



Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

00:06 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey and welcome to the teaching beyond the podium podcast series. This podcast is hosted by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida. Our guests share their best tips, strategies, innovations and stories about teaching. Dr. T is a clinical assistant professor for student personnel in higher education and has always taught in different settings from Sunday school classes to tutoring other students in his undergraduate years. He thought he was going to be a medical doctor, but his path in life and the universe conspired with a slightly different plan. One of the gifts Dr. T brings to the table is his authentic and honest self, the ability to share with others his own challenges and self-doubts in a way that can only serve to encourage us all.

00:53 Dr. Travis Smith

But just a moment of vulnerability. I didn't think I was smart enough to get a PhD. And I used to tell people all the time, like I was told growing up and all throughout my, my life, I wasn't a great writer. And so I suffer from imposter syndrome. And that kind of swayed me away from like the PhD route. And so I was thinking like all of these alternative routes. And so I just came to a point in my life while I was getting my master's degree that I realized, like education was my calling in life, and that's something that I was not going to run from anymore. I remember vividly sitting on my bed, and I was reading the Miseducation of the Negro and the book just came to life. At that moment, I knew that education was it for me. And so I accepted the calling and I was determined that I wasn't going to allow previous people or influences or even my own internal beliefs to deter me from achieving this goal.

01:46 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

His own experiences along with the work of Dr. Gay in the 1990s, helps to frame everything that Dr. T does in the classroom. Dr. T uses an approach called culturally responsive teaching, or CRT, which focuses on the strength each student brings to the class.

02:03 Dr. Travis Smith

So we do use culturally relevant teaching culturally responsive teaching interchangeably. And it's all building off of the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and other scholars in the early 90s in regards to culturally relevant pedagogy. And so it's all kind of like a combination of this really innovative way to center students. That's the premise of this approach. And so Dr. Gay defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnic diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. And so in a nutshell, for me, when I think about CRT, and I'm just gonna use the acronym, you know, here out, I think about the idea of removing myself and my biases as a teacher, and centering the experiences of students. And so who are my students? How do my students learn? How do my students engage with the environments around them? What norms what, what expectations? What cultural pieces? What capital do they bring to the classroom? And how do I use the capital that they bring into the classroom, to engage and challenge them in the process of learning? And so for me, that's the beauty of education. It's seeing every student that walks through your doors in your classroom, as an individual, as a human, as somebody that has capital and not seeing them from a deficit, meaning not seeing them for what they lack, but seeing them for the beauty that they bring to the classroom. And so for me, that's kind of how I engage and how I define CRT in the courses that I teach.

03:41 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Culturally responsive teaching is centered on a few key strategies. The first aspect and one of the most important ones is to become culturally aware, gain an understanding of our students as individuals.

03:53 Dr. Travis Smith

The first one is all about developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity. So you can't teach what you don't know. And so as a, as a teacher, the onus is on us, right as educators to make sure that we're learning as much about the students and their cultural backgrounds, the communities in which they thrive in, the communities in which they are around, and also the barriers that they're facing, so that we can also address those barriers inside the classroom.

04:20 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Getting to know your students and their culture is really only the first step. The second is really about caring for your students. In fact, research on excellence in teaching has

shown that the teachers students perceive as the very best teachers are those whose students feel care about them as individuals. That is a central trait of culturally responsive teaching.

04:42 Dr. Travis Smith

So this is the empathetic piece it's not the white savior complex. It's not you saying you're a superhero, but it's literally about you telling and showing the students that you care. There's like this old proverb people don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care. And so the first thing is all about building relationships and letting the students know that, hey, we're in this together, I have your best interests at heart, we're going to collectively build out this course and learn together in a caring, and empathetic way. And that comes from building learning communities. And so doing away with this European competition-style learning, which means someone has to be the best, and someone has to be the worst. And to transform it to a community to where we all can engage together and support one another in a conducive, productive type of environment, right? Thinking about one thing I tell my students all the time, everybody can get an A, Dr. T doesn't have one A to give out. There's no bell curve, right? Everyone can grow, everyone can learn, everyone can succeed in this course, it's all about community.

05:46 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Part of caring for students is to be able to communicate with them in a way that is meaningful and understandable to them. This is really about meeting students where they are and seeing the differences as strengths rather than deficits.

06:00 Dr. Travis Smith

So it's important that we're not forcing students to communicate the way in which we see the world, but allowing students to communicate and bring their cultural norms into the classroom. And so thinking about this idea of correct grammar, correct English, and what does that look like? And so, you know, from just from a landmass example of the United States. Depending on where you are, there are different vernaculars. Right? And so how do we honor these different vernaculars, as you probably can hear, I have an Alabama vernacular, right? And so just thinking, how do you honor that without shaming students, right. And so I've seen a lot of teachers, and I've seen this, particularly in some of the workshops, they're so hell-bent on quote unquote, teaching correct English, that they dishonor the vernacular and miss an opportunity to incorporate that vernacular, that slang into learning opportunities for the students, especially if that's the way they communicate. And so if that's how they communicate in their communities, then we can use that as a strength into the classroom with learning. So it's important

that we really understand how students communicate. And so even from a, moving from a linguistic piece to more of a physical piece, some students it's okay and it's normal that they get hugs, right, that's a part of the community or handshakes, or that's how students communicate. And so if you don't understand that, then you could be missing out. Or you could also be doing unintentional harm to the culture of the classroom. Communication is central to culturally responsive teaching. But it is also important to be aware of the various ways our students may learn. Culturally responsive teaching, according to Dr. T, transforms the classroom into a collaborative space that allows students to learn in ways that work best for them. Also responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. And that means honoring the learning styles. And so you have to know that every student that comes into the classroom, especially from a marginalized identity has unique learning styles, and how do we identify what those learning styles are, and be flexible as educators adhere or address those learning styles with our modalities? And so as an educator, I don't believe it's my responsibility to present one modality and make students fit into my mold. I think it should be a collaborative approach to say how do you best learn? How do you best retain information? How do you best synthesize information and allow me as the expert in modality, that's what I think educators should be, right? Experts and pedagogy experts in modality. Allow me to create the modality and the pedagogies around how you learn. While also understanding that it's important just because you might not like a certain style, that I still introduce you to that style so that I can challenge you beyond your comfort zone. And so it's kind of like a balance beam, I have to honor your learning style, while also introducing you to other learning styles, so that we can kind of continue to grow in this idea of learning as a lifelong process.

08:56 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

In addition, Dr. T suggests that many of us already use culturally responsive teaching concepts in our work and may be able to translate them to our various teaching environments.

09:07 Dr. Travis Smith

You're looking at instructional engagement, cultural language, and racial identity. Multicultural awareness, having high expectations, introducing critical thinking, and then this concept of social justice or restorative justice. And so embedding all of those concepts into content you're teaching, and so it can be embedded into math, it can be embedded into English, it can be embedded into writing, whatever it may be, you can embed all of these concepts into CRT from a modality standpoint.

09:38 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Dr. T is intentional in creating a class where all students can see themselves. He starts even before the semester by having students contribute music that best represents them.

09:49 Dr. Travis Smith

Before we start, I asked students to submit their top three favorite songs and I build the class playlist. And before every class starts at play, I do a shuffle of the class playlist So that's a way for students to show their classmates, this is how I express myself through music. These are my, my songs that I have my choice, while also they're walking into the space and their favorite song might be playing. And so that kind of sets the vibe for the class that this is an introduction, the first five minutes, I already see myself in this class. And so I try to be intentional to make sure every song plays throughout the semester so that everyone can hear, hear their song, and that they can, you know, share like students are now we're virtual, for the most part. And students are always saying, Oh, that's my song. That's my top song.

