We Wove the Rope: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Virtual English Learners Classroom

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Abstract

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a teaching framework uses the strengths of ethnically diverse students' funds of knowledge to enhance their academic learning. This framework can potentially increase students' success, but little is known about its use in a virtual setting. Due to the Covid-19 school closure, the first seven months of the academic year 2020/2021 were virtual. In this setting, I conducted a teacher action research study on the efficacy of using a CRP approach in two high school English Learners (ELs) classes focusing on the influence of CRP efforts on EL students' motivation to engage virtually and in their learning during the socially challenging time of a pandemic. Results suggest that daily active engagement and learning in an online platform requires intentional and innovative efforts to build student-teacher relationships while redefining engagement, maintaining a consistent daily routine, and offering a curriculum grounded in the CRP framework.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, English learners' engagement and motivation, and virtual classroom.

I Wove Them a Rope

Hearing their helpless cry,
as we were trapped in our own existence;
I wove them a rope in the warm summer light.

As fall came, I held my breath;
it was their time to climb the jagged cliff.
I saw them from above;
their fingers sank deep into the earth, hungry to reach up.
They swayed, sliding, pushing themselves up.
I screamed; wait, wait!
I have woven you a rope in the warm summer light.

I stretched my body to the edge,
flung the rope far into the ravine.
Desperately lifting their arms,
reaching, hoping,
almost there

The rope on the tip of their desire
and I have woven them a rope that was just
not long enough….

During the summer of 2020, with thousands of other educators, I logged on to webinar after webinar to increase my instructional technology skills in preparation for helping my students access their education during the Covid-19 pandemic. I had to find instructional tools to help my EL students climb the educational mountain that had grown steeper during the pandemic. When the 2020/2021 school year started, I desperately hoped my new online teaching knowledge would keep my students engaged. Nevertheless, as I expressed in my poem, I realized that my students and I needed more than just technology to ensure their success in a pandemic-era virtual classroom.

Literature Review and Methodology

When Covid-19 arrived in the United States, I participated in a two-year in-service professional development master's degree program emphasizing critical reflection and CRP. This experience included embedded opportunities to develop my praxis – the translation of theory into practice - by learning about and using teacher action research as a tool in classroom practice. Through the critical reflection process (Brookfield, 2000), I identified student needs, grappled with new theories, and then innovated by integrating a CRP approach to address those needs and assess the impact of those efforts.

With the arrival of Covid-19, rent and food uncertainties and other personal hardships associated with layoffs, poverty, and immigration issues were exacerbated for low-income immigrant families (Gelatt, 2020), so the ravines and chasms of inequity deepened for my students. I saw a significant decrease in engagement in our EL student population. Online learning isolated our most vulnerable students, who were already experiencing increased food insecurity and instability at home, affecting their sense of safety, connectedness, and hope (Hough 2020). It was more important than ever for EL students "to have social-emotional

learning spaces, personal connection, opportunities to ask questions about what is happening, and a semblance of continuity and community" (Skibbins, 2020). However, EL students were left to scramble independently without the usual level of access to educators. With remote learning, EL students had few direct interactions with their teachers, which could make assignments "feel more overwhelming and daunting" (Learning for Justice Staff, 2020). The situation pushed EL students with limited English comprehension to grapple alone to understand the content. Such frustrations led some of my students to "log out" of school, which harmed their chances of success. Despite their struggles, I wanted my students to be fully engaged in their learning. I needed to find a way to meet my EL students' emotional, physical, and educational needs and close the gap in educational engagement. I had to find a way to motivate them to learn and push themselves to reach academic success.

Since motivation leads to engagement (Irvin & Meltzer, 2007), I had to start with how to motivate my students to engage with the new, unfamiliar learning platform. One way to increase motivation and engagement was to use the framework of CRP, a teaching framework that uses the strengths of ethnically diverse students' funds of knowledge to enhance their academic learning. Five significant themes are included in the conceptual framework: Identity and Achievement, Equity and Excellence, Developmental Appropriateness, Teaching the Whole Child, and Student-Teacher Relationships (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Research related to these CRP themes has demonstrated the importance of developing students' identities and affirming the power of diversity, incorporating multicultural curriculum content with equal access and high expectations for all, developing cultural appropriateness in learning and teaching styles, teaching to the whole child by empowering students, and cultivating the student-teacher relationship to build a caring classroom community (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). The need for

CRP is important in all classrooms but is crucial for immigrant students living in low-income and low-literacy families and communities. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) assert that engagement in learning requires intrinsic motivation, especially for culturally different students. They suggest that intrinsic motivation is cultivated by culturally responsive teaching that includes four motivational conditions: establishing inclusion, developing attitude, enhancing learning, and engendering competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Kumar et al. (2018) found that achievement motivation in inclusive classrooms is encouraged by culturally sensitive teachers who create learning environments where cultural differences are appreciated and valued. An internal belief influences students' success in their valued ability to achieve rather than an external expectation of passing. This distinction is important because research suggests that externally motivated students are at a greater risk of low academic performance than intrinsically motivated students (Vero & Puka, 2018). The challenge for me was cultivating intrinsic motivation in my students by weaving the five strands of CRP into the core of my lessons in a virtual setting.

By late September 2020, I was ready to strengthen and expand my EL virtual learning approach. I relied on the core strength of CRP to help me guide my students upward in their educational journey. As I lowered the rope of CRP into my curriculum, I put on the lens of a teacher-researcher asking the question: As English Learner students face the challenges of a pandemic, what happens to their motivation and engagement when Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is implemented in a virtual classroom?

Participants and Contexts

I teach ELs in a large high school in the Northern Virginia area. I focused my research on two smaller self-contained EL English classes designed for students at the third English

proficiency level. Though still at the elementary level of English proficiency, these students had enough English language skills to communicate in an online setting.

The morning class consisted of 15 students – seven identified as female and eight identified as male. Similarly, the afternoon class had 15 students – nine identified as female and six identified as male. All the students were born in Central America or Asia. They all had a level 3 World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) testing score for English proficiency, but their written and reading abilities varied.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Strands to Support the Virtual Classroom

There are two strands of strategies that helped me implement CRP in my classroom. These strategies helped me to assess students' levels of motivation and engagement in learning.

The Strand to Reach the Depth of Students' Motivation

At the start of the academic year, none of my students used their cameras during virtual lessons, and only one or two used their microphones during class. To counter the low engagement, I wanted a routine where students could communicate their learning motivation to me. I decided to implement Marvin Marshall's Classroom Management routine (Marshall et al., 2007), a daily routine involving students rating their motivation on a four-point scale. I explicitly taught them the difference between the levels of motivation and how to reflect on these at the beginning of each class. The levels were: Democracy – intrinsic motivation where students are ready to engage in their learning due to their belief that learning positively affects their future; Cooperation – an extrinsic motivation when students are in class due to family pressure or grades; Bossy or Bully – low motivation, so the teacher has to boss the student around to learn; and Anarchy – when there is chaos in the classroom, and the student sees no reason to learn

(Marshall et al., 2007). I attached the scale with their attendance form for every class so that students could note their attendance and motivation levels.

The Strand to Reach the Depth of Students' Engagement

I also wanted students to communicate their level of understanding of my instructions and new content. Without the physical cues that I relied on to check students' understanding in the in-person classroom, I felt lost when I gave students directions and asked for feedback; usually, it would be the same three out of fifteen students responding. Engagement with classwork was minimal, and I had no idea if students' disengagement was caused by confusion about the directions or content or whether other issues deterred them. Therefore, I taught students to use my adaptations of Marzano's Levels of Understanding rubric (Guerrero, 2020) to communicate their understanding of instructions and content easily. Levels were: 0 - I don't understand; 1 – I'm still confused; 2 – I think I get it, but I need an example/help; 3 – I get it; and 4 – I can teach it. I incorporated the rubric on my lesson slides, and I used the poll tool in the virtual platform to quickly "read the room" for understanding and level of engagement, which provided input on where I needed to go with my teaching.

