

Building Connections Across Cultures through Digital Spaces

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	<i>Digital learning has increased in 2020 due to the current state of our country and teachers need to connect to culturally diverse learners through engaging virtual lessons. The article discusses teacher ready applications to build lasting relationships, determine student interest and cultural experiences, allow student choice for cultural differentiation, and provide frequent and meaningful feedback to maximize learner outcome. It is with deliberate intentions teachers build connections with culturally diverse learners through digital spaces.</i>
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Introduction

“Jambo, from Kenya,” greets Riley Snyder, as she virtually joins our classroom from halfway around the world. At the age of 24, Riley is founder and CEO of Generation Next, a nonprofit organization. Her work includes Generation Next Academy serving a growing population of 275 students, nursery through eighth grade, in the community of Kathyaka, Kenya. Shortly later, in the fall of 2018, my diverse classroom cheers with elation as Burgwim Muthoka, social worker with Generation Next, places his hands into fresh, clear water from the newly built well during a Live Facebook stream.

It was while reading *A Long Walk to Water*, my students began to wonder and discover the culture we were reading. As I observed their curiosities and dove deeper into their wonderings, I uncovered a need to understand, a concept out of reach and on the other side of the world. I knew I needed to find a way to make this learning relevant, meaningful, and real. As it happens, Riley, who began her organization at only 14, was in Kenya overseeing the well drilling which would serve the entire Kathyaka village. My students were instantaneously engaged watching live streaming videos of villagers overjoyed filling any available container for fresh water. One empathic student turned to me, asking, “How can we help?” Building on my own students’ interest, we research and discovered water jugs cost 100 shillings, the equivalent of a US dollar, a luxury for many families. My students collected recyclable cans in an effort to raise money. Riley Synder arranged to bring Barbara Wanza Burgwin and George Mathias, both essential employees for building relationships at the Academy in Kenya, on a personal visit to our classroom to Southern-Missouri to discuss their African culture and receive our donation for water jugs for the surrounding village.

As educators, we continuously observe and seek opportunities to engage students with the world and my example demonstrates how strong relationships, technology, and understanding student needs lead to enriched learning about another culture. Our classrooms are a diverse population of identities, personalities, languages, cultures, strengths, needs, and goals. Culturally responsive teachers build bridges between new content with student’s prior knowledge, beliefs, (Villegas and Lucas, 2007), and interests.

As of 2020, the global pandemic has united all learners with a significant experience in virtual learning. This is a unique opportunity to utilize technology to its greatest capacity to engage culturally diverse learners by using student interest and knowledge to craft meaningful lessons and offering student choice while build lasting, meaningful relationships.

Here are a few practical suggestions for using technology in the culturally responsive digital classroom to maximize student learn

Begin by Cultivating Lasting Relationships

In *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond states, “Relationships are the cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching (p.87),” and as a classroom and online educator of diverse populations, I use these words as a foundation for success. It was through the lasting relationship and connection

with a former student's family I provided my current students the opportunity to watch the well construction on another continent.

Instruction in digital spaces invites others into the student's home. This virtual exchange calls for trust between the teacher, student, and the family. Building a caring, trusting relationship is the key point of success from the beginning of any given learning exchange.

- **Check-In Questions:** These are simple questions with simple answers. Do you prefer swimming or reading at the pool? Do you like noodles or rice? Students respond in a poll using an online tool, give a thumbs up on the screen, type in a chat or respond in a variety of other options. As you get to know your students, this is an opportunity to incorporate information from your students' cultures. You can even have your students help write the questions!
- **Show and Tell:** Set time aside during the year to allow students to "Show and Tell" about themselves and encourage families to join. In my third-grade classroom, a young girl shared about her summer spent with her extended family in Japan. Her mom visited the classroom to explain about her culture. My class was intrigued and engaged, particularly about the Japanese school system. The mom found a classroom in Japan to exchange letters and we even communicated virtually!

Determine Student Interest and Cultural Experiences

Teachers with strong relationships utilize pre-assessments to cultivate information generating meaningful learning experiences. It was through observation and questioning I discovered my students' desire to learn more about the African culture turning a literature unit into a multicultural experience spanning the globe.

- **Pre-assessments:** Pre-assessments can provide information about a student's appropriate area of learning, including interests and culturally relevant information as the unit progresses. Types of pre-assessments can vary but successful pre-assessments are short and measure target goals.

As a third-grade teacher, I had a young refugee boy from Myanmar

with limited English proficiency. We were doing a personalized literacy pre-assessment while also spending one-on-one time building rapport. It is through simple dialogue I learned he once had a, "...dog shot by soldiers." The literacy pre-assessment evolved into deeper understanding of his background through these four words.