10:33 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Dr. T suggests that when we first consider getting started using culturally responsive teaching in our classrooms, we should ask ourselves a few key questions that can guide how we structure our class and interactions.

10:46 Dr. Travis Smith

Questions that we would ask faculty or educators - What does it look like to create a collaborative teaching environment? So that's number one. What does it look like to provide responsive feedback, so not just dinging students on grading, but also providing feedback that's responsive, that's calling attention to areas of opportunity while also building students up? Also, this idea of modeling. And so how can I show you examples? And how can we, as a class engage in practical examples, so that we can make sure that we're not just talking from a philosophical theoretical lens, but we're also providing real world community-based examples, or whatever the content that we're teaching? And then this idea of instructional scaffolding, we do know that students are going to come to us at various levels. And so how do we create individualized education plans for each student, let's say, this is where you're starting off. And that's totally okay. Like, this is how you come into this space. And now let's build where we already are. So not creating this new foundation, as if students don't come to us with concrete already laid, right? The concrete is there, we just need to identify the concrete and then build on the concrete base of what the student desires are.

12:03 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Culturally responsive teaching can feel overwhelming, given there are so many strategies and approaches one can take. Asking the questions Dr. T mentioned and then developing a plan of approach is most helpful.

12:16 Dr. Travis Smith

Don't get lost in the sauce. So that means don't get lost in the concept of I really want to do CRT, like I really want to do this, I really just I want to shine. That's not the premise of CRT, like, it's not a glorified type of thing it's not for you to get patted on the back, it's really an internal journey of self, to be honest with you. And so my first rule for engaging with CRT for any educator that wants to start is check yourself before you wreck yourself. So you have to do a self-reflection of how do I come into this space? How do I come into this space? An honest reflection of how do I currently see the world? How do I currently see my students? And once you do that, and be 100% honest with yourself, I think that sets the stage for you creating a plan of, first I need to undo these things. Before I even start engaging people, I see these students from this lens, and that's not healthy, that's not equitable. And so let me start working on this.

13:18 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Dr. T points out that this approach is not only a self-reflection, but also conducting research on who your students are. This is central to creating collaborative learning environments and experiences. Collaboration can't happen without a deep understanding of self and others.

13:35 Dr. Travis Smith

The second thing is you really have to do an ethnographic approach to understanding who's in the classroom. Who are you teaching? Who are their families? Who are their communities? And why are they here? Why do they show up every day? And so from there, you're doing research on yourself, you're doing research on your students. Once you understand self, once you understand students, then the rest is easy, because the students are going to tell you how they learn. The students and tell you what they want and what they don't want. The students are going to tell you what the norms are. The students are going to really be open to tell you everything that you need to design the course. And so I think those are the two steps that if you do the self-reflection, if you do the research on your students, with your students, learning more about them, then you can start designing collaborative teaching. You can't design a collaborative approach if you don't know what the students want. You can't design responsive feedback if you don't know how they receive feedback. You can't design modeling if you don't know

what they care about. You can create a model but if they're not engaged, and if it's not something that's relevant to them, then they're just going to be practicing another class assignment. Right? You can't engage instructional scaffolding if you don't understand the basis and the benchmark to where your students are coming from. And so from there, then you start creating problem solving approaches. Right? Then you start creating student centered instruction based off of the information you have. Then you can start creating different types of assessment that can fairly and justly measure where students are. And then you can create your course materials based off of the interest of your students.

15:14 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

There are a number of misconceptions about culturally responsive teaching, including that it's only applicable in the K through 12 setting. However, Dr. T argues that it can be used in all classroom settings and at all levels. His work demonstrates that this is not only feasible, but highly successful.