Anchoring Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the Virtual Classroom Routine

Souto-Manning (2018) suggests that "Teachers who are committed to culturally relevant teaching must identify resources that enhance access" (p. 58). The tools described above highlight ways to increase student access to opportunities for reflection and to communicate their motivation and understanding despite the challenges of limited language and the virtual setting. I implemented two additional strategies to support engagement in a synchronous class: polling and the use of a breakout room for one-on-one instruction.

I decided to incorporate the polling tool in my transitions within lessons. The polls were created quickly with yes or no answers, such as, "Are you ready to move on to the next part of our lesson?" Alternatively, "Do you have any questions before we move on?" The poll was a quick refocusing strategy for my students as if I had walked up to their desks and tapped them to pay attention. I could quickly call students who had yet to respond or send them a private message to check if they were alright. Though I did not see them on camera nor hear their voices on the microphones, students were virtually engaged when they answered the polls.

When I found out through the polls that a few students had questions or were not ready to move on, I used breakout rooms to talk to them, either to give them more detailed instructions or check in on them. Whether one-on-one or in a small group, these breakout room sessions created a safe place for students to express themselves. Some students were more willing to use their microphones and be honest about their needs in a private space.

Recognizing this need for a private space to connect, I used the 20 minutes when my students worked on an online literacy program to pull students into a breakout room for check-ins. I worked individually with two to four students in each class. This gave students the privacy needed to share their academic and personal concerns with me and allowed me to address those concerns.

I implemented the check-ins in November, and a student told me I was the first adult she had spoken to since school started in August. Another student said, "You are the only one that asked why I was absent, Miss; nobody cares." This student's perception was that nobody else cared, and I cared because I had asked her. The routine and space I built in the classroom allowed us to connect. The lack of interactions with teachers hurt students' engagement in their classes, especially for EL students who need to practice their English to improve their language

acquisition. Since I could get to know my students personally through these sessions, I could detect anomalies in their virtual classroom behavior more quickly and thoroughly.

Through the check-ins, I supported students' home life struggles during a pandemic, including rent and food insecurities, illnesses, pregnancy, immigration, and work issues. My daily data-gathering journal was filled with concerns about students' hardships. For example, in November, I wrote,

> During my time with P in the breakout room today, he shared that his father had just returned from the hospital. However, Covid left him with some complications, so P is the one in charge of figuring out which medicine to take at what time: "It's confusing, Miss." My heart breaks. He has the most English in his house, so of course, he's in charge of his father. I asked if his family was Ok with rent and food. He hesitated and mentioned that his father is out of work, so his mom is starting a new second job this week. I told him I would email the counselor and social worker to help his family further. He was appreciative.

Another example, written in February,

> It's a crazy day today! First, I called B into the breakout room and asked her why she had not been doing the schoolwork when she usually turned things in on time. She told me that a family member died last week. As the eldest, she had to help with the funeral. Ugh, I felt terrible for starting the conversation with schoolwork instead of "How are you?" Like I usually do…Then, R told me that he had to go into surgery again. I guess there were still problems that the doctor had to fix. In another class, I finally got the answer to why W had not been engaged all year round. I asked her if she would be in person, and she said she would not because it was her due date. She had been pregnant this whole

time, and I didn't know! It took her almost all year to trust me to share that information. When I spoke to the counselor, she filled me in, and everything made sense now with her low engagement.

These examples illustrate students' hardships during virtual school and how their realities affected their academic engagement. These experiences were relayed to me because I gave them a safe space to share their experiences during virtual learning. These strong connections we built during the sessions allowed me to direct students to resources and call on the counselor when needed. I also responded to their academic needs and included meaningful connections in curricula (e.g., including students' hometowns in lessons). When I addressed them during these sessions, it was always grounded on my expectation that they push themselves to pass my class and learn English. I made it clear to my students that I saw them as successes and trusted them to do the work to achieve it. Most importantly, evidence suggests that they understood this. Their responses on the tools I used to assess their level of motivation and understanding and their increased engagement and positive interactions with me indicated that their levels of motivation, engagement, and understanding were increasing over time. I knew that strong relationships with my students, cultivated during the one-on-one sessions, were an important foundation for designing successful CRP lessons.

