

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix

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In this article, Ladson-Billings reflects on the history of her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and the ways it has been used and misused since its inception. She argues for the importance of dynamic scholarship and suggests that it is time for a “remix” of her original theory: culturally sustaining pedagogy, as proposed by Paris (2012). Ladson-Billings discusses her work with the hip-hop and spoken word program First Wave as an example of how culturally sustaining pedagogy allows for a fluid understanding of culture, and a teaching practice that explicitly engages questions of equity and justice. Influenced by her experience with the First Wave program, Ladson-Billings welcomes the burgeoning literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy as a way to push forward her original goals of engaging critically in the cultural landscapes of classrooms and teacher education programs.

Almost twenty-five years ago, I attempted to make a pedagogical change (Ladson-Billings, 1990). Instead of asking what was wrong with African American learners, I dared to ask what was right with these students and what happened in the classrooms of teachers who seemed to experience pedagogical success with them. Pursuit of this question has helped define much of my scholarly career. My work in this area resulted in the development of what I termed *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When I began this inquiry, I was primarily concerned with practical ways to improve teacher education in order to produce new generations of teachers who would bring an appreciation of their students’ assets to their work in urban classrooms populated with African American students. Through this study, I came to focus on eight teachers who I found to be thoughtful, inspiring, demanding, critical; they were connected to the students, their families, their communities, and their daily lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The way these teachers thought and spoke about their practice allowed me to discover the underlying structure of their work and describe it in ways that became useful for other teachers in a

variety of settings. I identified three major domains of their work: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Briefly, by *academic success* I refer to the intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences. *Cultural competence* refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture. *Sociopolitical consciousness* is the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems.

My work on culturally relevant pedagogy has been widely cited and, in many spaces, has become a common way of approaching teaching and learning. Other scholars have extended my work, seeking ways to emphasize the political consciousness of students and teachers or focusing on gender as an important component of who and how teachers are in classrooms. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) argued that culturally relevant pedagogy should have a decidedly more political edge since students of color often are members of groups that have been politically shortchanged. Dixson (2002) made a point of emphasizing the feminist perspectives of teachers as a vehicle for seeking academic equity.

In developing these extensions, both Beauboeuf-Lafontant and Dixson still operate within the parameters of culturally relevant pedagogy as I originally described it. However, as the title of this essay symbolizes, scholarship is ever changing. Today, researchers and practitioners are moving and evolving in new ways that require us to embrace a more dynamic view of culture. As an educational anthropologist, I understand culture as an amalgamation of human activity, production, thought, and belief systems. Typically, we ascribe notions of culture to people who are a part of a nation-state, an ethnic group, or a religious group. Often we are less definitive about conceptions such as “youth culture” because they are not easily bound by agreed-on or recognizable categories. But, like other cultural groups, youth do maintain notions of membership (i.e., in-group versus out-group), language, art, beliefs, and so on. In many courses on multicultural education, students learn about static images of cultural histories, customs, and traditional ways of being. However, in reality, culture is always changing. For example, the upper Midwest is home to three generations of Hmong (Yang, 2008): the first generation was born and raised in Laos; the second was born in Laos and raised in transition, growing up in places like Thailand and Malaysia before settling in the United States; the third was born and raised in the United States. While these third-generation youth identify as Americans, they also understand themselves as Hmong Americans, and their experience of Hmong culture is different from that of their parents and elders. Thus, teachers who want to understand Hmong culture must recognize this heterogeneity of cultural experience.

Scholarship, like culture, is fluid, and the title of this essay, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix,” is intended to reflect this fluidity. The notion of a remix means that there was an original version and that there may

be more versions to come, taking previously developed ideas and synthesizing them to create new and exciting forms. Similarly, in the world of technology, change is both inevitable and expected: we are unsurprised when version 2.0 is succeeded by version 3.0, and so on. In popular culture, as well, there is always an expectation that someone or something will come along and move a cultural form to another level. Such revisions do not imply that the original was deficient; rather, they speak to the changing and evolving needs of dynamic systems. Remixing is vital to innovation in art, science, and pedagogy, and it is crucial that we are willing to remix what we created and/or inherited.

