

## **‘Sankofa’ teaching and learning: evaluating relevance for today’s African-American student**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The intent of this project was to identify and relate the values and perceptions of today’s African American students to culturally relevant teaching and learning practices. The reason for relating student culture with teaching practices is to improve pedagogical processes for African American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy, according to previous research, is considered rewarding to students, teachers, and the local and national community. However, culturally relevant teaching and learning elements have yet to be evaluated in the context of today’s African American students (members of Generation Y), who live in a very diverse and technologically savvy world. Critical race theory (CRT) is the main framework used in this project to explain the ubiquity of a culturally relevant pedagogy. The purpose of this quantitative study is to test this critical race theory, which relates the presence of the factors associated with culturally relevant teaching strategies with perceived relevance, controlling for race, at a historically black university (HBCU) in the southeast. The culturally relevant teaching strategies were defined based on characteristics recommended by previous researchers. The presence and importance of the existing teaching strategies was evaluated based on student self-report. Participants in this study included approximately 145 students from a HBCU. A survey consisting of 37 items related to culturally relevant pedagogy was constructed. Overall themes included; use of culturally-specific examples in class whenever possible; use of culture-specific presentational models, use of ‘relational reinforcers’, and active engagement. Each of these themes was captured by the survey items. Participants reported the extent to which teaching strategies were present on a 5-point scale Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and importance of these on a 3-point scale ranging from not at all important to very important. A new variable, ‘Relevance’ was formed based on the multiplicative function of importance and presence of a teaching and learning strategy. A set of six demographic questions were also included in the survey. Results of a factor analyses with varimax rotation identified 8 factors that explained 71% of the variance. Factors considered relevant included some identified in previous studies, intertwined with others which were more related to the technology skills of Gen-Y. Results of this study are expected to inform educational practices and pedagogies for African American students and improve teaching and learning outcomes.

Keywords: African American students, culture specific teaching strategies, cultural pedagogies.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Sankofa bird is an Akan symbol for “go back and retrieve”. The Akan are the largest ethnic minority in West Africa. This project draws on the symbolism of the Sankofa bird, which walks forward while looking backward, signifying the Akan’s traditional quest for knowledge which is based on the critical examination of an African past to promote healing, success, and progress in our contemporary lives. The intent of this project was to identify and synchronize the values and perceptions of African-American students with culturally relevant teaching and learning practices. The reason for interrelating student culture with teaching practices is to provide a better understanding of, and to improve pedagogical processes for African American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy is deemed rewarding to students, teachers, the local and national community (e.g., Berry, 2005; Cahnmann & Remillard, 2002; Howard, 2001; Howard, 2003; Stanford, 1998; Diller, 1999; Atwater, Lance, Woodard, & Johnson, 2013; Almanza & Mosley, 1980; Tsurusaki, Barton, Tan, Koch, & Contento, 2013). However, the relevant teaching and learning elements in the context of today’s African-American, Generation Y (Gen Y) student, who lives in a very diverse and technologically savvy world, have yet to be evaluated.

Past studies have identified culturally relevant pedagogies and some have explored the perceptions of what the African American students consider culturally relevant. However, none of the studies have established relationships between student perceptions of the presence of culturally relevant elements and their importance, in a homogeneous teaching environment. That is, this project seeks to answer the following questions; when predominantly black colleges utilize culturally relevant pedagogies, which practices do they use and are they important to the Gen Y student of today? Answering this question is important because the African American student of today is also a part of Gen Y and entrenched in a diverse world via technology and social media. This is especially important for the student population at an HBCU, a majority of who are African American and first-generation students. Academic mobility in this population is significantly lower according to most reports (U. S. Census, 2014; Siritunga, Montero-Rojas, Carrero, Toro, Vélez, Carrero-Martínez, 2011). Furthermore, it has also been suggested that the present generation of Gen Y students are very pragmatic and realist in their educational goals and aspirations (Sojka & Fish, 2008). Thus, this project considers the perceptions of the students, and identifies if the culturally relevant pedagogies in their environment are still efficacious for the student of today.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) is the main framework used in this project to explain the ubiquity of a culturally relevant pedagogy. Berry (2005) indicates that this theory acknowledges that racism is a part of American life; so it keeps race and racism at its center and requires that all theorizing, research, and debate address this core. In doing so, race is not marginalized in the dominant culture. This theoretical foundation is important because it will help explain the pedagogies that are deemed important and culturally relevant by the African American students of today who study at a HBCU.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Previous researchers have identified several elements associated with culturally relevant pedagogy. Berry (2005) identifies the use of shared memoirs or life experiences and mutual vulnerability as important elements to make the students care and feel a sense of belonging in the academic environment. Memoirs, written as well as verbal, and shared vulnerabilities develop a pedagogy that is engaging and thus effective. Almanza and Mosley (1980) stress the importance of considering the cultural learning styles of the students for effective teaching and learning. For example, using movement to teach would be responsive to the natural behaviors of African American children who were identified as moving thrice as often as their Caucasian peers. Attending to this learning style and using it to teach builds a personally engaging and culturally sensitive pedagogy.

