

## Reimagining UNISA's Open Distance Learning through the Lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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### Abstract

Currently, Unisa's Open Distance Learning (ODL) student population can be divided into three distinct generational groups of people (Baby Boomers, X Generation (Xers) and Y Generation). Despite the time and resources committed to higher education improvement, there is a real danger of a cultural and generational gap becoming a wedge issue in Unisa Open Distance Learning's (ODL) teaching and learning. In this article, we argue that there is a pressing need to close the cultural and generational divide in ODL within a framework that is compatible and relevant to the cultural contexts of the three distinct generational groups. Generational and cultural divides have an impact on teaching and learning. This article draws from Gloria Ladson-Billings's and Geneva Gay's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework and the works of Bourdieu. It proposes reimagining Unisa's ODL through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Open Distance Learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, generational divide, culture

### 1. Introduction

One of the key functions of public schooling is to develop and promote shared cultural values, national identity and loyalty to local community (Ullah, 2012). However, bridging cultural and generational divides in teaching and learning remains a global concern. The diversity of recent teaching and learning environments is continuing to change dramatically. For example, today Unisa's open distance learning (ODL) student population can be divided into three distinct generational groups of people (Baby Boomers, X Generation [Xers] and Y Generation). Despite the time and resources committed to higher education improvement, there is a real danger of the cultural and generational gap acting as a wedge between generations in Unisa's ODL teaching and learning, as current teaching and learning activities do not embrace cultural and generational issues. With the emergence of social media and new communication technologies in higher education it is critical to embrace this cultural and generational revolution in the teaching and learning activities contained in tutorial letters.

Arguably, all human beings have certain life stages in common, but no one generation approaches them in the same way. Central to this article is the assumption that educational practices must match the students' culture in ways which ensure a generation of academically important behaviours. Notwithstanding the challenges inherent in access to, and the cost and quality of ICT infrastructure, we argue that there is a critical need to close the cultural and generational divide in ODL within a framework that is compatible and relevant to the cultural contexts of the three distinct generational groups, as generational and cultural divides impact on teaching and learning. One possibility is relocating Unisa's ODL within the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) framework – a framework that operates at a contextual level. Despite its limitations, CRP provides a persuasive theoretical and methodological underpinning for this discourse. While keeping in mind other teaching and learning theories, this discourse acknowledges that CRP alone cannot solve all the problems of improving the challenges of ODL. Other aspects of the higher educational enterprise (such as funding, administration and policy making) must be reformed, and major changes be made to support CRP in an ODL setting.

A considerable amount of literature sees CRP as being essential in addressing the needs of today's diverse student population. In this article, we propose reimagining Unisa's ODL through the lens of CRP. Drawing from Gloria Ladson-Billings' and Geneva Gay's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework and the works of Bourdieu, this article: (1) investigates the philosophical background of CRP; (2) explores the notion of cultural responsiveness as a generational imperative; (3) argues for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as being transformative and emancipatory; and (4) proposes reimagining Unisa's ODL through the lens of CRP.

## 2. Philosophical Background of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

It would seem appropriate to begin this discussion by asking *What is culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP)?* CRP, also called culturally sensitive pedagogy, is not a new concept and has a rich history. Research indicates that the term culturally relevant pedagogy is used interchangeably with several terms, such as culturally responsive, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent and culturally compatible, to describe effective pedagogy in culturally diverse classrooms. It is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1992a; 1992b; 1994a; 1994b; 2001). Gay (2000:29) defines CRP as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Among others, CRP has had an immense influence through the works of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Elizabeth Moje, Kathleen Hinchman and Coffey Heather. The proponents' works perhaps offer important theoretical considerations in the development of culturally sensitive teaching approaches.