- **Make Observations:** Teachers are always collecting informal observations during teaching. We continuously look to find ways to connect to our students' interests. Teachers need to be aware of different cultural norms. Students from non-Western cultures may have different academic values than those promoted in American schools. Different cultures value group or individual activities more highly whereas some cultures value silence as a sign of respect; thus, a quiet, seemingly disengaged student may only be following the rules of his or her culture (Sousa and Tomlinson, 2018).
- **Interest Surveys:** These are a great way for students, and families, to bring their own personal interests into digital spaces. Interest surveys allow for classbuilding by asking "What is your favorite animal?" but also allow for curriculum building when asking, "Which do you prefer to use: audio recordings or video casting?" Additionally, interest surveys provide teachers with information regarding learner preferences. Through a family interest survey, I learned a family member of a student was originally from Guatemala. I invited her to visit our classroom and she shared about her struggles first moving to the United States as a teenager. Her visit helped build a connection with the diverse population in my classroom which included several non-English speaking and refugee students. The mechanics of inviting outside guests into one's classroom, with widespread uptake of video conferences technologies, has never been easier, just as my classroom connect to Riley in Kenya for real-world learning.

Student Choice Allows for Cultural Differentiation

Cultures are diverse and broad, even within, and teachers may appear fake (Rajagopal, 2011) when trying to connect with students' cultural interests. One option is to provide student choice in learning. Providing choice allows flexibility for differences in student attitudes, values, norms, traditions, and goals that characterize a certain culture. Offering choices allow students the opportunity to find individual voices and avenues to share knowledge building on experiences. When students are confident in their role in the classroom and community, students are more successful. (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

- **Varied Instructional Options:** Deliver content through multiple access points. Include written text, videos, audio, and pictures depending on the needs of the learners. Teaching both undergraduate and graduate online courses, I am diligent to provide audio recording, video, and downloadable documents of major content material and assignment directions. I include images of key learning principles to draw learner attention. This is another opportunity to provide vocabulary, student-centered stories, and examples of cultures collectively representative of the classroom. The online classroom is another opportunity to invite virtual visits of diverse mentors expanding similar racial, cultural, and class backgrounds.
- **Choice Boards:** Choice boards, sometimes referred to as bingo cards or tic-tac-toe boards, are another option for providing choice in digital spaces. A choice board is often a 3x3 or 5x5 grid offering a variety of teacher created choice items related to content and student interest. Over a specified timeframe, students complete an

option from each row to demonstrate learning goals identified by the pre-assessment to meet learning needs (Doubet & Hackett, 2015).

Mrs. Kimbrough uses choice boards, designed as a virtual bookshelf, for her online classroom. Her choice boards vary every few weeks, but includes audio, video recordings, and off-line options for when technology presents a barrier. She states she keeps students in mind when creating options. For example, one week she made sure to include a reading option about a soccer player for a group of students who expressed missing their daily soccer game at recess.

Frequent and Meaningful Feedback

Frequent and meaningful feedback is one of the most important tools we can provide to improve learning. Culturally responsive teachers in digital spaces must make feedback instructive rather than evaluative, specific and in the right dose, timely, and delivered in a low stress, supportive environment (Hammond, 2015, p.103).

- Set a flexible schedule: When working in virtual classrooms, parent and student communication plays a vital role in success. Develop a communication schedule but keep it flexible. Set a goal of one personal, positive communication home with each student family every two weeks. This communication could be a phone call or email. Schedules will keep you accountable, but the flexibility helps meet student needs. Feedback also holds students accountable. It is important to engage culturally and linguistically students with frequent, meaningful feedback to demonstrate high standards and that they are capable learners (Villegas and Lucas, 2007). Feedback also includes information regarding students work. In order to learn, students need to be making meaningful gains towards mastery. Providing instructive, rather than evaluative, feedback helps students take steps towards an end goal. During her school's shut down, Mrs. Gore met frequently with students using the free application Seesaw to assist students with progress. She would monitor progress and set new goals to keep students on task to meet learning targets. At the end of the week, if students meet their individual goals, they enjoyed watching her complete a 'crazy' antic such as letting her dog lick peanut butter from her toes, performing a rap song, and doing a TikTok dance.
- Use communication apps- There are a variety of free communication apps, such as Seesaw, Remind, Kickboard, Google Classroom and Class Dojo among others, that allow teachers to share work, send reminders, and communicate one-on-one with parents. Many apps also incorporate translations features. Ask parents for feedback, too!

Teaching in the middle of a crisis, whether in person or virtually or some combination, is an opportunity to grow and develop in important ways. There are also concerns the progress made in recent years in terms of cultural relevant teaching will be eroded by a time when there are legitimate concerns about equity of access. However, if we, as teachers, embrace the opportunities of technology to connect our students to the world around us, build upon our students' interest, offer choice and provide students feedback to aide in understanding, we are building our culturally diverse students a foundation of success. It is by entering equity in all conversations about school, we will have the opportunity to grow as an education system and ultimately be able to better serve all students on the other side of this, whatever the other side looks like.

Resources

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