15:31 Dr. Travis Smith

Some people look at a CRT is only a K 12 thing, meaning it can't be done on a collegiate level. And so I'm that crazy faculty member that I believe it can be. And I do it. And so I pushed myself to do it in the Ph. D course. And one way that we did it, we were going over how to create scholarly arguments. And so students had an assignment coming up in regards to a paper in our diversity issues and higher ed course. And so I want to make sure that our students understood this idea of APA writing and how to make a thesis statement and provide strong evidence, right, based off of citations behind it. And so students were put into groups. And the assignment was they had to create a paragraph using a thesis statement and supporting evidence for a scholarly argument based off of music genres. And so we incorporated music genres, and I gave them themes to write about. So basically, they had to go find song lyrics, and cite song lyrics accordingly, using parenthetical citations, as well as paraphrasing. And so they were able to bring in their cultural aspect in regards to music in regards to genres to actually prove a point while also learning how to make a scholarly development. And then they read the paragraphs out in front of the class. And it was just kind of like an aha moment that number one, when I asked the students their takeaways from the assignment, the very first thing they say, I did not know you could bring in secular assignments to teach us how to write scholarly, right, because they still had to make the thesis statement. And in what what's your claim, they still had to go find song lyrics as if they were research articles, right, and use those direct quotations or paraphrase. And then they still had to kind of do a conclusion sentence. And so all of that allowed the students to give it to whichever group they wanted, they felt comfortable with in regards to the genre music, whether it was hip hop, R&B, whether it was country, whether it was

blues, or jazz, they all chose whichever group they wanted to do. And they were able to bring a piece of them and show a piece of them.

17:33 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Dr. T sees the impact in his classes and through his students, but he's not the only one. Research on culturally responsive teaching shows the consistent impact this approach has on student learning.

17:46 Dr. Travis Smith

We do know that research shows us that students that engage in this type of teaching style exhibit higher learning outcomes, whatever those learning outcomes may be, right. And I'm really generalizing that out because there have been crazy studies for different content areas. And they're all basically saying students learn, right, students' self-perceptions, engagement, satisfaction with engaging in learning are higher. What I've personally seen is a really unique relationship with learning that students take away. And so when students can see themselves in the classroom, when they can see themselves in the course material, I think we reach potentially this utopia idea of learning to where learning at this stage is more so an individual journey. And I think that's the goal of learning is not necessarily this idea, did you master these outcomes? Did you obtain x, y, and z? I think the goal of learning is for each individual students to have a lightbulb moment to say I'm understanding this, I can apply this, and this is what it looks like in my life. And so that, to me is the most beautiful part of engaging in CRT is this idea that every individual student takes something away from the course, that's real world, applicable that they can apply to a real-world situation, that they are more advanced than when they entered the space meaning they quote unquote, learn something or advanced in their ability to solve problems. While also a sense of self. A sense of honoring self, a sense of self pride to where students feel validated. They feel like I can do this. I am doing this and there is more to come.

19:37 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Students still recall their experiences in Dr. T's classes, and those experiences are still shaping them today.

19:45 Dr. Travis Smith

I've had several students, especially my high school students, kind of reach back out to me hey, you know, Dr. T – it's funny because they used to call me Mr. Smith. Oh, hey,

Dr. T., you know, I'm graduating college and here's an example of what we learned how you taught me how to do XYZ. And this course is so easy now. The last four years, it was always filled with, thank you so much for, you know, pushing me, you're challenging me to do X, Y, and Z. Or I see, you know, there's trending response topics on Twitter and Facebook, like name a teacher that would do X, Y, and Z. And then I always get tagged in those particular threads. And so that's really refreshing to see students engage in their learning at a college level, and then long after college. I'm now getting calls and text messages in regards to like careers and students being in their careers and saying I incorporated this, or I started this program based off of what you said. So I have a lot of students that have started kind of like mentoring programs similar to what my nonprofit does, they've started their own business. So that's something we talked about, but that that's what it's about.

20:53 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Thank you for listening to this episode of the teaching beyond the podium podcast series. For more helpful resources developed by the Center for Teaching Excellence at UF, visit our website teach.ufl.edu. We're happy you joined us, and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.