At the heart of CRP is the assumption that culture is fundamental to learning. Culture refers to the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artefacts that members of society use to interact with their world and one another – it drives values development and binds people together (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). CRP is a pedagogy that empowers students by using cultural referents to impart knowledge; and it moves between two cultures but recognises each as legitimate. Interestingly, Ladson-Billings (1992a; 1992b; 1994a; 1994b; 2001) asserts that culture plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. For Bourdieu (1973), cultural capital is a form of cultural transmission that individuals acquire from their given social structure. Cultural capital embodies the norms, social practices, ideologies, language and behaviour that are part of a given context (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Gay (2000:29) describes CRP as having these characteristics: (a) it acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum; (b) it builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities; (c) it uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles; (d) it teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages; and (e) it incorporates multicultural information, resource, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

A plethora of literature indicates that CRP recognises respects and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments. Ladson-Billings (1992a; 1992b; 1994a; 1994b; 2001) suggests that CRP acknowledges, responds to and celebrates fundamental cultures, as well as offering full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures; consequently recognising the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. Hence, Bourdieu (1973) argues that education systems often institute "pedagogic action", which requires a familiarisation with the dominant culture and all its beliefs, behaviours and ideals.

In its most general sense, the purpose of CRP is the maximisation of learning for racially and ethnically diverse students. It is important to recognise, however, that all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, bring their culturally influenced cognition, behaviour and dispositions with them to school. Thus the efficacy of CRP is not limited to students of colour even though the term is most often used to describe effective teaching of racially and ethnically students (Villegas, 1991; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). CRP builds on the premise that "how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures. To maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice" (Villegas, 1991; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). However, student achievement is not the only purpose of a CRP. Teachers must also assist students to change society not simply to exist or survive in it.

For us, CRP facilitates and supports the achievement of all students. Richards et al. (2007) contend that in a culturally responsive classroom, effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centred context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and used to promote student achievement. CRP comprises three dimensions: (a) institutional, (b) personal, and (c) instructional. The institutional dimension reflects the administration and its policies and values. The personal dimension refers to the cognitive and emotional processes teachers must engage in to become culturally responsive. The instructional dimension includes material, strategies and activities that form the basis of instruction. All three dimensions significantly interact in the teaching and learning process and are critical to understanding the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy. While all three dimensions are important, because of space limitations only a few points will be made about the institutional dimension. This brief focuses on the two most relevant for teachers' work: the personal and instructional dimensions (Richards et al., 2007).

### 3. Cultural Responsiveness as Generational Imperative

At a philosophical level, this paper subscribes to the view that each generation brings its own set of values, beliefs, life experiences and attitudes to the teaching and learning environment and this can be a challenge for any higher educational institution. In addition, we find these generational cultures to have a tremendous influence on the culture of reading as well. For example, the cyber revolution has exacerbated this situation. With the emergence of virtual learning material (e-books, podcasts, and so forth) as well as digital libraries in higher education, among other things, teaching and learning appears to be a pipe dream – Generation Y's learning needs are not considered. Interestingly, many education policies around the globe appear to be silent on Generation Y's learning needs – they lack culturally relevant pedagogy. Two possible philosophical explanations could be that the dominant higher education theory and practice assumes that all learning experiences are the same in all life stages; and that they are still trapped in the fixed iron triangle of education. Thus, Generation Y's culture calls for the rethinking of teaching and learning activities within the CRP framework.

CRP has become increasingly used within academia. Notwithstanding the steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse Generation Y student populations in higher education, not all higher education programmes readily embrace or include culturally responsive teacher education pedagogy. Higher education programmes continue to use the pedagogy of decades past. For this reason, Unisa as an ODL institution needs practitioners who know who they are teaching, what to teach and the methodologies to teach it. In other words, it needs practitioners who can use quality research-based pedagogy; that is, a pedagogy responsive to the learning, emotional and social needs of ethnically and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities in urban schools. There is a dire need for Unisa's ODL programmes to offer many and varied cross-cultural experiences. We maintain that higher education practitioners need to know how to adapt the content of instruction and teaching styles. Curriculum, methodology and instructional materials should be responsive to students' values and cultural norms. Thus, the ultimate challenge for teacher educators is to prepare reflective practitioners who can connect with, commit to and practice an ethos of care with diverse students and their families.