Tsurusaki et al. (2010) demonstrated the power of transformative boundary objects in STEM learning. Having children make connections between systems taught in school and what they do in everyday life, becomes a powerful pedagogical tool. Drawing on the mores in the African church, the call and response method, active involvement, cooperative learning, and use of the African traditions of movement and rhythm were identified as other key elements of a culturally relevant pedagogy (Diller, 1999).

Stanford's (1997) engaged pedagogy involved two common tenets; lifting as we climb and giving it forward. Caring enough to spend time and stay involved with the students even afterhours, praising them, doing small things with great love are some of the characteristics of the 'remembered' teachers. This seemed entwined with the concept of 'relational reinforcers' which have been identified by other researchers as well (Berry & Mizelle, 2005; Liddell & Talpade, 2014). Liddell and Talpade (2014) distilled culturally relevant pedagogies from a pilot investigation conducted in 2009, using a mixed methods study, at a HBCU in the southeast. The qualitative segment identified the following relevant themes which were deemed effective by the students-- use of culturally relevant examples, presentation styles, use of 'relational reinforcers', and active engagement. The quantitative segment of this pilot indicated a rise in the self-efficacy of the students with the use of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Researchers have recognized and addressed the education of the millennial African American generation students (Dagbovie, 2006). Teaching of certain courses such as African American history using the following characteristics were suggested by the author: (a) use of one's own personal experience ("autobiography as a learner"), (b) the existing scholarship on teaching and learning African American history ("theoretical literature"), (c) conversations with experts in the African American historical profession ("colleagues' experiences") and, (d) interaction with students (the "learner's eyes"). Similarly, Tucker, Herman, Pedersen, Vogel, Reinke (2000) explored African American students' perceptions of academic challenges and respective solutions. Thematic analysis revealed the following solutions for academic success: (a) academic preparation and active participation in class, (b) positive peer influences, (c) self-empowerment through self-management strategies, and (d) praise and encouragement by teachers/parents.

## **Generation Y**

Gen Y represents a larger population than the baby boomers and consists of those born between 1981 and 2000. This generation has been identified as possessing distinct ideologies and

work ethic which include idealism, relativism, and a high socially connected orientation in the workplace. They exhibit better teamwork, and are unaccepting of ethical violations (VanMeter, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2013). Gen Y students have also been associated with characteristics such as being young, middle-class, and technologically savvy (Sternberg, 2012). This stereotyping tends to enhance the role of technology in education but is of little value in explaining their educational experiences. In a French sample, this generation was identified as sociable, and prone to sharing and solidarity rather than to acts of charity. Individual expression was important to this generation and therefore they were more likely to share if the appeals were made via social networks, if they were made to pleasure rather than guilt, and to contribute to non-profit organizations (Urbain, Gonzalez, & Le Gall-Ely, 2012). Although this research focused on the charitable nature of Gen Y, the characteristics which motivate this generation to act, can be transferred to the academic realm. Gen Y or *Millennials* in the classroom have also been associated with a sense of academic entitlement (Miller, 2013). Specifically, results have indicated high correlation between perceptions of ‘Grade Fairness’ and the following ‘External Responsibility’ subscale items “If I do poorly in a course and I could not make my professor's office hours, the fault lies with my professor” and “For group work, I should receive the same grade as the other group members regardless of my level of effort.”

In summary, culturally relevant pedagogies have unique characteristics that have shown promise in delivering positive learning outcomes. Although much research has been devoted to culturally relevant teaching and learning for African American students, academic challenges still persist. The statistics regarding their social mobility and graduation and academic retention rates are still daunting and deserve attention. This population has morphed in recent years, and is now a part of the Gen Y, which thrives in a diverse world. Thus, this project seeks to identify those teaching and learning strategies that are ‘culturally relevant’ for the African American student population who are a part of today’s Gen Y.