In this spirit, the authors in this symposium work hard to develop a newer, fresher version of culturally relevant pedagogy that meets the needs of this century's students. In developing this theory, culturally *sustaining* pedagogy (Paris, 2012), these authors use culturally relevant pedagogy as the place where the "beat drops" and then layer the multiple ways that this notion of pedagogy shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity—that is, that they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects. Indeed, in response to my earlier work (Ladson-Billings, 1995), people regularly asked me why I chose to focus on African American students as subjects for developing a pedagogical theory. While tempted to respond, "Why not use African American students as subjects (rather than objects) of study?" I generally took the time to point out that our work to examine success among the students who had been least successful was likely to reveal important pedagogical principles for achieving success for *all* students. A literature that tells us what works for middle-class, advantaged students typically fails to reveal the social and cultural advantages that make their success possible. But success among the "least of these" tells us more about what pedagogical choices can support success.

When I originally began searching for research on successfully educating African American students, I found nothing. The extant literature was filled with studies about African American students, but most cast them as deficient and closely associated with terms such as *at-risk*, *disadvantaged*, and *underachieving*. Search results directed me to references such as "see *culturally deprived*" or "see *culturally disadvantaged*." It was clear that there was no language of academic excellence associated with African American students. I came to see it as part of my responsibility as a researcher to help scholars see African American students as agents in the classroom worthy of both study and emulation. In other words, I hoped to help scholars and practitioners learn *from* and not merely *about* African American students. In my work with successful teachers, I was able to describe the ways that they engaged with African American students as active learners. By focusing on student learning and academic achievement versus classroom and behavior management, cultural competence versus cultural assimilation or eradication, and sociopolitical consciousness rather than school-based tasks that have no beyond-school application, I was able to see

students take both responsibility for and deep interest in their education. This is the secret behind culturally relevant pedagogy: the ability to link principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture.

The newer concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy is built on the same foundational notion of students as subjects rather than objects. Given the relationship between the two frameworks, I enter this conversation not as a critic of what these scholars present but as an interlocutor. I hope to help those who subscribe to earlier visions of culturally relevant pedagogy make the transition to the remix: culturally sustaining pedagogy. For, if we ever get to a place of complete certainty and assuredness about our practice, we will stop growing. If we stop growing, we will die, and, more importantly, our students will wither and die in our presence. Both teachers and students can be vulnerable to a sort of classroom death. Death in the classroom refers to teachers who stop trying to reach each and every student or teachers who succumb to rules and regulations that are dehumanizing and result in de-skilling (Apple, 1993). Instead of teaching, such people become mere functionaries of a system that has no intent on preparing students—particularly urban students of color—for meaningful work and dynamic participation in a democracy. The academic death of students is made evident in the disengagement, academic failure, dropout, suspension, and expulsion that have become an all too familiar part of schooling in urban schools. Academic death leaves more young people unemployed, underemployed, and unemployable in our cities and neighborhoods, and vulnerable to the criminal justice system. Furthermore, this vicious cycle often continues with the children they will parent. If we hope to disrupt this cycle, our pedagogies must evolve to address the complexities of social inequalities. Thus, the articles that follow reflect the way a new generation of scholars has taken on the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy and infused it with new and exciting ideas to better meet the needs of students.

My [r]Evolving Pedagogical Stance

Despite the apparent popularity of culturally relevant pedagogy, I have grown increasingly dissatisfied with what seems to be a static conception of what it means to be culturally relevant. Many practitioners, and those who claim to translate research to practice, seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture. Thus, the fluidity and variety within cultural groups has regularly been lost in discussions and implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy. Even when people have demonstrated a more expansive knowledge of culture, few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work, instead dulling its critical edge or omitting it altogether. In recent years I have begun to consider how the work needed to grow and change. As I continued to visit classrooms, I could see teachers who had good intentions toward the students and wanted to embrace culturally relevant pedagogy. They expressed strong beliefs in the academic efficacy of their students. They searched for cultural examples and

analogues as they taught prescribed curricula. However, they rarely pushed students to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities. There was no discussion of issues such as school choice, school closings, rising incarceration rates, gun laws, or even everyday school climate questions like whether students should wear uniforms (which typically sparks spirited debate).