A considerable volume of research (Santamaría, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Smith & Ayers 2006; Gay, 2000; Gay 2010; Banks & Banks 1995; Foster, 1995) indicates that culturally responsive educators believe that culture deeply influences the way students learn. The more a teacher understands the cultures and other aspects of diversity in a classroom, the more likely the teacher is to provide a classroom context that will result in successful, high-quality education for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1992a; 1992b; 1995a; 1995b). Theories, such as multiculturalism, multicultural awareness, cultural appropriateness and cultural compatibility, are concerned with tolerance and acceptance of diverse students and the challenges of accessibility to resources and learning opportunities in educational settings. However, CRP proponents argue that these approaches do not go far enough toward the transformation of society and schooling. They claim that CRP goes further in its focus on participatory social action towards social transformation. In contrast to methods that treat culture as a characteristic of "us" versus "them", CRP promotes the idea that society and communities are interdependent and made better when all of us are included in the discussions, solutions and visioning of the future. Cultural responsiveness as a global educational system changes agenda, calls attention to the needs of all diverse students, especially to lift up, recognise and value those whose cultures are not the dominant one in "schooling as we know it"; and urges teacher education programmes to teach and prepare their student teachers for working in diverse classrooms.

Undeniably, CRP defies the conventions of traditional educational practices with respect to ethnic students and recognises the existing strengths and accomplishments of these students and then enhances them in further instructional processes (Gay, 2000). On the other hand, it does not incorporate traditional educational practices with respect to students of colour (Gay, 2000). This means respecting the cultures and experiences of various groups and then using them as resources for teaching and learning. Most importantly, it appreciates the skills. Other ethnic groups of students prefer to study together in small groups. As Banks and Banks (1995) note, more opportunities for them and other students to participate in cooperative learning can be provided in the classroom. In addition, Banks and Banks (1995) assert that if education is to empower marginalised groups, it must be transformative. Being transformative involves helping "students to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action". To end this section, existing strengths and accomplishments of all students need to be developed further in instruction. For example, the verbal creativity and storytelling that is unique among some African Americans in informal social interactions is acknowledged as a gift and contribution and used to teach writing (Banks & Banks 1995). Typically, CRP is liberating and guides students in understanding that no single version of "truth" is total and permanent. It does not solely prescribe to

mainstream ways of knowing. To accomplish this, teachers make authentic knowledge about different ethnic groups accessible to students. Gay (2000:35) holds that the validation, information, and pride it generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating. This freedom results in improved achievement of many kinds, including increased concentration on academic learning tasks.

#### 4. Culturally Responsive Teaching as Transformative and Emancipatory

The poststructuralist trinity (Lacan, Derrida and Foucault) note that culture as a category of social life has itself been conceptualised in a number of different ways. Among others, they see culture as: (1) creativity or agency, (2) a system of symbols and meanings, and (3) practice. Culture is neither a particular kind of practice nor practice that takes place in a particular social location. It is rather the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general (Sewell, 2005:48). As Ladson-Billings (1992a; 1992b; 1994a; 1994b; 2001) puts it, culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking processes of groups and individuals. A pedagogy that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994a; 1994b; 2001).

Gay (2000; 2010) defines CRT as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Gay (2000:29) also describes CRT as having these characteristics: (1) it acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum; (2) it builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities; (3) it uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles; (4) it teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages; and (5) it incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

Scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1994a; Ladson-Billings, 1994b; Asante, 1991/1992; Au, 1993; Erickson, 1987; Gordon, 1993; Smith & Ayers 2006; Lipman, 1995; Gay 2000; Pewewardy, 1994; Philips, 1983) see CRT as liberating, transformative, comprehensive, validating, empowering, emancipatory and transformative. In addition, it guides students in understanding that no single version of "truth" is total and permanent. It does not solely prescribe to mainstream ways of knowing. CRT infuses family customs—as well as community culture and expectations—throughout the teaching and learning environment (Ladson-Billings, 1994a; Ladson-Billings, 1994b; Gay 2000). In addition, by providing instruction in a context meaningful to students and in a way that values their culture, knowledge, and experiences, CRT fosters student motivation and engagement. Central to CRT, as Gay (2000:37) notes, is making authentic knowledge about ethnic groups accessible to students. Furthermore the validation, information, and the pride it generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating. Santamaria (2009) captures more details in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of culturally responsive teaching practices

