Bringing Together a Harmony of Voices

Using the Inside-Out Strategy as a Culturally Responsive Approach to Intertwine Knowledge from Self, Peer, and Text

By Aimee Myers and Jessica Hightower

Aimee Myers currently works with preservice teachers at Texas Woman's University. Previously, she was a phase coordinator for a federal GEAR UP grant that supported underserved urban schools and also spent nine years as a secondary English teacher. She can be reached at amyers8@twu.edu.

Jessica Hightower is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Houston in curriculum and instruction. She serves as the certification officer for University of St. Thomas and is a former secondary social studies teacher. She can be reached at jhighto@stthom.edu.

Abstract: Culturally responsive teaching is often nebulous and challenging for many to integrate in an effective and intentional way. As novice teachers, we struggled with developing tangible ways to actualize culturally responsive teaching. However, through our combined experiences and research, we have gained a better understanding of culturally responsive teaching and ways to apply the concept. We hope to support other teachers who are looking for practical tools for their culturally responsive toolbox. In this article, we introduce an instructional strategy, called Inside-Out, that has benefited us within our own culturally responsive approaches. By utilizing Inside-Out, teachers can use student prior knowledge and lived experiences as resources to bridge together the multiple diversities of the classroom community. For teachers to be culturally responsive to their students, it is important that students become funds of knowledge, and their voices become an essential component to the classroom curriculum. Inside-Out supports students as funds of knowledge by merging three key sources of knowledge: self, peer, and text. Through these multiple viewpoints, our classrooms can be transformed from a predisposed silo of information to an inclusive opus full of multiple harmonies.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, funds of knowledge, diversity, student voice

The TCTELA 2019 conference theme, "Beyond Boots, Borders, and Books: The Many Faces of Literacy in Texas," reminded us that our students come from a vast array of backgrounds, cultures, and identities. This conference gave Texas educators a welcoming, safe space to learn about meeting the needs of students from all backgrounds. It is important that we give our students the same safe, welcoming space to explore their identities and express those identities. In order to better understand how to create inclusive and equitable spaces that engage all students, we can look towards culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as a guide.

Being a culturally responsive teacher is a goal for so many of us working in English language arts classrooms. Jessica and I have worked with both urban and alternative K-12 students for several years, and we learned the significance of creating a space where students feel that they are a part of the learning community. Now, as preservice teacher educators, we work towards supporting others in their knowledge of CRT. Oftentimes, teachers' descriptions of CRT revolve around spirited words like acceptance, empowerment, engaging, respect. However, actualizing these abstract words and making them come to life in the classroom is much more difficult than it seems. The process of actualizing CRT is a common issue many teachers face (Strickland, 2018; Young, 2010). Many times, we fall into a pit of cultural additives where we are tempted to add a new piece of diverse literature that we feel reflects the culture we are teaching. However, CRT encompasses more than just promoting multicultural texts in the classroom; CRT is about process, not just content. While diverse content and topics are important, merely supplementing the curriculum with diverse texts can oversimplify diversity in the classroom or even have detrimental effects on students (Banks, 2008; Ngo, 2010; Vittrup, 2016). Essentially, how we teach is just as important as what we teach.

In this article, we share a learning strategy that has greatly assisted us with supporting culturally responsive approaches for students. The instructional strategy, called Inside-Out, interweaves three

sets of voices: the student (self), the student's classmates (peers), and a published author, artist, or expert (text). These three voices can create a harmony that allows teachers to better navigate and support the various perspectives and experiences held by the diverse students in class.

Utilizing Students as Funds of Knowledge

One step towards being culturally responsive to our students is acknowledging them as funds of knowledge. We use the term "funds of knowledge" to describe our students' knowledge accumulated from their homes, communities, and culture that has developed systems of information, skills, and strategies (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Acknowledging our students as funds of knowledge allows us to better actualize CRT by creating safe spaces where students are heard through respectful listening practices and student voices are interwoven into the curriculum.

When students are recognized as funds of knowledge, we create an inclusive environment where students become a part of the curriculum. Gay (2010) reminds us that to be culturally responsive in the classroom, we "need to create caring learning communities where culturally different individuals are valued; using cultural knowledge of families, communities, and heritages to guide curriculum, classroom climate, instructional strategies, and relationships with students" (p. 31). To support a culturally responsive teaching approach, we must understand that student voices and experiences should be valued as much as the authors we present to them.