## **METHODS**

The purpose of this quantitative study is to test the critical race theory that relates the presence of the factors associated with culturally relevant teaching strategies with perceived importance, for students at a historically black university in the southeast. A list of culturally relevant teaching strategies were developed based on characteristics recommended by previous research. The presence and importance of these teaching strategies was evaluated based on student self-report.

This study therefore aimed at investigating importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to African-American student of today. For the purpose of this study, cultural relevance was computed by the Importance of the teaching strategy multiplied by the Presence of the teaching and learning strategy in the students’ learning environment.

## **Respondents**

Respondents ( $N = 145$ ), were African American (93%) college students from three historically black colleges in the southeast. A consent form based on NIH and APA ethical standards was distributed prior to survey administration to the volunteers. Majority of the respondents were female (81.3%), and juniors/seniors (79.2%). The students reported 16 majors,

with the majority from the School of Arts and Sciences (94%). The duration at the current institution reported by the participants ranged from a period of 9.5 months to 5 years.

## Measures

A survey consisting of 37 items related to culturally relevant pedagogy was constructed. The themes used to construct the items were based on past research (Liddell & Talpade, 2014). The following themes were used: Use of culturally-specific examples in class whenever possible; use of culturally-specific presentational models, use of ‘relational reinforcers’, and active engagement. Each of these themes had elements which were captured by the survey items.

An example of the elements related to one of the themes (use of culture-specific examples in class whenever possible), would be: (a) where possible use primary texts written by Africana authors; if this is not possible, use supplemental texts. (b) when providing examples related to the main points of the course, use those that come from the Africana experience. (c) engage actual practitioners of the course subject or course content who are of African descent or utilize posters, pictures, etc. related to Africana people or to the Africana experience. (d) when making references to people, places, things, including texts, include those that are related to experiences recognizable to the students or to Africana experiences.

Examples of the items constructed in response to the above theme are as follows:

- My instructors use textbooks in class that are written by people of my own race.
- Resources (websites, books, videos) used in my classes feature people of my own race.
- My instructors use examples that are related to the experiences of my race
- I can relate to the examples that my instructors use in the class
- I am exposed to several role models of my own race
- Contributions of individuals from my own race are introduced in class.
- My instructors make references to people, places, things, that I can identify with.

All the items had a Likert-type response scale. Participants reported their degree of agreement (5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and importance (3-point scale ranging from not at all important to very important) with each survey item. A set of six demographic questions were included in the survey. A new variable ‘Relevance’ was computed as follows: The degree of agreement X rating of importance using the SPSS variable computation.

## Procedures

Instructors in the School of Arts and Sciences were asked for permission to distribute the survey to students in the classroom. Instructors determined the incentives for survey participation (extra credit points). The researcher went to the classrooms at the predetermined times and distributed the consent forms followed by the survey to volunteers. Surveys were distributed in four classrooms and participants returned the surveys to an envelope placed in the front of the classroom. Students typically took approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. Students were asked to keep a copy of the consent form for their records and if they had further questions.

## RESULTS

SPSS software was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were used to test the assumptions for conducting the analyses. The equal variances assumption was satisfied for the variable 'Relevance'. A factor extraction method, using varimax rotation was conducted and results revealed nine factors which explained the majority of the variance. The means and standard deviations of the variable Relevance are reported in Table 1. Tables 2 and 3 includes the results of the factor analyses. Additional tests, such as non-parametric tests on Gender X Relevance were computed. The non-parametric tests were appropriate because of the unequal sample sizes. Results revealed significant differences between the genders on what they considered 'relevant' to their teaching and learning. The results of the Mann-Whitney U tests are included in Table 4.

The means and standard deviations for Relevance are provided in Table 1 (Appendix). The data indicates no violations of homogeneity.

Results of the factor loadings following the varimax rotation indicated that the eight factors (Table 2 - Appendix) accounted for 71.18% of the variance. Out of the 8 factors, factor 1 accounted for most (21.16%) of the variance.