Indicators of CRT(Ladson-Billings, 2001) Academic achievement	Descriptive Characteristics of CRT Gay, 2000) CRT is empowering	Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al.,1992)
<p>Teacher:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Presumes students capable.</li> <li>2. Delineates achievement in classroom context.</li> <li>3. Knows content, learner, and learners' style.</li> <li>4. Supports curricular critical consciousness.</li> <li>5. Encourages academic achievement. (p. 74)</li> </ol>	<p>Teacher encourages academic competence, personal competence, courage, and the will to act (p. 32).</p> <p><b>CRT is transformative</b> Teacher recognises existing strength and accomplishments of students and enhancing them further in the instructional process (p. 33).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers identify knowledge, skills, and practices that enable modest-income families to live their lives.</li> <li>2. Teaching -learning process is improved.</li> <li>3. Educational excellence supported.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Cultural competence</b> Teacher:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understands culture and role of culture in education.</li> <li>2. Takes responsibility for learning about students' culture and community.</li> <li>3. Uses students' culture as basis for learning.</li> <li>4. Promotes flexible use of students' local and global cultures (p. 97).</li> </ol>	<p><b>CRT is validating</b> Teacher uses cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of CLD learners to make learning more relevant and effective (p. 29).</p> <p><b>CRT is comprehensive</b> Teachers teach the whole child (p. 30).</p> <p><b>CRT is multidimensional</b> Teachers make use of encompassing curriculum, content, learning contexts, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers enter students' homes as learners, conducting household interviews and observations.</li> <li>2. Later, teachers reflect on the meaning of their findings.</li> <li>3. Teachers collaborate to devise appropriate teaching practices.</li> <li>4. Relationships between students' families and teachers are strengthened.</li> </ol>

<p><b>Sociopolitical consciousness</b> Teacher:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Knows larger sociopolitical context (school, community, nation, and world).</li> <li>2. Has investment in public good.</li> <li>3. Plans and implements academic experiences.</li> <li>4. Believes students' success has consequences in teacher's life (p. 120).</li> </ol>	<p><b>CRT is emancipatory</b> Teacher lifts the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truths typically taught in schools (p. 35).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers re-examine practices in terms of their influence on student participation.</li> <li>2. Teacher commitments are reinforced.</li> <li>3. Community knowledge is validated.</li> </ol>
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Source: Adapted from Santamaria (2009).

According to Gay (2000:31–32), while improving academic achievement and developing a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility is a goal of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, education of this sort can be multidimensional for teachers and learners:

“Culturally responsive teaching requires tapping into a wide range of cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives. Emotions, beliefs, values, ethos, opinions, and feelings are scrutinized along with factual information to make curriculum and instruction more reflective of and responsive to ethnic diversity. However, every conceivable aspect of an ethnic group's culture is not replicated in the classroom. Nor are the cultures included in the curriculum used only with students from that ethnic group. Cultural responsive pedagogy focuses on those elements of cultural socialization that most directly affect learning.”

For Ladson-Billings (1992:382), culturally responsive teachers develop intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes”. Among others, cooperation, community and connectedness are central attributes of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2000:38) asserts that students are expected to work together and are held accountable for one another's success. The goal is for all students to be winners, rather than some who win and others who lose, and for some students to assume responsibility for helping one another achieve to the best of their ability (Gay 2000:38).

In light of the above, CRT is “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. It lifts the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools; and helps students realise that no single version of truth is total and permanent (Gay 2000:38). It does not make itself the mainstream way of knowing or learning. To accomplish this, teachers make real knowledge about different cultures and ethnic groups accessible to students. The validation, information, and pride it generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating (Gay, 2000; 2010).

## 5. Reimagining Unisa's ODL through the Lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

If education has not changed with the times, then it is reasonable to assume that the role of teachers has not changed as well. Therefore, one could conclude that the role of the teacher is effective ... if only this were 1965 (Johnson & McElroy 2012). Just as the teaching and learning environment is constantly changing, so must the teacher adapt their roles and responsibilities - Teachers are no longer teaching in isolation – culture and generational divide play a critical role. In line with this, the question becomes, *is Unisa's ODL (teaching and learning) matching the students' generational culture and/or is it compatible with practices which speak to culturally diverse students?* Cordington and Grant-Marshall (2011:135) note that education has become a massive and hotly competitive industry, and educational institutions have to change rapidly to keep up with new trends. In addition, in each generation a specific style of teaching and learning has predominated. Given that Unisa's students are spread across the different generational categories, it is important to recognise these styles, as they have influenced not only how we learn but also how we teach. It goes without saying that Unisa's ODL has historically been rooted in a standard set of operating procedures which has defined teaching and learning as separate, absolute entities where the teacher dictates a set of behaviours for the student to follow.