In addition, as our classroom communities continue to grow and become dynamic representations of a global world, our approach to teaching and learning has to acquiesce to the needs of our students. In a recent study, Dabach and Fones (2016) found that transnationalism and globalization were at the forefront of many classrooms. Students today come from many different nations and ethnicities. Even in classes that are less transnational, young people are more global than ever before due to social media and the Internet. Dabach and Fones's study indicates that 21st century classrooms "require responsiveness to students' experiences and forms of knowledge that are derived from beyond a U.S. frame of reference" (p. 12). Seeing young people as funds of knowledge can allow us to support the cacophony of diverse voices in the classroom and actualize culturally relevant teaching approaches. In so doing, we are able to bridge the inclusion of student voice to preparing students for a global and interconnected world. By relying on student lived experience as a connected piece of the curriculum, we are opening a door for them to share their authentic selves and make learning relevant and engaging (Stewart, Walker, & Revelle, 2018).

Inside-Out as a Tool for Being Responsive

To assist teachers in developing tangible tools for the CRT toolbox, we started to share an instructional strategy called Inside-Out (K20 Strategies, n.d.). This strategy is a classroom activity that can be used at any grade level and can also be interdisciplinary. Inside-Out in its simplest form is a graphic organizer. The graphic moves students through three steps of approaching a text. The first step is "self"—students think about their own knowledge. This information is recorded in the inner circle. The second step is a "peer" —students turn to an elbow partner and share their own knowledge with each other. Information learned from their peer is recorded in the middle circle. The third step is the "text" —students are given a text from the teacher for exploration. New information gained from the text is now recorded in the last, most outer circle (see Figure 1).

The foundations of Inside-Out are based upon CRT scholarship supported by Geneva Gay (2013) and Gay's call to action for us to begin "teaching to and through our students" (p. 49). For culturally responsive teaching to be authentic, it is important

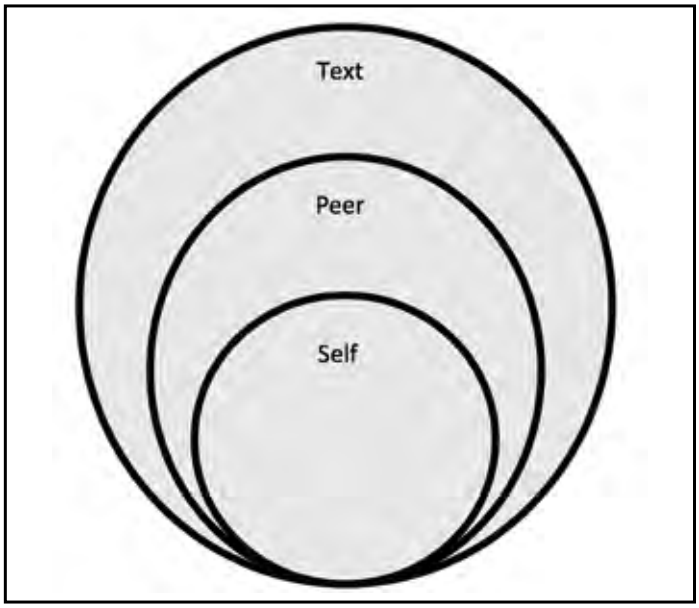

Figure 1. Inside-Out Graphic Organizer

that students become part of the curriculum. We hope to offer content that is a reflection of our students' many backgrounds, but supporting student voice is one of the strongest ways to ensure that our students are reflected in the curriculum. Rather than just reading stories about young people similar to them, our students become the stories.

Inside-Out begins by engaging students' prior knowledge. No matter the concept or topic, the first step of Inside-Out demonstrates to students that we value their lived experiences and knowledge. In the second step, the activity shifts into collaborative knowledge construction between student peers. We not only value their individual experiences, but we also value the learning community. This phase of Inside-Out then becomes the communal aspect of our classroom where we share our experiences, blend our knowledge, and support one another. In her research with teachers becoming sociocultural mediators, Sonia Nieto (2017) calls this community development "building bridges" (p. 131). Steps one and two of Inside-Out assist with building bridges and create a sense of community between students and their lived experiences.

