

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the English Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract: Teachers of all subjects face one common problem: student engagement. Because students need to be engaged to effectively learn, teachers need to know the best way to engage students in learning. In the English Language Arts classroom, teachers are faced with the problem of engaging students in reading texts that are sometimes not interesting or relevant to their lives. These teachers are tasked with finding ways to make these texts more engaging, or deciding to use more culturally relevant texts. Research has found that culturally relevant texts and teaching methods engage and therefore more effectively teach students. How can teachers make canon texts more culturally relevant to students and how can teachers use culturally relevant texts to teach their students?

Introduction

Throughout the school year, there are approximately 180 days teachers have with students to teach them their content. During these 180 days, students have roughly an hour a day to study English Language Arts. Considering the limited amount of time teachers have with their students, it is important to carefully choose which texts best fit the curriculum and will make the most impact on the students. So, what kinds of texts do teachers need to use in order to engage students effectively? Often, teachers stick to canonical literature because it is what is most commonly taught. However, research has shown this may not always be the most effective way to teach literature, because such texts may not be relevant or engaging for their students. Another way that teachers can instruct on literacy is by introducing culturally relevant literature and pedagogy into the English language arts classroom. This particular methodology has many benefits for student engagement and success.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Research suggests that the best way to engage students is through culturally relevant pedagogy. Gloria Ladson Billings (1995) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). The use of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom helps increase engagement, and therefore increase the effectiveness of teaching; it has been shown to be linked to greater student engagement as well as improved standardized test scores (Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart & Hughes, 2015). Harbour and colleagues found that when teachers effectively engage students, they have a higher level of achievement and are more successful. This means students need to be engaged in order to learn. Because students are more engaged when being taught with work

that is relevant to them, a culturally relevant approach offers a more effective way to teach.

Culturally Relevant Literature

Culturally relevant pedagogy can be taught with either culturally relevant literature or canonical literature. Researchers Tanya Christ and Sue Ann Sharma's (2018) work on culturally relevant practices found that culturally relevant pedagogy supports "students' motivation, engagement, literacy outcomes, and positive identity formation" (p. 55). They specifically studied this in regards to literature instruction. They looked at knowledge of the students' cultures, attention to text selection, and the use of culturally relevant texts and pedagogy combined. They evaluated lesson plans, reader responses and reflections to measure whether or not the students were learning the material more effectively. They found that culturally relevant pedagogical practices improve student learning "because they help students anchor to their identities and personal experiences via a specific subset of prior knowledge" (p. 58). Using culturally relevant pedagogy to guide teaching instruction helps improve motivation, engagement, and student outcomes.

One specific successful practice that was studied was the selection of culturally relevant texts. Teachers used students' self-reflections to improve their ability to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy and to select culturally relevant texts (p. 66). They found that by doing so the teachers learned more about their students' cultures and came to recognize that cultural relevance is an important aspect to consider when instructing students. This is an important insight because of the importance of student engagement; by choosing culturally relevant texts for them to read, the teachers increased their engagement and the students were therefore more likely to learn the content that the text and teacher are trying to teach.

For example, one teacher in this study chose the book "Maniac Monkeys on Magnolia Street" by Angela Johnson. She selected this book for an African American student. She did this by considering several dimensions of her student's culture and identity (including race, dialect, and age) in relation to those of the character in the book, as well as considering the situations the characters were going through. She also asked the student questions about herself to determine the story's relevance (p. 66). The teacher found that her student was able to connect with the literature and was able to successfully respond to multiple dimensions of the novel because of the cultural relevance to the student (p. 67). This anecdote and the larger study suggest that culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant texts both need to be present in the English Language Arts classroom in order for students to achieve at high levels. This conclusion is supported by the sixteen other preservice teachers in the study who had similar outcomes with their students when they implemented culturally relevant pedagogy into their classrooms.

Culturally relevant literature is a way to get students engaged in literacy learning. A study conducted by Clark (2017) also looked at the impact of culturally relevant literature on African-American struggling readers. This study examined the achievement of these children for ten weeks in an after-school reading program. This program presented tested three different types of text usage: the first used culturally relevant texts, the second non-culturally-relevant texts, and the third used culturally

relevant texts intermittently. The purpose of this study was to examine how reading comprehension might be improved or worsened by the use of culturally relevant texts.

Clark (2017) found that the students who had read culturally relevant texts demonstrated significantly greater comprehension than the students who read the non-culturally-relevant texts, or those who read them intermittently. Clark also found that the students who read culturally relevant texts improved their word recognition skills at much higher rates than those in the other groups. Overall, this study supports the theory that culturally relevant teaching is beneficial to student learning and helps improve comprehension. This study also shows that culturally relevant texts can promote higher achievement for African-American children and strongly suggests the importance of considering student culture when teaching literature.

Canonical Literature

It is also worth looking at how to make canonical texts more culturally relevant for students. Because some canonical novels cannot be replaced, whether due to budget constraints, standards, or district practices, teachers need to know how to implement culturally relevant teaching practices while teaching canonical literature to students. Even though research has shown that culturally-relevant texts are better at engaging students, canonical literature can be taught using culturally-relevant pedagogical practices to ensure that students are being taught in the most engaging way possible.

Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, and Petrone (2014) describe canonical literature as a group of texts that may evolve over time but it is widely and commonly taught. They argue that canonical texts “perpetuate ideologies that are also dominant—about Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability” and that these types of ideologies are often left unquestioned and unexamined when these works are taught, which has the effect of privileging some while marginalizing others. Because canonical literature is so widely taught, and because the traditional ways of teaching this literature can support these problematic ideologies, it is important for ELA teachers to incorporate culturally relevant practices while teaching these works of literature.

Bright (2011) studied how to use canonical literature in different ways, and in particular how to use intertextuality to generate interest in the literature. Bright quotes Gallo (2001) “Typically, books classified as canonized literature are recommended for use in high school curricula, fulfilling an expectation that teens read what is considered to be “great” literature. The reality is that “for the most part, canonized novels deemed suitable for adolescents and young adults by teachers and curricula are not relevant or interesting to young readers” (p. 39). Bright suggests that an intertextual approach to teaching canonical literature can help surmount this problem. She defines intertextuality as incorporating one or more texts for the students to read before reading the canonical literature to better prepare the students for the canon literature they will encounter. Her research suggests that if a teacher is going to teach canonical literature, they need to consider using parallel texts to introduce the themes in order to generate interest in the novel before reading. Otherwise, as Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart and Hughes (2015) found in their research,

students will likely not be engaged, and therefore will not effectively learn very much from reading the literature.

Since the question, “which texts are more effective to teach between canon literature and culturally relevant literature” seems to lean towards culturally relevant teaching, my follow up question is “how to teach canon literature in a culturally relevant way.” Research done by Simon (2008) offers another approach to teaching canonical literature. She suggests scaffolding student experiences with canonical texts. Simon begins by showing the need for such scaffolding. In an interview with a student, the student was asked about her experiences with canonical literature. The student stated that she never connected with *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, a popular canonical novel. Because of the disconnect, she ended up failing the class and felt discouraged from reading other literature. This implies that there are detrimental consequences from requiring students to read canon literature without first scaffolding and providing more authentic and engaging learning opportunities.

Simon researched student’s comprehension and engagement using the text *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton. She had them read the first scene and asked them to note the sensory details, and found the students’ responses unenthusiastic. She asked students to reflect on what they had read, and received feedback including “what a drag it was to open that book,” and “the cover alone turned me off” (p. 136). Simon surmised that their lack of enthusiasm was because the book did not reflect their experiences. She then introduced activities like role-playing and activities to build background knowledge as part of her students’ pre-reading. After engaging in these activities, students showed an understanding of the topic and characters, and an interest in reading the book. They also noted that it made the text more real. One student was quoted saying, “I was eager to read the story to find out which of the characters symbolized the roles we played.” Students initially had not engaged with the story because of their lack of knowledge about how this text might be relevant to their own experiences of poverty, race, religion, and class. After implementing culturally relevant teaching practices, students were able to identify points of contact with the text. Where earlier the students had missed key points of the story, after the culturally relevant activities, students reported that they felt as if they had entered into the story and were able to see the story instead of just reading it. As one student stated, “It made me see the character’s view... Before I had only seen them from my own readings and my own understanding of the book.”

At the end of her teaching of the novel, Simon (2008) asked students to complete a final reflection. In this reflection, the students’ responses were more positive. Simon saw these responses as a demonstration of how role-playing can be used to engage students to learn about canonical literature. This research goes to prove that providing engaging activities to go along with canonical literature is more effective than having the students cold-read such literature.

How to Use Canonical Literature as a Historical, Cultural, and Social Teaching Tool

Another way to engage students in reading canonical literature while also incorporating cultural relevance is explored by Maher (2013). Maher presents a method of teaching the canonical novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a resource for teaching about

the school-to-prison pipeline. The goal is to not only understand *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but to also understand a larger issue and to make the students more culturally, socially, and historically aware. Maher's approach engaged four different aspects of culture, which she explored through linkages to the novel: single parent homes, lynching and racial discrimination, the criminal justice system, and poverty. To gauge student engagement, Maher observed her students and had them complete reader response journals. For each subject, Maher worked to generate interest and provoke thought about that aspect of culture. For example, to engage the subject of single fathers raising children, Maher showed clips from *Finding Nemo*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, and from the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This method involved the students in understanding a real problem in the country and made them more culturally and socially aware. The subject of prisons and incarceration was connected to racial discrimination, which allowed the students to become more historically aware of America's past in relation to racial discrimination, incarceration and lynching. The responses of Maher's students showed the strong feelings and engagement this approach generated, "Our world is so messed up! I don't know why God lets things like this happen," wrote one student, while another wondered "Who could possibly have that much hatred in their heart, killing human beings like that?" (p. 48). These responses show that the students were deeply engaged and affected by what they read and discussed. Maher also connected this topic to schools' zero-tolerance policies, which disproportionately affect African-American students (p. 48). Again, this brought real-world cultural relevance into the classroom.

Maher (2013) found that such an approach led students to be more engaged in classroom activities and to be able to write insightfully about the literature because of the cultural approach to the novel. Using canonical literature in a cultural, historical, and social way led them to think more deeply about the world around them.

Conclusion

Culturally relevant pedagogy is important for teachers to practice to be more effective and engaging educators. Whether they are practicing this pedagogy by using culturally relevant texts or canonical texts, it is important to keep in mind their students' backgrounds, cultures, religions, etc. By doing this, teachers can more effectively teach their students in meaningful ways and increase the success of their students.

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