non-teachers showing relatively equal levels of bias (Starck et al., 2020).

The Need for Inclusive Community

Belonging is a prerequisite to engagement; a felt sense of worthiness and acceptance circumvents the sympathetic nervous system arousal that occurs during fight-or-flight stress responses associated with inequitable academic settings, allowing students greater access to prefrontal cortical function, higher order cognition, and working memory, in addition to greater receptiveness to social engagement and social learning (Ginwright, 2015).

To facilitate such belonging, employing culturally responsive teaching practices and an equity-centered design to the creation of curricula, learning environments, and instructional strategies is paramount (Hammond 2014; Love 2019; Kleinrock 2021; Minor 2023).

Our Approach

Write the World actively engages culturally responsive practices in the design of writing prompts and curricular materials by using student-authored pieces from teenagers around the world as the basis of writing instruction. In this way, diverse youth voices are centered as sources of expertise. For example, students might be asked to write a literary analysis essay in response to an exemplary teen-authored poem or short fiction piece. Similarly, associated reading materials that serve as "mentor texts," or models for writing, are representative of a breadth of adolescent identities and experiences.

Additionally, in materials that do incorporate the voices of outside authors, Write the World draws from a world-wide public literary canon informed by our experience running a global online writing platform for over ten years, disrupting the often Eurocentric texts typical of literacy curricula.

Supportive Collaboration

Because we view writing as a *social process*, we take seriously the explicit teaching of cultural humility and responsiveness in peer-peer and teacher-student interactions. The bedrock of social learning at Write the World occurs through interactive, rubric-based reviews in which peers (or teachers) provide in-text annotations and comprehensive written feedback to student writers throughout their drafting process. This exchange

necessitates a delicate balance of supportiveness and actionable, constructive feedback on the part of peer editors and teachers providing feedback, as well as attention to cultural norms and nuances represented through students' pieces.

In such exchanges, both writer and reviewer bring to the text their individual sets of schemata—or "internal working models" that represent their worldviews—informed by context, development, and culture, and which may be quite different from each other.

Through peer review lesson plans, frameworks, and scaffolded provocations for peer reviewers embedded within the rubrics themselves, Write the World employs an asset-based approach to interactive feedback exchanges and collaboration that encourages explicit, respectful, and responsive considerations of one's own and others' positionalities.

Perspective-taking

By utilizing techniques such as open-ended questioning, Write the World teaches reviewers to guide writers' original thinking and artistic intentions from a place of curiosity and encouragement rather than impose a more prescriptive approach that may be rooted in the reviewer's positioning.

Doing so cultivates students' capacities for empathy and "theory of mind" (ToM), or the "ability to attribute mental states to ourselves and others, serving as one of the foundational elements for social interaction" (Ruhl, 2023), meaning psychosocial, cognitive, and identity development are at play alongside the cultivation of global citizenship and literacy skills.

Indeed, by reading or listening to a story, the brain produces a neurochemical called oxytocin, dubbed "the moral molecule" (Zak, 2013) for its facilitation of feelings of empathy and resulting prosocial behavior, legitimizing the power of stories to connect students and teachers across difference and through equity.

Differentiation and Engagement

Across materials and interventions, Write the World also incorporates multiple modes of engagement and scaffolding for differentiated instruction, meaning content is adaptable

for students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) or who have language-based or other learning differences, in alignment with Universal Design for Learning pedagogies, cited above.

And real-world publication opportunities, whether verbal or written, foster community connections and exchanges with authentic audiences that connect the world of the classroom with the world(s) of the student(s), invoking the heart of project-based learning pedagogy—comprised of seven "gold standard" tenets: a challenging problem or question; sustained inquiry; authenticity; student voice and choice; reflection; critique and revision; and production of a public product" (PBL Works, Buck Institute for Education, 2023), all of which promote student agency, itself at the heart of culturally responsive, equity-centered, and trauma-informed instruction.

Honoring Student Experience and Expertise

"When students have a chance to narrate their lives, put language to their experience, and process their thinking through discourse, they begin to notice and name their own competence," writes Hammond (2015, 149).

By implementing and iterating the above strategies and engaging in continuous learning and unlearning in the field of culturally responsive teaching, Write the World operationalizes research to promote accessible, inclusive writing programming across subjects, creating conditions for students to not only notice but claim and "name their own competence," then share it with the world.

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