

Engaging Head, Hand, and Heart:

Lessons From a Caribbean Social- work Degree Program

The wholistic development of students is the bedrock of Seventh-day Adventist education.¹ The Adventist philosophy of education encapsulates this intent, as it promotes the expectation that students will not only grow intellectually, but also spiritually and physically as a result of each course of study.² This unique approach to education is intended to serve the dual purpose of preparing the student for useful service on earth as well as for eternal life in heaven.³

The wholistic orientation of Adventist education appears to be mirrored in Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), a pedagogical approach that seeks to use the culture of the student as a vehicle for effective instruction. Gloria Ladson-Billings, one of the early proponents of CRT, describes it as a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes.”⁴ Similarly,

Gay indicated that CRT addresses “different types of learning (cognitive, physical, emotional) . . . in concert.”⁵

A recognition of the wholistic focus of CRT led the author to the following questions, which will be addressed in this article: Can CRT be used to achieve the wholistic development of tertiary students, as conceptualized by the Adventist philosophy of education? What steps, reflecting CRT, might lecturers take to target the cognitive, attitudinal, and psycho-motor domains of students? The exploration of the melding of the philosophy of head, heart, and hand with CRT will draw upon the experiences of a social-work degree program at the University of the Southern Caribbean (USC), a private seven-campus Seventh-day Adventist university.

Context

Trinidad and Tobago is a two-island nation at the southernmost tip of the archipelago of the Caribbean islands. Its approximately 1.4 million population⁶ is comprised of persons of East Indian heritage (35.4 percent), African

heritage (34.2 percent), mixed heritage (22.8 percent), and persons of other heritages (1.6 percent).⁷ While acculturation has led to the creation of a unique blend of cultures, ethnic groups continue to demonstrate cultural practices that reflect their heritage in food, music, dance, and dress.

The University of the Southern Caribbean was established in Trinidad in 1927. Over its 90-year existence, it has expanded its operations and currently offers undergraduate and graduate programs on two campuses in Trinidad and one on each of the following islands: Tobago, Antigua, Barbados, Guyana, and St. Lucia.

The social-work program is offered at four campuses: Trinidad (both campuses), Tobago, and St. Lucia. An analysis of the students in the social-work program reveals both cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity. Although the students are predominantly from the Caribbean, they originate from different islands, each of which has unique cultural patterns.

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The cultural heterogeneity of students is also derived from the diversity of their ethnic backgrounds (race and religion) and geographic locations (inner city, suburban, and rural).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching, also termed *culturally relevant teaching*, is based on the premise that students from ethnic minority groups experience disadvantages in most education systems since the instructional techniques, materials, and language used in the classroom generally favor the ethnic majority. Students from all ethnic groups may achieve academic success if professors adjust their approaches to embrace diversity instead of expecting diverse groups to accommodate to the majority culture. Gay presented CRT as a strengths-based approach that “[uses] the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”⁸ Ladson-Billings noted that CRT goes beyond academic success by engendering positive attitudes in students toward their own culture, as well as helping students develop critical inquiry into structural inequities.⁹ In order to achieve its goals, CRT addresses four aspects of teaching: the curriculum, teachers’ attitudes, communication approaches, and instructional strategies; all of which must incorporate or demonstrate sensitivity to cultural issues.¹⁰

While literature on CRT has focused on primary and secondary education,¹¹ the approach is also relevant to tertiary education. Ferdinand, writing about the experience of international students in a graduate program in the United States, noted that the students experienced “much intellectual and cultural bondage with a U.S.-centric curriculum . . . that does not fully prepare them for today’s global marketplace.”¹² She also indicated that using a curriculum that favors the majority culture increases the risk of “lack of motivation among [international] students.”¹³

Because most of the students at USC

come from the Caribbean, is the concept of culturally responsive teaching still relevant? Yes. Culturally responsive teaching in the Caribbean context is complex and multi-layered. Since students of the social-work program are a heterogeneous group, CRT can tap into the various ethnic backgrounds to achieve more effective communication and instruction. A more critical issue: Most social-work knowledge and re-

