

# Five Competencies for Culturally Competent Teaching and Learning

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Today's classrooms require that instructors possess competencies for teaching all students. Robust instructional strategies and culturally sensitive curricula are critical, but more important is an instructor who is sensitive and responsive to the unique differences of each student. Recognizing the need to strengthen specific competencies to reach and teach all students requires an understanding of new ideas and a willingness to view instruction through varied cultural lenses.

**1. Culturally competent teaching and learning facilitates critical reflection.** A critical analysis of one's own cultural assumptions is foundational to culturally-responsive teaching and learning. Critical reflection on tightly held cultural assumptions is necessary to dislodge misconceptions and stereotypes. Culturally-responsive teaching engages students in self-awareness activities that lead to reflection on cultural assumptions. For example, in situations where beliefs about learning vary diametrically, there may be serious misunderstandings. When one student believes his learning is unrelated to timely arrival to class and another student views punctuality as a sign of respect, or when one student asks many questions and another quietly wrestles with issues in the content, each may struggle with respect or acceptance of the others. While all may be learning, each may view the others as lazy, disruptive, or disrespectful. Diverse instructional groupings allow students to learn about individual differences and to reflect on their own assumptions and beliefs.

**2. Culturally competent teaching and learning demands respect for others.** Every student possesses a unique cultural background. Experiences based on various traditions, norms, and values inform ways of knowing and learning. Learning communities with many ways of knowing and learning benefit everyone. When there is little diversity, the overwhelming presence of "whiteness" may be intimidating to students of color and English Language Learners (ELLs) and may serve to silence their voices. Culturally responsive methods such as inter-cultural communication stimulate respect for the needs of all learners and allow every voice to be heard.

**3. Culturally competent teaching and learning involves accommodating individual learners.** Respect for the learner is a critical component of effective teaching. In addition to pedagogical and subject matter knowledge, competent instructors relate well to their students and possess dispositions such as compassion, fairness, integrity and respect for diversity. Teaching that is respectful and learner focused will naturally involve individual accommodations.

Good teachers not only learn from, but learn about their students. Learning about the cultures and languages of individual students provides a foundation for implementing effective accommodations that facilitate learning. Learning about students involves listening to them, interacting with them, and modeling for them. Effective accommodations for diverse students may include extra time on exams to accommodate the additional load on mental processing, exams in another room where students are able to write, read aloud, then revise their answers to test questions, or time to verbally elaborate on their written responses with the instructor.

**4. Culturally competent teaching and learning requires the use of intercultural communication skills.** Culturally competent instructors are willing to learn from their students; they recognize the potential of intercultural communication as a means for enhancing the learning of the entire learning community. Effective communication with others who are linguistically and culturally different includes the use of techniques like active listening, elaboration, paraphrasing, and restatement.

Active listening is a process where both the sender and receiver are fully engaged, the listener is focused and attentive, and distractions are minimized. Active listening strategies are especially important when participants speak different languages. Intercultural communication strategies such as active listening inform learning and facilitate critical reflection.

**5. Culturally competent teaching and learning requires focused activities and intentionally structured environments.** Perspective-taking behavior requires an understanding of norms, values, and traditions that have informed the other's worldview and learning behaviors. Ranking the value of ideas such as tradition, religion, independence, education, work, health, respect, honesty, food, etc. and a review of personal rankings with other class members may lead to meaningful conversations. Such activities may encourage students to engage in critical reflection on deeply held assumptions related to values and beliefs. Intentional groupings of students with others from different racial groups have been shown to have a positive impact on students—especially white students. A study by Chang (1996) demonstrated that college students are more likely to discuss racial issues when they are part of a diverse student body and when they participate in racially diverse groups in class.

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**Reference:** Chang, M. (1996). *Racial Diversity in Higher Education: Does a Racially Mixed Student Population Affect Educational Outcomes?* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles).