

Theoretical Insights on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the USA and in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is a contemporary significant concern in academia because of the diverse enrollment of learners from around the world. With an aim to provide a sense of belongingness in the process of active learning engagement in the classroom, the syllabus is designed by the Department of English; however, this paper examines how South East Asian English authors are excluded from this diversification. Through an inductive qualitative approach, this article diagnoses courses and texts included in the literature curriculum in the undergraduate programs at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Chicago as references. Therefore, this paper prescribes Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to be redefined not only based on racial data of enrolled students but also on the gap of decolonization of the syllabus as the incorporation of veteran English authors in South East Asia or in the Middle East is hardly perceived in the Western curriculum of literary pedagogy. This study discusses the gaps in CRP not only in the Department of English of American Universities but also in the aforementioned department of Bangladeshi Universities from classroom observation and teaching experience where the syllabus is decolonized but an active learning environment is an urgent need to be addressed.

Keywords: *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Active Learning Engagement, Decolonization of Syllabus*

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I. Introduction

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), to imply it on a broader scale, has first to be acknowledged beyond racial gaps. The psychological impact of culture on forming certain traits among individual learners is hardly taken into consideration while designing a curriculum. Once those traits are understood, most of the pedagogical approaches can be responded to in a more effective way, especially in CRP. The primary goal of CRP is to create an identity-safe environment in the classroom to boost effective learning. To be precise, this article briefly illustrates the classroom norms and faculty roles in CRP, classroom practice with multidimensional sharing opportunities, and theoretical models to evaluate the active learning strategies while teaching English Literature to undergraduates. This comparative study shares insights into how American universities, for instance, the University of Chicago and the University of Notre Dame, undergraduate programs in the Department of English are not inclusive while designing the syllabus as Bangladeshi, Indian, Urdu, Arabic, Persian authors in English are not at all included in the curriculum that is dominant by either classic and among the contemporary authors, most are American, British and European.

The debate will go on whether high school science books can be rediscovered from a different perspective or not. For example, in the 6th century, Kanad, a scientist at Vaisheshika School in ancient India, introduced atomic theory long before John Dalton: the 'known' discoverer of the atom in the 18th century. Syllabus designing or redesigning without the use of eurocentric or male-centric lenses is a hard nut to crack for many nations and languages. However, presenting polarities or at least being critical of a non-polar curriculum is what this paper pitches as inclusive pedagogy that provides a sense of belonging to learners. Christine E. Sleeter criticizes the most common misconceptions of CRP in his article 'Confronting the Marginalization of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy':

"Culturally responsive pedagogy is often understood in limited and simplistic ways...: cultural celebration, trivialization, essentializing culture, and substituting culture for political analysis of inequalities." (Sleeter 568)

While teaching English Literature for undergraduates in Bangladesh, this is how inclusivity could be bridged with a comparative study of Keats' and Tagore, or to understand spirituality, the bridge between Rumi,

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Kahlil Gibran, and Lalou seems essential while teaching William Blake and S. T. Coleridge. The way eastern professors can connect Larkinesque nihilism with Mirza Ghalib's, this kind of 'decolonizing curriculum' practice is quite absent in the western academic scenario. Here, including the non-western content even while teaching English Literature would be an attempt to reduce that 'privilege gap'. As 'Creating Inclusive Classrooms by Engaging STEM Faculty in Culturally Responsive Teaching Workshops' paper suggests: "Developing self-awareness, mining the privilege gap, and reducing implicit bias are essential components of inclusive pedagogy training..." (O'Leary, et. al. 3)

It might sound like a "Calibanesque" approach, the way Caliban revolted in *The Tempest*, as it should be if the instructor wishes to connect Haruki Murakami, Arundhati Roy, and Zia Haider Rahman while teaching any post-modern novel written by a native English author, for instance, A. S. Byatt's. Nevertheless, the question is whether English Literature means literature written in English or by 'the English'. That is a rare scene in the west, where hardly any eastern philosophy or literature texts are referred to, let alone discussed. Therefore, decolonizing the curriculum as a "metaphor allows people to equivocate these contradictory decolonial desires because it turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation" (Tuck and Wayne 1-40) argues the paper 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.'

