

What Does It Take To Be Culturally Relevant?

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When I was invited to speak today on the topic of culturally relevant pedagogy, I said yes. After all, I was a psycholinguist in the early years of my career. I've done lots of research on language development. I've spoken and written thousands of words on the relationship between language, thought, emotions, culture and human and community development. I even taught English to foreign graduate students at Brown University decades ago. So I was eager to speak with you. And then it struck me—I had no idea what was meant, in your field, by culturally relevant pedagogy. I had questions— Does relevant mean similar to? Which culture are we talking about? And, if so, does pedagogy mean an approach that matches that culture?

I did a little work finding out. I spoke with some of you here, did a little reading and even found a Wikipedia entry on the six principles of CRP. All of this helped me realize what the term means to me. Culturally relevant pedagogy in TESOL environments, to me, is an approach to helping people engage in activity through which they become languagers. I use that term, which I think I made up, to convey more than learning and more than speaking. Languagers create language and use language to create other things—relationships, learnings, material things, and themselves. Languagers are speakers, listeners, conversationalists, readers, writers, poets, singers, creators, makers of meaning. Becoming a languager entails acquiring skills and knowledge. But it's fundamentally a developmental, a qualitatively transformative, activity of becoming something and someone you weren't. Put it more simply, it's a growing, not a knowing, activity.

Here's where we can begin to explore cultural relevancy. Whatever particular pedagogy you are practicing, to whatever extent it is culturally relevant to the specifics of who are teaching and where you are teaching—it is being carried out in the broader culture that has tremendous impact on every one of us. So it seems to me, we need to examine that broader culture and take it into account in whatever we do. What is its philosophy, its psychology, its economics, its politics? What are we all being socialized to? How do we understand what learning is? What development is? What language is? What a human being is?

The current culture here in the US, and increasingly globally, is individuated, competitive and knowledge-oriented—philosophically, psychologically, economically and politically. While we might be polarized to an extreme today, we've been socialized for centuries to see and understand and relate dualistically—with pressure to put most everything into categories and to divide the world into either-or—either cause or effect, mind or body, good or evil, cognitive or emotional, private or social, nature or nurture, thought or action, work or play. In such a climate, what is culturally relevant pedagogy? In such an acquisitional, product-driven world, can we build environments to support students of any age and sub-culture to continuously develop themselves, their families, their communities—and their cultures? What does it take to learn developmentally and continuously become learners and language users?

My training and experience—and my gut—tell me that the last thing we should do is what we've been doing. To repeat a well-known quote from Albert Einstein—“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” Even if we want to adapt students to the culture as it is—and I think that most of us here want to help them to change it—it doesn't follow that using the dominant tools and understandings is the way to go. Instead, I think that giving them new kinds of tools and understandings, tools of development, is what we should do.

So, what do I recommend? I think we have to be weird in order for them to learn, in order to grow, in order for them to become language users. I think we ourselves have to be—and

help our students to be—weird in the sense of being other than who we and they are. We have to organize environments for them to play at being other—to play with their identities, with each other and with language. We have to organize environments for them to perform, which is a kind of play—to take who they are and create with that someone other than who they are. You cannot learn another language, I firmly believe, unless you are being ridiculous a large part of the time.

The most powerful tools for development that I'm aware of are play and performance—not only in early childhood but throughout the life span. That's because when we play and perform we can loosen the rules and roles that keep us doing what we know how to do. We have permission to take risks and do something new without believing that we have to know how it'll turn out before we do it. When we play and perform with those we are with, we are smack in the middle of a socially creative process.

Let's take a look at some people as they play and perform with language.

[Father-baby conversation video](#)

This is wonderful example of playing with sounds and words. Father and baby are fully involved in playing a language game, and creating a performance of a conversation. Neither one understands what the other is saying and it doesn't matter. But in the performance, the character father understands what his baby is saying and the baby understands him. The father relates to the baby as who he is (a babbling baby) and at the same time as other than who he is (a language). Variations of performances of conversation like this one take place hundreds of times a day in the life of nearly all children.

Lev Vygotsky, who has influenced my work enormously, had much to say about play, language, learning and development. About play, he said: "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (1978, p. 102). I love this metaphor; to me, it captures beautifully the

dialectical “otherness” and “becomingness” of play and performance and their role in learning and development.

“Head taller” also suggests that we become who we are not because of the human capacity to do things without knowing either how or that we are doing them. Vygotsky was well aware that being supported to do what you don’t know how to do is key to development in early childhood. He noted that young children actively participate in their development without knowing that they are doing it. As he put it, “...before a child has acquired grammatical and written language, he knows how to do things but does not know that he knows.... In play a child spontaneously makes use of his ability to separate meaning from an object without knowing that he is doing it, just as he does not know he is speaking in prose but talks without paying attention to the words” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 99).

Here is another example of playing with language, this time by adults doing a very common improv game, telling a story one word at a time.

[One word story improv video](#)

The way these improvisers are telling a story, one word at a time, is unnatural. It’s a particular kind of performance that exposes the social creation of meaning that goes on all the time, but that we tend to think of as a spoken readout of what’s in my head and your head. Clearly, whatever meaning these improvisers are creating, it’s not a solo but a joint creation. I find a striking similarity between this kind of adult improv play and the countless conversations and stories that go on when we’re very young, like this one: “Mama, baba, babababa”; “Yes, sweetie, that’s a little baby doll”; “Baba doll”; “What’s the baby doll doing?”; “Baba cry.”

The next example is a movement improv performance by some young people.