I collected data continually in a variety of ways. The polls and breakout room activities became part of a routine I noted on my daily data recorder in my journal. I journaled on my students' engagement, and I noted that my increased use of polls and one-on-one breakout rooms was followed by increased attendance and engagement. Even without oral participation, it was evident that students were engaged in the lessons because they participated by answering the polls to either move on from the lesson or pause for content or direction clarifications.

Ensuring daily engagement in an online platform required redefining engagement and maintaining an intentional daily routine grounded in the CRP framework that gave students a virtual voice. Though none of the students turned on their microphones and cameras most of the time, my evidence suggests they were engaged in the lessons. In an in-person classroom, I could know precisely, even before an assessment, who understood the learning target, who needed more help, and who was utterly lost. In a virtual environment, only when the students were engaged could they communicate with me where they were in their level of understanding of that lesson. In the survey at the end of the year, 75% of my students indicated that the one-on-one sessions helped them learn and participate more in class. When asked what their favorite activity was this year, the twenty-minute session activity was their favorite because they could "talk to the teacher" and "ask questions."

A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Curriculum Project, "The Hamilton Project"

After implementing and solidifying the class routine using tools for reflection, engagement, and communication, I was ready to continue to weave the rope with my students by adding the curriculum strand of the CRP framework into our virtual classroom. The Hamilton Project was my first attempt to immerse my students in CRP during a curriculum unit. I created the unit using the CRP framework. I assessed students' motivation and engagement daily with the Level of Understanding and Level of Behavior tools while I used comprehension and skill-based assessments before and after the unit. These lessons were designed to push me to teach the whole student, honor all voices, and build relationships while maintaining high academic standards.

I created the Hamilton Project for two purposes: to review content and to build community. The project was based on Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical "Hamilton" (Miranda, 2015). Though there is some controversy regarding the musical, I built the project because I was

inspired by how Miranda re-envisioned American revolutionaries as a multicultural cast of characters. I hoped my students would be inspired to see their own identities as part of the American fabric. As I formed each activity, I had my students' lives and futures in mind. I knew that the only way I could successfully inspire them to believe in their education was to adhere to the tenets of CRP. Along with the lessons, our daily routines mentioned above were woven into every activity in the unit. The project description below highlights how each strand of the CRP rope strengthened the unit to support students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Identity and Achievement

The project focused on the introductory song of "Alexander Hamilton," where the audience is introduced to Hamilton's early life hardships. It tells his story of poverty and trauma to the point where he came to America as an immigrant at the age of 19. Simultaneously, the song has an undercurrent that foreshadows his great legacy. At the song's end, the chorus asks, "What's your name, man?" Hamilton answers, "Alexander Hamilton" (Miranda, 2015). There is such power in the note of that name. It is the power of his identity and what he would become.

After my students paraphrased and understood the lines and viewed the performance, I asked them: "What's your name?" With their names, they wrote out their stories, highlighting what made them who they are now. The writing allowed them to embrace their past and push forward to their new future in The United States. I highlighted the power that each of them brought with them to my classroom, our school, our society, and our nation.

Equity and Excellence

The musical "Hamilton" is a rap musical that would last close to six hours if performed as a regular musical without the quick rap tempo. The songs are fast and filled with colloquialisms, idioms, and slang words that make it challenging for me to catch every word, let alone for EL

students to comprehend the songs. So, I scaffolded the songs to bring proper understanding to my students.

First, it was essential to teach them paraphrasing, a skill we usually taught in the second semester that students often struggled with during the research unit. I thought it would be best to introduce it to them now as the lines were short, and they could have an idea of what "write it in your own words" really means. Second, the rap lines have few proper punctuations and sentence forms. Since we reviewed punctuation and simple sentences, I asked students to turn these lines into formal sentences. It was not to discredit the form of the song but to scaffold my students' meaning-making. The song is filled with irony, metaphors, similes, and other higher-level literary expressions that I had to strip into simple sentences to harvest each line's real meaning. By combining the review with paraphrasing, I challenged students to use tools such as the dictionary and thesaurus, as Google Translate would not capture the song's slang and idioms.

Using Google Slides, each student was assigned one slide with a half stanza or one whole stanza to ensure that everyone could understand the song at the end. They worked together to break down the lines of "Alexander Hamilton" in class before watching the taped performance. The process of paraphrasing and forming correct formal sentences allowed all students to understand the song, even before they heard it for the first time.