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search are produced in a context and culture foreign to Caribbean students. Unless the curriculum is adapted and the content presented in a way that addresses the unique conditions of the society in which it is used (indigenization), information may be accepted unquestioningly (transmission model).¹⁴ The resolution of this issue is not, therefore, to dismiss knowledge created in other contexts but to develop more effective strategies for assisting students in engaging with the “foreign” knowledge, as well as stimulating the production of local knowledge (authentication).¹⁵ By using CRT at the tertiary

level, Caribbean cultural knowledge and experiences can be employed as an instrument for critical analysis and the application of the knowledge developed in other contexts.

Engaging the Head

Culturally relevant teaching enhances the educational experience of students by using cultural experiences as vehicles for knowledge acquisition.¹⁶ Students become more invested in the learning process because they perceive the information as relevant to their lives. What are some ways that CRT can be used to achieve cognitive engagement among tertiary students?

Cognitive engagement through CRT begins with the program structure and percolates throughout the program via the curriculum, as well as the teaching and assessment methods. At USC, the social-work program was originally designed to incorporate two courses that highlighted issues relevant to the Caribbean¹⁷ as well as a course that focused on diversity issues.¹⁸ This was done to address the lack of content specific to the region. The inclusion of these courses in the program communicated a general commitment to culturally relevant content. Over the period of the program’s existence, culturally relevant material has been purposefully integrated into additional courses.

In addition to providing content about uniquely Caribbean experiences and those of various subcultures and ethnic groups within the Caribbean, students are introduced to structural social work (study of the causes for social and ethical problems) and empowerment, which are both based on the conflict perspective. Students are, therefore, encouraged to think critically about the experiences of both dominant and marginalized groups and to analyze the extent to which structural social issues impact relationships among groups.

Cultural content is incorporated in USC social-work courses using multiple methods. In the early stages of teaching concepts/theories, lecturers

provide examples, using familiar cultural content. Lecturers also create case scenarios, using diverse cultural contexts, and have students apply the concepts/theories to these scenarios. Lecturers engage students in providing examples and generating case scenarios, based on their own personal knowledge of various cultural settings. This not only assists students in applying the information to their own contexts, but also exposes them to multiple cultural contexts, expanding their comprehension of both the concept and the cultural practices.

However, Gay warns that there is a need to go beyond the inclusion of “ethnic content” to make “radical changes . . . in the instructional process”¹⁹ that challenge students to engage in critical thinking related to the content. Thus, the lecturers use discussion approaches that encourage exploration of the relevance and utility of concepts/theories within the Caribbean setting, as well as the structural context of experiences. However, this often produces a dilemma for the teacher. While some students are keen to engage in critique and debate, others express a preference for the “certainty” of directed instruction. It becomes the lecturer’s responsibility to articulate the value of critical thinking and find ways to reward it in order to stimulate this desired behavior.

Unless assessment methods support culturally relevant teaching, a disconnect will occur among the course content, teaching methods, and course assessment. One of the assessments for a core course required students to share their understanding of a concept/theory taught in the class, using a cultural method of their choice—for example, calypso, spoken word (performance) poetry, or even simply using the dialect of their country to explain the concepts.²⁰ Students have also engaged in projects requiring the creation of Caribbean-based models that closely match the cultural context. These activities lead to deeper reflection and application of the information to which students are exposed in the classroom.

The experience at USC revealed that cognitive engagement is most effective

when cultural elements are immersed in the program, the curricula, and the teaching methods, as well as the assessment methods. This wholistic approach to the use of culturally relevant teaching creates multiple levels of engagement for the student, thereby enhancing its effectiveness.