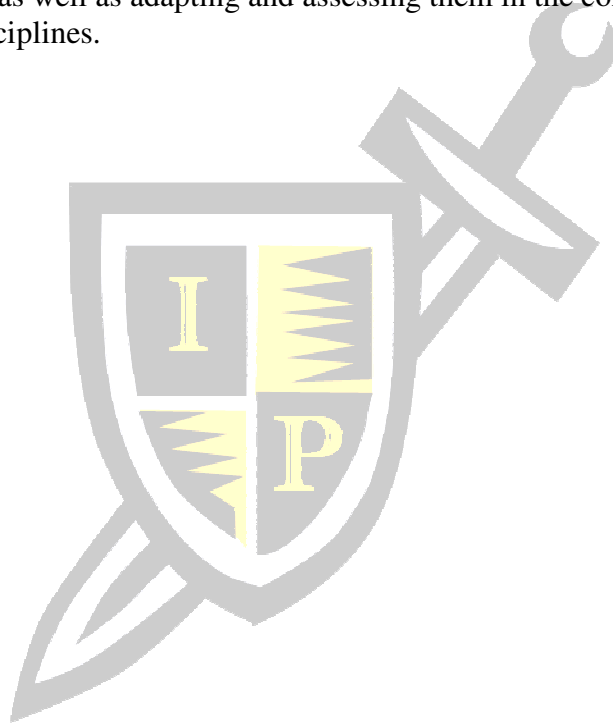
The coefficients of the extracted factors are shown in Table 3 (Appendix). This analyses extracted the factors that were reported as relevant to the African-American students at the HBCU. Significant differences in relevance by gender were identified but are not reported due to the small sampling of males ( $n = 15$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The analysis for culturally relevant pedagogy for the African-American Gen-Y students revealed the emergence of technologically related strategies intertwined with those of the traditional past. For example, the use of storytelling as a teaching strategy, and the inclusion of non-verbal expressions along with digital storytelling for presentations, emerged as one of the most relevant strategies for African American students of Generation Y. Factors associated with student centered resources (using text written by people of own race) and communal and personal relationships as a context for teaching and learning (community teaching, learning in communities, teacher access, personal relationships) were also identified as relevant by the students. Some of these factors have also been identified by previous researchers such as Tucker et al. (2000) and are congruent with the results of their qualitative exploration which revealed factors such as using methods involving active participation in class, positive peer influences, and the importance of student-teacher relationships. Access to teachers, being able to disclose information about one's personal life, and incorporating examples in class that the students could relate to, was relevant to the students' learning. In this context of 'culturally relevant pedagogy', Berry (2005) reported that she "...incorporated students' schooling lives in the classroom experience (p.37)." Using examples related to the student's lives was found to be an effective technique in the field of genetics and cell biology as well (Siritunga, Montero-Rojas, Carrero, Toro, & Vélez, 2011). The efficacy of the use of culturally relevant pedagogy has also been considered important in the realm of medical education (Dogra, Giordano, & France, 2007) as well as health education (Frazier, Massingale, Bowen, & C., 2012). This is similar to the results shown here, with the high relevance of the strategy which included the making of references to

people, places, things, that the students could identify with. Dagbovie (2006) argues that we must acknowledge the visually oriented and technologically able/dependent students, and use this medium for teaching and learning. Our results showing high relevance for using nonverbal and digital mediums for teaching and learning are very much in agreement with Dagbovie's argument.

These findings are important and the strength of this research study lies in the theoretical and empirical foundation on which it is based. The need for such studies is inherent in the comparative lack of social mobility among African American students. The factors identified in this study are important to inform teaching and learning practices among this population. Although our research indicates a relevance of culturally sensitive pedagogy across disciplines, it is acknowledged that the sample was mainly from the social sciences and other factors may emerge as being relevant to other disciplines such as business, engineering, and math. Future research directions should therefore include disseminating these culturally relevant strategies to educational institutions as well as adapting and assessing them in the context of teaching and learning in different disciplines.