Within this context, there is a missing link between theory and practice - Unisa's ODL denies cultural diversity, and assumes that educational experiences are the same for all students in terms of generational divide. Current practice seems not to be promoting equity and inclusion among culturally diverse students in the instructional design. Given the current diverse student population, Unisa's ODL must be redefined to meet the needs and demands of a diverse generational culture. For this reason, we propose that Unisa's ODL needs to develop strategies to assist students who come from an array of diverse backgrounds. Differences in our ODL students are apparent in regards to generation, race, social class, religion, languages, dress, cultural practices, and activity choices. Hence, coupled with the changing cultural/racial demographics in the general student population, there is a need to “bridge the gap” between race, social

class, religion, languages, dress, cultural practices, and ODL.

Smith and Ayers (2006) assert that in light of the conceptual relationships between culture and learning, it becomes crucial for teachers to reflect critically upon educational practices that accommodate the diverse needs of learners from different cultural backgrounds. To promote equitable environments for learning, it is imperative that culturally responsive methods of instruction are used to assist us in delivering content that will aid in promoting lifelong wellness for everyone we influence. In this article we strive to respond to the question of "How can Unisa's ODL provide a teaching and learning environment which puts all students in the best possible position to excel?" We maintain that CRP has the prospects of this question. Among others, CRP facilitates and supports the achievement of all students. In a culturally responsive classroom, effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally-supported, learner-centred context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and used to promote student achievement (Richards, Brown & Forde 2007:64). Culturally Responsive Pedagogy involves three dimensions which aid in creating successful learning environments for diverse learners: (a) institutional, (b) personal, and (c) instructional.

In conclusion, we perceive CRT in ODL settings as all about using culture and experiences of different ethnic groups as a way to teach more effectively. A culturally relevant teaching must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural identity, while succeeding academically. We recognise the challenges of Unisa's ODL, however we propose reimagining ODL practice through the lens of a methodological framework for promoting equity and cultural sensitivity in open distance learning. Among other, this lens accommodate: (a) cultural maintenance, (b) ownership of learning, (c) communities of inquiry, and (d) provisions of multiple perspectives. For Unisa's ODL to be responsive to the cultural uniqueness of its diverse students, it must emerge in the planning, design, implementation, and assessment of learning experiences, particularly those offered at a distance through instructional technologies. In addition, it should recognise the inconsistency with which students of various world views may interpret the world around them. The design of ODL experiences should draw from many educational philosophies, learning theories, and pedagogical methods compatible and consistent with CRP. We hold that educational programs must be aligned with students' needs, interests, values, student perceptions, communication styles, and desired learning outcomes that apply within a particular cultural context.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, effective teaching and learning in an ODL setting has to be fluid and adaptive to diverse cultures. At philosophical level, best practices of ODL are consistent with multicultural education. In the case of Unisa's ODL, practitioners often do not know the ethnicity or background of their students. With this in mind, it is important to make every effort possible to really get to know our students – we cannot single out certain students based on their culture or background. For this reason, it is important to try and actively learn about the students one is teaching. We maintain that to be culturally diverse is to shift our teaching styles to be more responsive to the life experiences of the other ethnic groups instead of the other ethnicities conforming to our experiences. Effective teaching and learning cannot take place without learning the backgrounds of each and every student. With today's ODL environment becoming so ethnically diverse it is important to gain an understanding of the student's background and current situation. ODL environments are by no means immune to the problems arising from cultural and generational differences. Fundamentally, these environments may even be more prone to cultural conflicts than traditional classrooms as practitioners in these settings not only interact with students who have removed themselves from their native culture but they also interact with students who remain "physically and socially within the different culture, a culture that is foreign to, and mostly unknown, to the teacher".

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