The last step of Inside-Out revolves around a "text." Now that students have shared their own knowledge and learned alongside their peers, we can offer additional knowledge to them with the text. In step three, we have the opportunity to build upon or add depth to students' existing knowledge. Students read a text from fiction or a news article to supplement their knowledge. Step three is where our students interact with more traditional literacy approaches of reading a text. However, an alternative component to step three could be adapting the idea of "text" to support multimodalities. Rather than have traditional texts like poems, stories, and news articles, teachers can offer various "texts" through mediums like photography, art, video clips, and infographics. Since most of our students live in a visually stimulated world, utilizing multimodalities for step three can meet students where they are (Nieto, 2010). Regardless of the "texts" chosen by the teacher, step three of Inside-Out stands on a foundation of student prior knowledge and lived experiences guiding the teachers' understanding of students' connection with the content.

Inside-Out in the Classroom

Inside-Out can be done with any text or modality. We would like to present one way we have used it with students. In this section, Aimee Myers offers an example of how she utilized Inside-Out with her English II students to introduce them to a shift in a novel.

Teaching Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to students can be difficult due to the novel's rural setting and early 20th century language and context. Therefore, it was important to create spaces where students can connect to the novel and address the story's real-world relevant moments. For example, the last few chapters of the novel take a huge shift in both setting and plot with the enormous impact of the hurricane. Hurricanes have a devastating impact on much more than structures; they impact families, schools, food sources, infrastructure, psychological stability, and the economy.

In order for students to understand the character shifts that happen in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* directly due to the aftermath of the hurricane, they needed to have knowledge of the vast and complex effects that hurricanes have on communities. However, rather than giving a lecture to my students about what I knew about hurricanes, I wanted to honor my students as funds of knowledge. Within my class, I had students from several different regions of the country as well as immigrant students. I also had students from a varying range of economic situations, family involvement, and linguistic backgrounds. Each of my students had experienced hurricanes differently and therefore had different levels of knowledge. When my students engaged in the first circle of Inside-Out, each of them brought their economic, regional, linguistic, familial, and lived experiences to the activity.

First, I informed students that we are going to explore hurricanes. I asked the question, "What do you know about hurricanes?" Some had been directly impacted by recent and monumental hurricanes like Katrina. More recently, Hurricane Harvey or Hurricane Rita might be weighing heavily on some of our students, especially in Texas. However, some of my students had only indirect knowledge from media coverage on television or through science textbooks. I wrote the question on the board so they could see the question and stay focused. They were given a few minutes to jot down details of their own knowledge regarding hurricanes. Their thoughts did not need to be complete sentences. This was not a moment for them to showcase skillful writing ability. They needed only to "dump" all their thoughts into the first circle of the Inside-Out graphic. By not focusing on grammar or mechanics, I showed them that I value their knowledge. Knowledge was our focus, not structure.

For example, some students jotted down phrases like "Categories 1 through 5" and "possible flooding." However, some students wrote more personal examples like, "My abuelita could see sunlight through her roof and it took 4 weeks to get it fixed" or "We had to live in a shelter at the church." I reminded them that everyone's first circle looks different. If they had only one thing listed in the circle, that was completely acceptable. If they had fifteen things listed in the circle, that was also acceptable. This was an opportunity to gauge our own knowledge and work communally to build a foundation of new knowledge.

Once students filled their first circle, they found an elbow partner and spent approximately five minutes sharing information with each other. I asked students to listen and learn from their classmates and jot down the new information gathered about hurricanes. Often, this is where I would hear students make comments like, "I didn't even think about how bad it can impact someone's job until I heard someone else's story today. I knew people often lost their houses, but I didn't even think about parents losing their jobs because the building where they work is gone." Once again, they were not required to write in formal English or grammatically correct sentences, and the bilingual students were encouraged to share and discuss in their first language. I wanted students to understand that their sole focus was on their knowledge.

To complete our process in the second circle of the Inside-Out graphic, we took a moment for the class to come together and share the new knowledge we learned. I asked students to share something they learned from a peer rather than share something from their own first circle. This not only encouraged speaking and listening standards, it also showed the students that our individual knowledge and our communal knowledge are valued.