Developmental Appropriateness

The project highlighted engagement, morale, and motivation. Hamilton was a poor immigrant when he first started in America; his father left him, his mother died, and his cousin committed suicide, among other minor challenges. The struggles and traumas that Hamilton went through were not unfamiliar to many of my students. I hoped learning about Hamilton's

challenges before becoming one of our Founding Fathers would inspire my students to believe in their potential.

Students collaborated to understand the song using their newly acquired English language in their own words. They were exposed to songs and videos, and at the end, they wrote their own life stories and thought about where they would go and what they would do with all that potential. My students were at the prime age where they could easily doubt their strength and power, and this project became a pathway for them to let the world hear their voices.

The Whole Child

The project celebrated the whole child. Though we were using Alexander Hamilton as the focus of the activity, the students were the center of this project. It would not have been successful without the students expressing their names and telling their stories. The project would empower them by seeing the connections of how our pasts shape us but do not define our futures.

Student-Teacher Relationship

From the beginning of the year, I focused on building trusting relationships with my students. The Hamilton Project reinforced and built on those relationships as we created a safe space to share their stories. It was an honor to see part of their past and to glimpse their dreams. Their trust in me to read and honor their stories became a base for our bond; a sense of community that says, I know your name, and I hear you.

Findings

Several forms of data were collected to assess whether and in what ways CRP-infused lessons in the Hamilton unit motivated and engaged students in a virtual setting. One form was my research journal, in which I recorded the highs and lows of students' engagement during each

CRP lesson. The journaling showed which lessons engaged students most and led me to pedagogical questions. For example, "Are students most engaged when more CRP elements exist in the lesson?", "Does engagement decrease when the content is too difficult, regardless of CRP elements?" or "With increased motivation due to CRP teaching, can students sustain engagement even when the content is challenging?" These questions led to better lesson planning for subsequent lessons.

Another source of data was my students' writing. The pieces they wrote during the unit were inspiring to read. Their writings gave insight into their lives and dreams and their ability to connect and apply the lessons. Grading their writing was challenging, as I did not want to reduce their stories to a number, so I created a rubric with categories that separated the power of their voices (focus and development) from the technical issues in their written English language use (punctuation and grammar). Again, I relied on CRP tenets to highlight academic issues without diminishing my students' voices.

The writing assignment allowed students to reflect on their journey before coming to the United States. Then, with content expectations in mind, they wrote a paragraph declaring their own goals in a summative format. The students' tone mimicked Hamilton's determination to make it to the "mainland," as he was an immigrant from the Caribbean. Their responses illustrate their belief in reaching their dreams. One student wrote:

> My name is [AB] I was born in a small city in Central America. I came to the US finding a better life for me and be able to help my siblings in the future. I'm an orphan and I think it's the worst thing that happened to me. I came here with a lot of fear, fear that something bad would happen to me, fear of dying trying because the trip was hard and intense and I didn't even know anyone, I came alone with no one who could defend me.

However, bigger than fear was my desire to achieve my goals and fulfill my dreams. My strength is facing difficult situations, don't give up never and trusting myself to fulfill my objectives.

Another student wrote:

My name is [CD] I was born in Central America and coming to this country was not an option that I had in mind, but unfortunately in countries like mine, not everyone has the same opportunities. So I came to this country with the dream of being able to become someone professional, because it was what I always wanted and so far every day, I achieve a little more. I get up in the morning and I always try to do my best at school, after that I go to my work and as long as little by little I will achieve my dreams. My strengths are that I am very proud of everything I have done, I am also proud of having qualities such as being bilingual, knowing that I come from a low place and that I can do much more. My name is [CD], and I'm going to work hard to achieve my goals.

Another student wrote:

My strength is that I trust who I am, and what I will become, since I want to finish my bachelor's degree and study medicine to become a doctor, and make myself and my family proud. My name is [EF], and only just wait and see, I will change the world.