The perfect opportunity for growth, change, and expansion came to me when I began to work with First Wave, the innovative spoken word and hip-hop arts program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In the fall of 2007, the university's Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives (OMAI) initiated a scholarship program (currently the only one of its kind) to support a learning community of spoken word artists. Rather than simply developing a student organization for artists outside of the regular academic sphere, OMAI made a commitment to fully integrate hip-hop culture into the academy. Working with this program provided me with an opportunity to make changes in my undergraduate teaching. The thinking behind First Wave is that youth culture (specifically hip-hop) offers some important opportunities for changing the way we think, learn, perceive, and perform in the world. Despite being a global cultural form, it is still largely absent in the sanctioned university curriculum, leaving students who are hip-hop artists to perform in extracampus spaces. In response, OMAI program director Willie Ney designed a unique experience that allows our institution to recruit and financially support student artists in much the same way we recruit and support student athletes, bringing hip-hop out of the margins. Also like student athletes, First Wave artists pursue one of the university's existing undergraduate majors. Many are interested in education—some as teachers, others as policy makers. By scouting at poetry slams, festivals, and cyphers, he identified students who were both talented artists and academically eligible to attend the university. Although performing is a big part of the First Wave students' identity, they must meet university requirements for degree completion. This is where we began to see some cracks in our programming.

Many of the First Wave students expressed a desire to give back to the communities from which they came, and the most common expression of this desire was the aspiration to become teachers. However, the first few First Wave students who applied to and were admitted to our teacher education programs (both at the elementary and secondary levels) came away deeply disappointed in the quality of the programs. Despite all of our expressed commitments to equity, diversity, and social justice, the First Wave students found themselves in teacher education courses filled mostly with young White women from suburban (and some rural) communities who still thought about people of color (particularly African American and Latin@ students) in deficit terms. Over and over, First Wavers left our teacher education programs, and the few who were determined to pursue teaching as a career sought out alternative cer-

tification routes, like Teach for America, hoping that they would find fewer deficit-based attitudes in alternative certification programs.

In order to forge a relevant teacher education experience for students interested solely in urban teaching, I constructed a seminar course titled *Pedagogy, Performance, & Culture*. The course was open to any undergraduate, but we were careful to reserve at least half of the twenty slots for First Wave students. In addition to the in-class experiences, I had the luxury of concurrently running a public lecture series that convened directly after each class. The added bonus was that each of the lecturers was invited to our seminar and students had an opportunity to speak one-on-one with them. Our speakers included scholars, artists, community activists, and media personalities with expressed interests in youth culture in general and hip-hop culture in particular.

Although the students depended on me to be the “expert,” I depended on them to lead me to consider new ways of understanding how popular culture can be deployed to engage in conversations about critical theoretical concepts such as hegemony, audit cultures, and neoliberalism as well as to develop new pedagogical strategies. For example, before each guest spoke at the course-required public lecture, I asked if someone was willing to “spit a poem.” The First Wave students eagerly responded to that opportunity and performed pieces that brought their audiences to tears. They engaged us in diverse social issues through their performances, such as domestic abuse, classism, violence, and sexuality. Many times after a poem was recited, the speaker would look at me as if to say, “You expect me to go on after *that*?” The students’ artistry, power, and confidence helped reorient audiences toward the idea that learners can be sources and resources of knowledge and skills—a critical component of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Our class had aspects of conventional university courses: a syllabus, readings, discussions, and written assignments. Students read work by canonical social theorists, including Bourdieu, Durkheim, Woodson, and DuBois. But it also had some new and nontraditional elements. We did close readings of what might be seen as alternative texts—hip-hop lyrics, videos of hip-hop artists, and 1960s-era protest poetry. The final assignment was a performance. Originally, I had planned for the First Wave students to do a final cypher—a public performance that would incorporate concepts we had discussed in class—while the other education students created a curriculum adaptation using hip-hop. However, I began to notice that non-First Wave and First Wave students were already collaborating outside of class. For example, the teacher education students who were in K–12 classrooms began designing lessons and learning experiences that incorporated elements of hip-hop. In at least one case, the First Wave students went into the practicum class of a non-First Wave student. One of the non-First Wave students was a member of a forensics team, and she began to explore how the spoken word pieces performed by First Wave students might help her sharpen her technique by including more

dramatic pauses, using different facial expressions, and drawing out words. Since forensics is an activity that typically relies on subjective judgment on the part of evaluators, this student wanted to go beyond mere memorization and recitation of pieces to deliver more dramatic renderings, appealing to judges' emotions.

As a result of this cross-pollination, I decided that all students would participate in a final cypher. I allowed the students to form their own groups; however, my one restriction was that each group had to include both First Wave and non-First Wave students. The students had the opportunity to work with Professor Chris Walker, the artistic director for First Wave. Chris helped them flesh out the conceptual elements of their work and link these concepts to spoken word or dramatic pieces. My concern was less with the professional quality of the cypher and more with the way the education research we studied could be melded with this new cultural form that seemed to consume much of students' lives and outlooks.

