

Theory of Practice Memo: Culture

Education is shaped by cultural diversity in the classroom now more than ever. Due to increased immigration and cultural diffusion among communities stemming from the internet revolution, a greater variety of students are entering into the US school system. Students and educators' awareness of them have dramatically changed. This increased demand for cultural understanding among schools has changed how educators (should) differentiate and manage student curriculum.

Outside of simple respect, culture is important to educators in a variety of ways. Ultimately, your students will not perform at their peak if they are blocked by some mechanism of culture. They could feel uncomfortable with recognition because of collectivist tendencies, thus preventing them from contributing at a maximal level in group projects. They could take issue with the content of a lesson, for a variety of reasons, and in turn lack engagement. They could be bothered or unfamiliar by a tendency of your classroom—gestures, asking for help, homework—many tropes of US education are not as common as some believe. Altogether, ELLs can be better served with more culturally relevant & considerate education.

To employ culture in the classroom is a relatively simple process. There are a large variety of ways that you may do it. Generally, you will want to synthesize content with relevant cultural icons. This could be through modifying the details of an assignment to ask for cultural perspectives, incorporating cultural artifacts around the classroom and in the lesson materials, or simply bringing it about in class discussion. An example might consist of a long form formal writing assignment. Its goals would be to assess students abilities to identify, collect, and determine the validity of source materials. You could write the prompt to ask students to consider a significant figure from their culture: presidents, athletes, celebrities, etc. Allowing your students to both draw information and motivation from cultural interest will beget greater engagement and performance.

It is important to delineate what culture(s) you are targeting in the case that you are not asking your students to do so themselves. There is no one size fits all approach to effectively incorporating culture into the classroom. To actually differentiate, you will also need a strong background knowledge of your classroom *and* the variety of culture outside of it. The former can be achieved through home visits, language surveys, and personal interaction, and the latter through study. You might then (tactfully) categorize students by their culture and consider how best to individualize content to work better for them. Of course, if you see that what you are doing is not working, then you should change it. Culturally relevant education continues to evolve at a great rate and not examining its effectiveness is paramount to having made no change at all.

It is also important to consider one's own role and culture. Most teachers are white females, but not most students are white females: there is a disconnect, so examining and learning how one's role might shape their beliefs and views in the classroom can help in avoiding biases. This is particularly important to keep in mind with regards to black students as there are many statistical indicators of systematic racial biases in disciplinary infractions with this group—it is a *very* real problem and should not be discounted for fear of overzealousness.

Culture is a fundamental aspect of humanity, and in our modern world so is school. They cannot remain separate for much longer. Teachers and administrators have a new responsibility: to bring the culture of all students into the school system. This is not a simple process, but for individuals it is entirely feasible to start making changes in pedagogical strategy through incorporating culture in the classroom today.