Occupying the Hand

The integration of manual labor in the curriculum is an integral part of the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education.²¹ Manual labor provides exercise,²² teaches practical skills,²³ equips students with abilities that can be used to earn a living,²⁴ and helps them to develop greater depth in thinking.²⁵ The secular version of CRT does not aim to achieve physical development through manual labor in the manner envisioned by the Adventist philosophy of education. It does, however, aim to transcend academic pursuits by engaging students in activities that challenge the status quo and contribute to social change. “The transformative agenda of culturally responsive teaching [seeks to develop] social consciousness, intellectual critique, and political and personal efficacy in students so that they can combat prejudices, racism, and other forms of oppression and exploitation.”²⁶ In social work, the confrontation of social -isms (ageism, classism, racism, sexism, etc.) is central to the mission of the field of study and is embodied in the core value of social justice.²⁷ Involvement in activities that further these core values often incorporates physical activity, which is different from the cognitive endeavors that typically characterize tertiary academic experiences.

Richards, Brown, and Forde note that the work of culturally responsive teachers is to prepare students, not only in the classroom but also for “meaningful and responsible participation . . . in the society.”²⁸ The vision of having students engage with changing the wider society can be integrated in classroom assessments. USC social-work students have, for example, been given classroom as-

signments that required them to engage with various local agencies in addressing issues relevant to the community. However, the ultimate vision of the lecturer is to achieve long-lasting change in students’ attitudes, so that they embrace the value of service and social justice as their *raison d’être*. This requires that they provide students with opportunities for engagement even when there is limited academic reward. Currently, the social-work department provides opportunities for students to create and implement outreach activities during the week surrounding World Social Work Day. In the future, the department hopes to implement year-long opportunities for such engagement.

Shaping of the Heart

Culturally relevant teaching actively seeks to change students’ attitudes by helping them develop an appreciation for their culture as well as the cultures of other persons.²⁹ In keeping with Banks’ multicultural education framework, CRT seeks to reduce students’ prejudices.³⁰ Attitudinal change is, however, much harder to achieve than cognitive development, as it is less tangible and more intractable. Students enter the university with attitudes that have been formed and coalesced over a period of years, and which continue to be reinforced each time they exit the walls of the institution and return to their communities. So, how can attitudinal change be fostered?

For attitudinal change to be achieved, students need to become aware of their own perspectives and attitudes. The social-work lecturers at USC routinely provide students with opportunities for discussion and teach them to engage in reflective practice. They are led to explore the sources of their own stereotypes, biases, and prejudices and to identify the triggers for discriminatory actions by themselves and others. Additionally, students are introduced to professional standards relating to the dignity and worth of the individual and the principles of acceptance, non-judgmentalism, and individualization. Students are encouraged to grapple with these concepts, with

the goal of integrating them as part of their professional and personal lives.

Social-work lecturers purposefully create a classroom climate that fosters respect for diversity. Ground rules are established collaboratively at the beginning of each course and reinforced throughout the semester. Students rarely are overtly disrespectful of others in the class. However, they sometimes make disparaging comments about marginalized groups, assuming that no one in the class is a member of those groups. Such comments are decisively but compassionately addressed by reminding students of the class norms and of the possibility that other students in the class, faculty and staff, and those in surrounding communities may be members of the group(s) about which they made the disparaging comment.

Lecturers must have a commitment to listening to students' concerns and responding appropriately. If a lecturer elevates cognitive engagement above attitudinal change, he or she may be too preoccupied with pedagogical tasks to hear when students hints at the impact living in an inner-city community has on his or her ability to settle into or adapt to the college/university environment. A lecturer who is prepared to listen to students' hints at cultural identification becomes better able to encourage them to expand on their experiences, to model sensitive and respectful responses, and to help the rest of the class to gain a deeper understanding of the various cultures.

Using CRT, the staff shape the hearts of students through consistently treating each one with sensitivity, tact, and openness, as well as by reflecting the ethic of care that is characteristic of CRT, and creating a classroom where respect is practiced.