On the day of the public performance, the students convened in one of the dance studios and went through their final run-throughs. The First Wave students seemed nervous about the limited time they had to develop their artistic conceptions, whereas the non-First Wave students were just nervous—the very idea of standing on a stage in front of an audience seemed terrifying to them. When the curtain went up in Lathrop Theater, the performances of the nonperformers were seamless and fully integrated into their group. And, to my pleasant surprise, they were not relegated to background or chorus parts but were prominent in each group's performance. In at least one instance, a non-First Wave student developed the basic concept for the performance and did much of the writing. The work surrounding the cypher helped me see how culturally relevant pedagogy can engage what may appear to be the least able students so that they can become intellectual leaders of a classroom. Most of the non-First Wave students had never been in a classroom where students of color were in the majority, and in some of their essay reflections they admitted that, in those instances where they had "minority" classmates, they never expected those students to be raising the critical questions and pushing the discourse.

To make this a culturally relevant pedagogical strategy of cultural competence, I was careful to include examples of music, art, poetry, and dance tied to the African American, Latin@, and Southeast Asian immigrant cultures. The sociopolitical edge in the course emerged when we began discussing the curriculum controversy over Mexican American studies in the Tucson Unified School District (see Martinez, 2012) and students decided to organize a teach-in so that others on campus could learn more about the issue.

The experience of working with the First Wave students and teacher education students who were looking for something more than our traditional program underscored for me why any notion of culturally relevant pedagogy has to change and evolve in order to meet the needs of each generation of stu-

dents. My younger colleagues in this symposium provide the next iteration of culturally relevant pedagogy. They call their work *culturally sustaining pedagogy*.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In the remainder of this introduction, I describe how the work of the authors in this symposium helps push the boundaries of culturally relevant pedagogy toward a new notion of culturally sustaining pedagogy. First and foremost, I am indebted to the authors in this volume for their hard work in trying to push forward new ideas about pedagogy designed to meet the needs of all students. My remarks concerning their articles begin with an important lesson I learned about invention and innovation.

More than thirty years ago, I walked into my first doctoral-level course at Stanford University taught by the late sociologist of education Elizabeth Cohen. Cohen was determined to have her students understand the importance of theory as a way to make education research more rigorous and powerful. She was especially interested in what she called “status equalization” (Cohen, 1979). This work suggested that the classroom environment disadvantages some students, just by virtue of who they are. Characteristics such as race, class, gender, language, immigrant status, culture, or sexual identity, argued Cohen (1982), served to limit students’ opportunities because others made judgments about their academic abilities. Through years of intensive studies, Cohen came up with an instructional strategy that would help mitigate students’ status characteristics. She called this instructional strategy “cooperative learning.”

However, by the time I finished my degree and started teaching at Santa Clara University, what I saw under the title “cooperative learning” in the literature, in workshops, and classrooms looked *nothing* like what Cohen had proposed. Her comprehensive work to reduce status inequality had been reduced to an “activity” that people implemented to create a “change of pace” in their classrooms. The lesson I learned from this was that once you place an idea into the marketplace of ideas, consumers of your ideas feel free to use (or abuse) your idea as they see fit.

I had a similar experience when I first arrived at the University of Wisconsin. My colleague Kenneth Zeichner was renowned for his work on reflective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). However, he was dismayed at the way his ideas had become buzzwords. He told me how weary he was of attending “reflective teaching conferences” where the substance of the conference bore no resemblance to his explorations. In his own words, Zeichner declared, “For it to be reflective teaching, you actually have to be reflecting on *something!*” (personal communication, 1992).

Finally, I have had my own encounter with the inability to maintain and control meaning—even the meaning of something you actually created. My

work on culturally relevant pedagogy has taken on a life of its own, and what I see in the literature and sometimes in practice is totally unrecognizable to me. What state departments, school districts, and individual teachers are now calling “culturally relevant pedagogy” is often a distortion and corruption of the central ideas I attempted to promulgate. The idea that adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting “diverse” images makes one “culturally relevant” seem to be what the pedagogy has been reduced to.