These students' stories demonstrate how curriculum can engage students by connecting and affirming their identities and experiences and can open possibilities for their futures. Analyzing Hamilton's story, students related to one of our Founding Fathers. The connection reinforced the belief that they, too, can have a powerful influence to make significant global contributions. I explicitly told them, "I see no difference between you and Hamilton." In their final assessment at the end of the CRP project, all the students wrote that they were inspired by

either Hamilton's story or Lin-Manuel Miranda himself. Their reactions and comments, such as declaring their names and saying, "You just wait, I will reach my dreams," prove that a CRP approach can help empower students and deepen their commitment to learning.

Students also met content expectations. As can be seen in the examples shared above, students fulfilled the level 3 WIDA academic objective of writing with a "range of sentence patterns and grammatical structure" that use proper capitalizations and periods, paragraphs that show "an organized expression of ideas with emerging cohesion," and vocabulary usage that "fulfills the writing purpose" (Wisconsin, 2020).

Students' ratings over time indicated that the CRP Hamilton Project boosted their motivation to engage and learn. Their daily ratings on the motivation scale increased during and after the Hamilton Project, with most of the students rating their motivation to learn at the highest level by the end of the unit, as compared to only a few feeling motivated when the adapted Marshall levels were first introduced (Marshall et al., 2007). There was a sustained effect, with most students maintaining this high level of engagement beyond the completion of the Hamilton Project. In addition, students increasingly used the chat function during class, with private comments to the whole class and to me. These private chats helped me better understand my students' needs and strengthened our bond.

Weaving a Strong Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework in a Virtual Classroom

While a CRP approach has clear benefits in all classrooms (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), this research illustrates that it is critical in a classroom of diverse learners, especially in a virtual environment. The relationships I built with my students gave us the trustworthy grounding needed to advance. CRP gave me a blueprint for weaving a solid rope with my students to ascend from their home base to the learning they wanted to reach. I needed strong

content knowledge to build a support system. I then had to tap into students' home foundations to connect that content for them to climb up the rope of success. If I did not start with students' home knowledge and empower their experiences, those who reached their intended destinations might need to learn how to return to their core values. That home knowledge made them who they are. The CRP approach did not deny students' identities and experiences and ask them to assimilate; instead, it empowered and assured students of who they were and how they could enrich society (Emdin, 2021).

For teachers to tune in to students' personal stories and their compassionate, helpful responses, intentional classroom daily routines that honor those experiences must be in place. In my research, these interactions and dedicated routines were essential for sustaining students' motivation and engagement in the virtual learning environment. When students faced hardships due to the pandemic or otherwise, they had a safe space to ask for guidance and help, whether for personal or academic concerns. The evidence of the benefits of this CRP approach in an online learning environment has implications for future online efforts as well as for considering how teachers can weave learning ropes with their students in face-to-face classrooms.

Summary of Lessons Learned Relevant to Teacher Professional Development

It is not enough for pre-service and in-service professional development programs to teach only the tools of CRP – frameworks and theories only exist as ropes hanging in the air. Student-teachers and practicing teachers need to experience the strands of these ropes and learn how to weave them with content and curriculum. This research was focused on EL students in a virtual environment, but lessons learned have broader implications for educating all children. The research suggests that to authentically reach students and empower them to learn, their teachers need to learn to:

1. Build strong, compassionate relationships that support engagement and learning.

2. Reflect on their work and examine their assumptions, exploring and refining their pedagogy according to their students' needs.

3. Find and use tools and strategies that connect with students and their lives to encourage learning through authentic access to the curriculum.

4. Become courageous and active advocates for their students, willing to dive deep into the chasm of inequity to provide the resources and support that give every child solid footing and a strong rope for the long climb.

By the end of the year, my students and I were no longer lost in the virtual learning abyss. We were partners in making virtual learning a success. Students were no longer teetering in and out of sight, losing their way, and I was no longer desperately reaching for them in the darkness. Through CRP, I realized that the relationships we built and the tools we used were like carabiners in climbing, linking the rope and our harnesses together as we made our steady way upward. My students knew I was there with them, listening to their struggles and guiding their way. At the start of the year, I wove them a rope that was not long enough. With the infusion of a CRP approach, my students and I lengthened and strengthened that rope and did the climb together.

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