Once the first two circles were completed with knowledge from our experiences, we moved to the last circle. This was where students began reading chapters 18 and 19 of the novel. I informed students that as we progressed through the chapters, they would add new knowledge gained from the text. Some of my students jotted down descriptions of people clashing with wildlife after the storm. They

provided textual examples like the man trapped in the tree due to a rattlesnake or Tea Cake being bitten by the dog. Some students focused heavily on the aftermath of the hurricane and how marginalized groups of people were treated differently even though they were also refugees from the storm. They wrote down details of Tea Cake being forced at gunpoint to help bury the dead rather than being able to assist Janie with finding resources and shelter. These student-driven examples from the text became the springboard for our analysis of character shifts in the novel.

For most of my classes, it took us a day or two to finish the text. However, they continued to add details to their third circle while we read. Once students finished the reading, our Inside-Out graphic became a beautiful harmony of multiple perspectives and voices: ourselves, our peers, and Zora Neale Hurston. The Inside-Out also became a scaffolding tool for us to move towards higher order thinking components like character analysis, narrative shifts, historical contexts, irony, and influence of setting.

Conclusion

As new K-12 classroom teachers, we struggled with being responsive to the needs of our students. We also understood the challenges of abstract teaching concepts like CRT. For this reason, we felt it was important to present our strategy at the 2019 TCTELA conference. We were eager to share a strategy that has greatly benefited our students. Now, in our current work within Texas educator preparation programs, we have seen many preservice teachers eagerly headed into their student teaching assignments wanting to utilize all the components of CRT. However, once in the classroom, our student teachers often lose confidence in how to apply theoretical components of CRT and develop them in tangible ways for their students. It is important that we understand that we can start building some of the foundational components of CRT with first knowing our students, and knowing our students requires listening to them (Warren, 2018). We often have preconceived notions about our students' backgrounds, life experiences, and prior knowledge. However, unless we create safe, communal spaces for perspective sharing, we will struggle with being able to navigate all the different backgrounds in our classrooms, especially when those backgrounds are vastly different than our own.

As teachers move through the three steps of Inside-Out, we merge lived experience with literary discourse. This process allows students to be funds of knowledge and gain a sense that they belong within the stories we explore in class (Fitts, 2009; Genova & Stewart, 2019; Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2018). By allowing students to belong within the stories we explore in class, we are allowing the transition for them to acknowledge their place as global citizens and recognize that their voices and perspectives matter. There is no panacea for CRT issues and each class and group of students you work with will require variations in order to meet their different needs. However, by encouraging the voices of your classroom to soar, a beautiful symphony can be awakened.

References

Banks, J. (2008). *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies.* New York, NY: Allyn & Bacon.

Dabach, D. B., & Fones, A. (2016). Beyond the "English Learner" frame: Transnational funds of knowledge in social studies. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 18*(1), 7-27.

Fitts, S. (2009). Exploring third space in a dual-language setting: Opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 8*(2), 87-104.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry, 43*(1), 48-70.

Genova, H., & Stewart, M. A. (2019). " My life, my stories": Reading, writing, and belonging in the ESL classroom. *English Journal, 108*(3), 34-43.

K20 Strategies. (n.d.). K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal. Retrieved from https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategies

Llopart, M., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2018). Funds of knowledge in 21st century societies: Inclusive educational practices for under-represented students. A literature review. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 50*(2), 145-161.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice, 31*(2), 132–141.

Nieto, S. (2010). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Nieto, S. (2017). Becoming sociocultural mediators: What all educators can learn from bilingual and ESL teachers. *Issues in Teacher Education, 26*(2), 129-141.

Ngo, B. (2010). Doing "diversity" at Dynamic High: Problems and possibilities of multicultural education in practice. *Education and Urban Society, 42*(4), 473-495.

Stewart, M. A., Walker, K., & Revelle, C. (2018). Learning from students: What, why, and how adolescent English learners want to read and write. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education, 6*(1), 23-40.

Strickland, D. L. (2018). Factors relating to the multicultural efficacy and attitudes of teachers. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations.* 1742. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1742

Velez-Ibanez, C. G., & Greenberg, J. B. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among U.S.-Mexican households. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 23*(4), 313-335.

Vittrup, B. (2016). Early childhood teachers' approaches to multicultural education and perceived barriers to disseminating anti-bias messages. *Multicultural Education, 23*(3-4), 37-41.

Warren, C. A. (2018). Empathy, teacher dispositions, and preparation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Teacher Education, 69*(2), 169-183.

Young, E. (2010). Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy: How viable is the theory in classroom practice? *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*(3), 248-260.