I share these anecdotes as a lesson on how information and ideas can be misread and misunderstood. Thus, the work of this symposium—to name and define *culturally sustaining pedagogy*—will need to be a vigilant and steadfast project that guards against the degradation of the meaning and implementation of the term.

In an essay by Paris and Alim, we gain insight into the first attempts to define culturally sustaining pedagogy. The authors graciously acknowledge my work as foundational but also argue that this concept needs to be pushed further. I agree. Any scholar who believes that she has arrived and the work is finished does not understand the nature and meaning of scholarship. Paris and Alim make an important turn from what people think of as culturally relevant pedagogy to incorporate the multiplicities of identities and cultures that help formulate today’s youth culture. Rather than focus singularly on one racial or ethnic group, their work pushes us to consider the global identities that are emerging in the arts, literature, music, athletics, and film. It also points to the shifts of identity that now move us toward a hybridity, fluidity, and complexity never before considered in schools and classrooms.

In this work, Paris and Alim also push us to consider hip-hop culture as a site of pedagogical possibility. To their credit, they remain critical of much of the so-called hip-hop education that currently exists in our schools. They urge us to guard against the voyeuristic culture-vultures that consider hip-hop to be the next trendy thing that can be used to hook students, only to draw them back into the same old hegemonic, hierarchical structures. This work is nascent, and, as such, it is filled with tentative and still-forming notions of the way forward. It has no definitive or prescriptive solutions, and, for some, that will be deeply unsatisfying. However, those who do this work understand that not knowing is one of the most powerful tools and motivators for doing more and doing it better.

McCarty and Lee offer another term with which we must grapple: *culturally revitalizing pedagogy*. The salience of this concept is invaluable when working with Indigenous youth. Where Paris and Alim focus on postmodern realities of language and culture, McCarty and Lee reach back to disappearing languages that must be revitalized while also moving us forward in consideration of what it means to work in plurilingual educational spaces. Can one retain and restore a language in contexts like these? Furthermore, can linguistic preservation and revitalization take place without sovereignty—national sovereignty as well

as educational sovereignty? Especially important in this article is the way that the authors appropriate the central concept of tribal sovereignty to make sense of educational sovereignty and underscore the importance of indigenous epistemologies in making sense of the concerns and desires of sovereign nations that find themselves in states of dependency. The authors extend notions of culturally relevant pedagogy to embrace culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy because they link their work to the very survival of people who have faced systematic extinction. For these authors, teaching Indigenous students is not merely about propelling them forward academically; it also is about reclaiming and restoring their cultures.

Coda

If we want more powerful pedagogical models (see Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2008), then our pedagogical practice has to be buttressed with significant theoretical grounding. Theoretical knowledge attempts to explain empirical phenomena, but theories “are more than merely abbreviated summaries of data, since they not only tell us *what* happens but *why* it happens as it does” (Kaplan & Manners, 1972, p. 11). Thus, pedagogical theory and practice can and should operate in a symbiotic relationship. If we are to help novice teachers become good and experienced teachers to become better, we need theoretical propositions about pedagogy that help them understand, reflect on, and improve their philosophy and teaching practice.

More than two decades ago, Shulman (1987) offered a useful rubric for understanding aspects of pedagogy. His notions of “content knowledge,” “pedagogical knowledge,” and “pedagogical content knowledge” have formed an explanatory paradigm for teaching expertise. However, Giroux and Simon (1989) offered a radically different perspective on pedagogy in their call for a “critical pedagogy that takes into consideration how the symbolic and material transactions of the everyday provide the basis for rethinking how people give meaning and ethical substance to their experiences and voices” (p. 237). Where Shulman’s conceptions were seen as generic, allegedly applying to all students, Giroux and Simon saw themselves as developing a pedagogy for the subaltern, or underclass. These radically different conceptions of pedagogy represent the continuum along which the work on culturally relevant pedagogy and this new work on culturally sustaining pedagogy must operate.

In our attempt to ensure that those who have been previously disadvantaged by schooling receive quality education, we also want those in the mainstream to develop the kinds of skills that will allow them to critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage. In this era of state-mandated high-stakes testing, it is nearly impossible for teachers to ignore mundane content and skills-focused curricula. However, teachers undertaking culturally informed pedagogies take on the dual responsibility of external performance assessments as well as community- and student-driven learning. The real beauty of

a culturally sustaining pedagogy is its ability to meet both demands without diminishing either. The articles in this symposium are wonderful examples of just this kind of pedagogy.

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