[Young people improv movement video](#)

What did you see? I saw young people being ridiculous and doing something they've never done before. I saw them paying attention to one another. I saw them creatively imitating each other. I saw the beginning of a group ensemble and a stage they built for all of them to belong on it. In creating that ensemble of weirdness, they are creating an environment for them to try new things like babies do. The difference is that they are going beyond their already restricted social roles and creating new meanings together—which, to me, is a key element of culturally relevant pedagogy.

My last example involves me. I wish I had a video of it, but it happened a long time ago, well before making videos was commonplace.

I was about to leave for Moscow to work with an innovative university there. This was my fourth or fifth trip to Russia and I was frustrated thinking about how bad I felt that I didn't speak Russian in spite of trying to learn it off and on for years. Even though I was close with my colleagues there I still felt our relationships were limited. I shared this with my mentor and intellectual partner Fred Newman and he told me I couldn't speak Russian as who I was, because I didn't know the language. I'd have to perform as a Russian speaker if I wanted to change the dynamic. I asked him if he had any performance direction for me and he said, "You should perform as a teacher of Russian." He saw me looking at him like he'd lost his mind. So he continued, "Gather a group of the Russians translators and ask them to let you teach them Russian. All you need to create this performance, to create the lesson, is one English sentence—How do you say 'how do you say' in Russian?" (Answer: kak ty skazhesh)

It worked. Armed with that sentence, I could perform as a teacher and ask them things like, "How do you say 'Today is Tuesday?'; How do you say 'Which is the noun in this sentence?'" and so on and so on. I became a teacher of Russian and my supportive and enthusiastic students and I created a 45 performance of a Russian language class—with me who didn't know Russian performing as teacher and they, who were native Russian speakers, performing as beginning Russian learners. I and they spoke only Russian (except for the English words I asked them how to say in Russian) and together we

learned the alphabet and how nouns and verbs go together, we read a children's book, and created a poem. We had created an environment—a stage, if you will—that freed me up to speak Russian by performing who I was not. They told me that performing as beginning students, they also felt loosened from their professional roles and noticed some things about the Russian language that they take for granted.

My examples of playing with language and performing as language users are meant to give you a broader understanding of play than the one we've been socialized to—the one that contrasts it with work and, tragically with learning, the one that equates it only with fun and leisure and when you have time for it. I'd like you to think of play not so much as a particular activity, but as **how you do something**, as opposed to what it is you're doing. In my experience, this creates a big, big opening for students and teachers in classrooms. And as a how, we can play with anything, even the hard stuff of life, and with anyone, even those we don't know or disagree with—and even the curriculum content that students find the hardest or the most boring. In playing, we all are growing beyond our regular feelings, attitudes, learning and knowledge, and creating possibilities for different ways of relating, feeling, thinking and learning.

At the beginning, I mentioned that I came across a listing of six principles of CRP that can help create an inviting classroom culture inclusive of all diversity. I have another list—this one of benefits of play. Here are four of them that are especially relevant to educational environments. I offer it as additional support to you in creating your classroom culture.

Benefit 1. Play and performance give us permission to be other than who we are in “real life.” They allow us to imagine ourselves as being, feeling and doing different. Just as little children pretend to be fantastical characters or Mommy and Daddy, and older ones imagine themselves into basketball or tennis greats and the next Beyoncé, older children and adults can and should create ways of playing that require us to step out of our usual roles and identities. To move about and around those roles and identities. I ask you, how else can people become language users in another language if they don't? After all,

all they know about “real life” has been lived with and through their first language.

Benefit 2. Play and performance give us permission to “cheat”—to creatively imitate those more skilled than we are at something. Babies don’t become speakers by studying a grammar book or dictionary. They play with words and sounds. They creatively imitate people and animals and toys and things like fire trucks and doorbells. They pretend to be others. They do the ridiculous. That’s how they learn and grow. Whether you’re beginning to teach, learning to study, speaking in public or making friends, we all cheat. We play at being others. We do what we see them doing (hopefully with their help and encouragement). But since it’s US doing it and not them, it becomes uniquely ours and we become teachers and scholars and public speakers and friends. And speakers of a second or other language.

Benefit 3. Play and performance help us belong. Belonging helps us move about and around feeling alone, isolated and victimized. Playing is how we become part of existing communities—the human community, first and foremost, and the thousands of communities, large and small, that humans create. Becoming a languager in other than a first language is using, not giving up, who you are in the process of becoming a member of that linguistic-cultural community, by imagining yourself as a competent member and creatively imitating others, in other words, by playing at being a member before you know how.

Benefit 4. Play and performance is how we create new communities. There’s something very special about belonging to a community or a group that you were part of creating, that didn’t exist before, that got built through you and others working and playing together. You not only have the community but you also have new kinds of relationships with your fellow builders, relationships nurtured and supported by the very community you built. A culturally relevant pedagogy should strive for community building in the classroom, a community in which everyone can learn developmentally and continuously become learners and languagers.

To sum up: in a culture that every day, in subtle and not so subtle ways, reinforces the biases and hierarchies that maintain inequity and injustice, that ignores process in the name of product and outcome, that glorifies individualism, and that frowns upon play and constantly tells us who we are instead of encouraging us to continuously create new performances of ourselves—a culturally relevant pedagogy is one that is playful and performatory. In this hard historical moment, this non-developmental culture of ours—I don't think we can create much of anything positive or humane, never mind a fair and peaceful world, if we persist in being who we are in so-called real life. Let's develop. Let's give becoming *other than who we are* a chance.