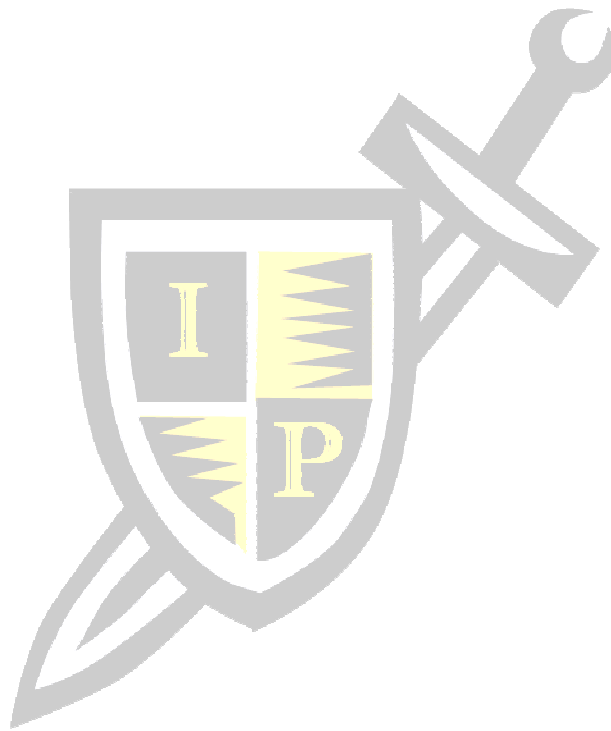


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## APPENDIX

**Table 1 - Means and Standard Deviations of Relevance**

Relevance Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Relevance Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>1</b>	6.17	3.87	<b>20</b>	9.71	4.53
<b>2</b>	8.04	4.22	<b>21</b>	8.07	4.89
<b>3</b>	10.93	3.91	<b>22</b>	8.62	4.82
<b>4</b>	11.35	3.84	<b>23</b>	8.94	4.97
<b>5</b>	11.81	3.59	<b>24</b>	11.29	4.18
<b>6</b>	10.47	4.46	<b>25</b>	10.52	4.85
<b>7</b>	11.47	4.23	<b>26</b>	11.16	4.55
<b>8</b>	9.85	4.09	<b>27</b>	10.41	4.09
<b>9</b>	7.02	4.09	<b>28</b>	9.78	4.41
<b>10</b>	6.74	4.29	<b>29</b>	8.24	4.45
<b>11</b>	7.03	4.23	<b>30</b>	10.00	4.44
<b>12</b>	6.98	4.85	<b>31</b>	9.17	4.48
<b>13</b>	8.85	4.62	<b>32</b>	7.98	4.85
<b>14</b>	6.98	4.40	<b>33</b>	11.11	4.05
<b>15</b>	7.16	4.60	<b>34</b>	10.80	4.40
<b>16</b>	7.38	4.77	<b>35</b>	9.77	4.75
<b>17</b>	10.34	4.42	<b>36</b>	7.40	4.63
<b>18</b>	10.74	4.37	<b>37</b>	9.12	4.72
<b>19</b>	10.74	3.90			

**Table 2 - Extracted Factor Loadings X Items**

Survey Items	Factor Loadings
<b>Factor 1: Teacher Access</b>	
My instructors make references to people, places, things, that I can identify with.	<b>.803</b>
I feel comfortable approaching my instructors during their office hours	<b>.869</b>
My instructors encourage me to visit them during their office hours.	<b>.815</b>
<b>Factor 2: Storytelling</b>	
My instructors use stories to communicate the important concepts in the class	<b>.830</b>
<b>Factor 3: Community learning</b>	
My class assignments include group projects	<b>.826</b>
<b>Factor 4: Non-Verbal expressions</b>	
In addition to writing and oral communication, we are encouraged to include non-verbal communications during class presentations.	<b>.836</b>
<b>Factor 5: Community teaching</b>	
My instructors have had me teach another person who did not understand a concept.	<b>.796</b>
<b>Factor 6: Student centered course resources</b>	
My instructors use textbooks in class that are written by people of my own race	<b>.816</b>
<b>Factor 7: Personal relationships</b>	
My instructors know about the significant others and incidents in my life	<b>.767</b>
<b>Factor 8: Digital storytelling</b>	
My instructors encourage the use of digital story telling in my classes.	<b>.749</b>

**Table 3 - Extracted Factors X Coefficients**

Factor 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
<b>1</b>	<b>.697</b>	<b>.405</b>	<b>.287</b>	<b>.296</b>	<b>.318</b>	<b>.139</b>	<b>.147</b>	<b>.196</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>-.533</b>	<b>-.128</b>	<b>.461</b>	<b>.465</b>	<b>.285</b>	<b>-.141</b>	<b>.392</b>	<b>.125</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>-.255</b>	<b>.155</b>	<b>.431</b>	<b>-.137</b>	<b>-.202</b>	<b>.747</b>	<b>-.278</b>	<b>.172</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>-.136</b>	<b>-.034</b>	<b>-.642</b>	<b>.030</b>	<b>.292</b>	<b>.454</b>	<b>.349</b>	<b>.394</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>.320</b>	<b>-.738</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.464</b>	<b>-.274</b>	<b>.236</b>	<b>-.083</b>	<b>.021</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>-.167</b>	<b>.499</b>	<b>-.296</b>	<b>.626</b>	<b>-.471</b>	<b>-.004</b>	<b>-.078</b>	<b>-.122</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>.103</b>	<b>.025</b>	<b>.091</b>	<b>-.182</b>	<b>-.299</b>	<b>.252</b>	<b>.728</b>	<b>-.514</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>.076</b>	<b>.019</b>	<b>.109</b>	<b>-.189</b>	<b>-.552</b>	<b>-.277</b>	<b>.287</b>	<b>.694</b>

*Note.* Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.