This section has focused on achieving attitudinal change through culturally relevant teaching. However, the Adventist philosophy of education aims to go beyond attitudinal change to foster spiritual growth, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Can CRT achieve this goal?

It must be emphasized that the secular version of CRT does not aim to de-

velop the student spiritually. However, in the context of a Christian institution, it is possible to use examples drawn from Christ's life and other stories from the Bible to introduce and reinforce attitudes of compassion and acceptance toward persons from other groups. For example, in one course, students are required to explain how one or more social-work principles were modelled in Christ's life. The most popular example has been that of Christ's approach to the woman caught in adultery, as

outlined in John 8:1-11, which reflects the principles of acceptance and non-judgmental attitudes. Creative melding of the Christian belief system with CRT can, therefore, foster positive attitudes regarding diverse groups.

Conclusion

In applying CRT to the development of the head, heart, and hand as envisioned by Adventist education, it is apparent that cognitive engagement is the easiest aspect to integrate. While it may be more challenging for teachers

Recommendations for Teachers in Other Disciplines

The Head

The application of CRT at the tertiary level is not limited to the field of social work, nor is it limited to the teacher. Although teachers are on the front line of implementation, they achieve greater success when there is institutional and administrative buy-in and support. A lecturer may creatively apply the cognitive component of CRT to another field of study by using the following process:

- Reflecting on the cultural contexts of the students;
- Deliberately incorporating elements of the various cultural backgrounds in the examples used to present the information;
- Encouraging students to apply the knowledge to their cultural contexts;
- Engaging students in analyzing the applicability and relevance of the knowledge to their cultural contexts;
- Requiring students to demonstrate their ability to apply the knowledge taught in the course using cultural referents.

The Hand

Engaging students in physical activities, typically manual labor, is a unique aspect of the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education. Some Adventist institutions require all students to participate in extracurricular non-credit courses that involve manual labor. Students also have regular courses that include a service component such as service-learning, volunteer opportunities, and community service (which can include manual, physical labor).

The Heart

Attitudinal transformation is a high priority in social-work programs. While not all programs intentionally seek to help students address personal stereotypes and biases, classrooms where a culture of respect and openness is cultivated will provide multiple benefits for students. To achieve such a classroom, the following approaches may be used:

- Teachers may establish and reinforce ground rules of respect for diversity and acceptance of persons from various cultural backgrounds.
- Teachers who are employed at Seventh-day Adventist or other Christian institutions can deliberately use examples from the Bible to highlight attitudes of compassion toward diverse cultural groups. This may be done during the devotional period at the start of class, or the concepts may be integrated in the lesson.
- Teachers must engage in self-reflection to ascertain whether they accept stereotypes or hold prejudices and, if necessary, address them.

to achieve attitudinal transformation than cognitive engagement, this is possible if they use the ethic of care embodied in CRT. However, the spiritual transformation expected in the Adventist philosophy can be fostered only in organizational contexts that support this philosophy. The original version of CRT was not designed to achieve the goal of physical development through manual labor as conceptualized in the Adventist philosophy of education. However, the psycho-motor domain may be included through the integration of activities that engage students in working outside the classroom, within the community, to address critical social issues.

A wholistic approach to the use of CRT can have a positive effect on students that extends beyond their academic tenure as they make a lifelong commitment to embrace a culturally sensitive lifestyle. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



Kernita-Rose Bailey, MSW, is an experienced social worker who has worked in the fields of medical social work, HIV/AIDS, children and family services, and education. At the time of writing this article, she was a Lecturer in Social Work and chaired the Department of Social Work at the University of the Southern Caribbean in Trinidad. She has published in the areas of HIV/AIDS and social-work education.

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16. Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, 27.
17. The courses, Introduction to Social Work in the Caribbean and Social Work Issues in the Caribbean, were incorporated in the social-work program from its inception.
18. The course, Values, Ethics, and Diversity, includes a focus on issues of diversity.
19. Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, 30.
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