Carlos Tejeda and Manuel Espinoza skillfully point out the idea in their article 'Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy: Social Justice Reconsidered': "reconceptualization of the social organization of learning in schooling institutions and fundamentally in classrooms.... Decolonizing Pedagogy argues what knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, and how we might construct a representation of our world and our place within it..." (Tejeda, et. al. 8)

After decolonizing the syllabus, institutions or instructors might dive deep into understanding cultural differences in a classroom. The two facets of culture are tangible and intangible culture. The surface can be defined as tangible culture; that is, music, art, color, festivity, food, and clothing hold the central position of cultural discourse. However, intangible cultural practices like behavior and thought processes, the way one receives, interprets, and delivers the information, are rarely paid any attention to or put into pedagogical practice. If given priority, these traits can create an inclusive classroom to make the learners feel that they belong. For instance, CRP mostly focused on the faculty roles when introverted learners never speak of their queries or new teaching strategies to evaluate those who are slow to respond in a class. Instead, it can be put in this way: no one is slow; rather, one might be slow in a particular way of learning. For example, one who is not attentive to a 'great' lecture, might excel in keeping pace with visual classroom materials. That is one aspect of a diversified curriculum. Decolonization of the syllabus is certainly missing in the Western scholarly environment.

Each learner has idiosyncratic experiences in their childhood that developed their individual ways of perception and interpretation. From the language of 'energy' and the way it is used and suffused in a symbiotic classroom, it's a fact that some learners excel in crowds proving well-rounded leadership skills, whereas some could be comfortable with seclusion and performing classroom activities alone. Interpreting Kolb's learning dimensions, evaluation can also happen at multiple levels appreciating these differences among the learners to appreciate the co-existence of polarities. International Journal of STEM Education points out:

"Research has shown that the distinct experiences and unique backgrounds brought to the college classroom by a diverse student body enhance the educational outcomes of all students ... There is a need for professional development opportunities that support faculty members in embracing diversity as an asset and in becoming more culturally responsive in their teaching..." (O'Leary, et. al. 2)

Embracing diversity turns into political agenda only as it focuses on a multi-racial classroom environment only. However, the syllabus of American universities shows how exclusive it is by not incorporating South East Asian and Middle Eastern veteran authors in English or in translation.

II. Discussion

An identity-safe environment stands upon three grounds: a) infusing multicultural perspectives in the curriculum, b) active learning engagement techniques in the classroom, and c) embracing a growth mindset.

Infusing a multicultural attitude into the curriculum means enabling the instructors to ask whether the subjects, courses, syllabus, and reference materials are inclusive or not. An inclusive syllabus doesn't mean that it includes all the texts ever written; rather, it implies that learners, disregarding their cultural or racial background, will have a sense of belonging in a class. For instance, when a discussion goes on modern short stories, and if faculty members in the West are constantly sharing their critical insights only on Anton Chekov or Gabriel Garcia Marquez, without any hint of Saadat Hasan Manto or Ismat Chughtai, that can be argued as a non-inclusive academic discussion.

Most undergraduate courses include only Western Americans. For example, in the Department of English, the University of Chicago, a course named 'Literature, Property, and Violence' includes texts by "Harriet Jacobs, Herman Melville, and Toni Morrison." Another course entitled 'Hypnotic Modernism:

Literature, Psychology, Automaticity' is all about "James Agee, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford, Guy de Maupassant, Frank Norris, Muriel Spark, André Breton, and Gertrude Stein." Another example is 'Eighteenth-Century Literature' which includes "Daniel Defoe, Lady Mary Montagu, and Samuel Johnson." However, only one course is 'Introduction to Asian American Literatures which consists of "Carlos Bulosan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, Fae Myenne Ng, Nora Okja Keller, Cathy Park Hong, Ted Chiang, and Yoko Tawada." Courses named 'Enlightenments and Romanticisms' only focus on England, Scotland, Ireland, and American writers. Nevertheless, texts by non-British authors mean "Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Kant, Herder, Schiller, and the Saint Simonians."

The University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA is not an exception. Similar to the University of Chicago, their 'Non-Fiction Writing: Style and Fact' includes "John D'Agata, Walter Benjamin, Vladimir Nabokov, Susan Sontag, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Beyoncé, Omer Fast, Samuel Delaney, and others." Courses like Narrative in Fiction and Film are confined only "from nineteenth-century novels to Hollywood blockbusters"

The teaching techniques applied in classroom activities promote active or passive learning. Also, it reveals how active learning engagement empowers learners. Furthermore, how learning goals are aligned with the evaluation process is a grave concern, and the question is whether learners can self-assess or not. Many contemporary scholars believe self-assessment strategies are the best tools for individual growth.

The role of the faculty, if considered as a discussion leader or a facilitator, is to make the learners active. The philosophy of statement and academic integrity should be specified to the learners at the very beginning of the class so that they can understand the style and reason of the instructor's teaching philosophy. The next stage is to understand a multicultural classroom beyond race, religion, and gender. A few might be comfortable with lectures, though that entirely depends on how eloquent the facilitator is. That might sound like a 'one-man/woman show.' Some professors provide reading materials long before the lecture date. Some provide lecture/seminar videos of other professors from around the world. The most common nowadays is using Microsoft Powerpoint slides on the projector. Rarely, in the Bangladeshi academic context, professors do record their lectures and send them to the learners before the lecture date so that when they meet up in the class, the professor can play the role of a discussion leader where learners actively set their queries or argue about various aspects of the topic. The classroom then is certainly decentralized. The margin takes over the center, and thereby the classroom becomes an inclusive teaching environment. It can be argued that all learners might not equally participate, but that depends on how the facilitator designs the classroom activities with various kinds of group tasks or individual tasks, which also depends on the number of learners in a particular class.

Grading could be done in multiple ways: fieldwork, written exams based on an understanding of the text, academic papers, creative group projects, and multimedia presentations. On the other hand, the Kolb learning method adds a unique approach to assessment. As it says, learners learn in four cyclic phases: firstly, as primary text readers, which is called their 'Concrete Experience,' involving their 'Feeling and Watching' senses. In the next phase, learners brainstorm and discuss 'Reflective Observation,' where they "watch and think. The third phase is Abstract Conceptualization, where learners develop projects, write proposals, perform model-building exercises, and write papers involving their 'Doing and Thinking' senses. Finally, in the 'Active Experimentation' phase, learners directly get involved in field work or case studies and simulations, where they are 'Doing and Feeling' the learned and generated knowledge. This method can be effective even for those with visual impairment or attention disorder. Also, every student might not be a good exam scorer if writing a paper is the only method used to assess one's knowledge. Instead, discussion leaders and thinkers will also get the platform to be properly evaluated once the instructor follows Kolb's learning cycle as an assessment strategy too. Thus, diversity in the pedagogical approach can be exercised in its true pragmatic meaning where one can be evaluated based on each step: how well one can comprehend, watch, think, lead, feel, express, or write.

While teaching fiction, poetry, or drama, the pandemic period taught institutions and facilitators to be multi-dimensional in their approaches via learning management systems like Canvas and Panopto. In any course, only lectures and handouts will fail to appreciate the diversity of a classroom where every student might have unique abilities to perceive and interpret data or knowledge depending on the kind of cultural practice learners had in their childhood days. According to the Kolb Learning Cycle, the four basic principles discussed above reveal that learning helps to "diverge, assimilate, converge, and accommodate" (Svinicki, et. al., 141-146) knowledge.

In the divergence stage, learners let the learning occur. In the assimilation stage, learners reflect and review the knowledge; whereas, in the third stage, they develop new knowledge and connect it with the old knowledge. Finally, learners put all of them into practice when they apply the knowledge. Now the critical part of the Bangladeshi academic system is that hardly all these stages of learning and multidimensional ways of presenting content are practiced. Many might argue that English Literature can be taught in these ways. The old-age oral tradition of storytelling works, but that is not the only way of storytelling, especially when a classroom might have students with various psychological traits and attention span issues.

Similarly, teaching is supposed to be no more confined to center-margin roles between lecturers and learners. Facilitators might acknowledge that all the learners do not have a similar level of IQ, which is a cultural output as well. Certainly, such a classroom can be balanced by the pre and post-lecture tasks and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches, if practiced, in multiple ways of presenting any data as well as evaluating the learning outcome. Particularly, for an overpopulated country like Bangladesh, where one classroom has 70-100 students, using technology, pre-class activities, and post-lecture tasks can pragmatically implement an effective learning environment.

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