



# **BRANCHED TOOL FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS**

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# Introduction

## Purpose

Critical reflection encompasses identifying, questioning, and assessing our deeply held assumptions, exploring our thoughts, feelings, and experiences and examining how they inform the ways in which we instruct and engage our students. Stephen Brookfield considered the goal of critical reflection to be developing an increased awareness of our instruction from a variety of vantage points. He identified four lenses critically reflective practitioners can use to enhance their practice: 1) the autobiographical, 2) the students' eyes, 3) our colleagues' experiences, and 4) the theoretical literature.<sup>1</sup> Essential to critical practice is action leading to learning environments as “democratic spaces of knowledge exchange” (p. 44).

The BranchED Tool for Reflective, Culturally Sustaining Practice for Teacher Educators uses critical incidents, a type of reflection on everyday practices that reveal something important about values and social structures.<sup>2,3</sup> Critical incidents give the reflective practitioner agency to use a culturally sustaining lens as an analytic tool. Critical incidents are also an approachable way to reflect on culturally sustaining practice. Whereas making broad assumptions such as, “My practice is/is not culturally sustaining” can be overwhelming, working inductively—starting with a specific practice and then moving to broader generalizations—gently invites practitioners to think about equity and culturally sustaining practice.<sup>4</sup>

## What is culturally sustaining pedagogy?

The term culturally sustaining pedagogy acknowledges its predecessor, culturally relevant pedagogy, coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings. It evolved into culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies.<sup>5</sup> We use the term culturally sustaining practice to name the assets-based approach of weaving the cultures of communities into the fabric of the learning culture in order to care for and sustain them. Although not intended to be exhaustive, the following principles are key concepts around culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies:

- Critically reflecting on identity
- Learning from the community
- Communicating high expectations for all learners
- Situating learning within the lived experience and culture of learners
- Critically challenging the status quo
- Centering learners in instruction

These guiding principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy have been captured in the questions in the tool. Filtering a specific practice through these guiding questions gives the practitioner agency and can transform it into a reflective, culturally sustaining practice.

## Why critical reflection?

Reflection is prominent in critical and social change pedagogies in challenging assumptions and previously held beliefs while maintaining autonomy and humanity.<sup>6,7</sup> Critical reflection is key in culturally sustaining practice because it engages the emancipatory knowledge constituent, allowing freedom from oppression, critical consciousness, and changing reality

<sup>1</sup> Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing Co.

<sup>2</sup> Schmeichel, M. (2012, March). Good teaching? An examination of culturally relevant pedagogy as an equity practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 225.

<sup>3</sup> Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing Co.

<sup>4</sup> Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116. Retrieved from: <http://www.sagepub.com/eis/Gay.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Paris, D. (2012) Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, J. (1973). *Theory and practice*. Beacon Press.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, P. (1990). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Translated by M. B. Ramos. Continuum Publishing Company.

for self and others. Adopting a critically reflective practice is a responsible way to practice education, allowing us to move forward with hope and make change.<sup>8,9</sup>

## How to use this tool

This tool is intended to invite teacher educators to critically reflect on teaching practices through a culturally sustaining lens. Applying critical questions to our own experiences invites us to develop insights to help us challenge and change inequitable structures.

While the literature suggests that culturally sustaining pedagogy is more of a mindset than a practice, this tool also offers strategies to guide reflective thought and inform practice. Since teaching is highly contextual, this list is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive.

Continuous critical reflection is an important part of culturally sustaining practice. This tool can be used repeatedly to critically reflect on teaching experiences. While you can use the tool independently to reflect on your practice, we encourage collaborative engagement to allow for expanded insight and support from colleagues. Indeed, critical reflection is recommended as a group process, which creates a shared experience in which participants can learn from each other.<sup>10</sup> Crucial to group critical reflection is an environment conducive to open and honest discussions about feelings, beliefs, assumptions, and actions.

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<sup>8</sup> Lyiscott, J. (2019). *Black appetite. White food: Issues of race and justice within and beyond the classroom*. Routledge

<sup>9</sup> Gannon, K. (2020). *Radical hope: A teaching manifesto*. West Virginia University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Savaya, R., & Gardner, F. (2012). Critical reflection to identify gaps between espoused theory and theory-in-use. *Social Work, 57*(2), 145-154.

## BranchED Tool for Critical Reflection for Teacher Educators

### CONNECTING WITH SELF: Espoused Theory (worldviews and values that guide your actions)<sup>11</sup>

Consider your journey as a PK-12 learner and teacher educator and respond to the following:

- What values and assumptions guide your work as an educator?

### RECALL: Theory in Use (worldviews and values reflected in the behaviors that drive your actions)

Recall a recent day in your classroom that stands out vividly in your memory. Don't place judgement, just recall it in as many details as possible. Write for at least 10 minutes describing every detail. If possible, share an artifact to accompany this moment (syllabus, PowerPoint, student product, etc.).

- Provide a brief description of the context of the event.
  - Who was in attendance?
  - What was your role? What were the students' roles?
- Describe what took place.
- Provide an account of your behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and explanations.

### CRITICAL REFLECTION FOCUS QUESTIONS

Select 3-5 questions to explore further individually, or collectively with colleagues, within the context of the teaching event you identified above.

- Who may have been privileged during this teaching event?
- Who may have been disadvantaged during this teaching event?
- How did instruction reflect the cultures and values of learners' families and community?
- What steps did you take toward ensuring that all learners had access to the learning opportunities provided?
- How was instruction explicit about issues of equity and inclusion?
- Were there any threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the instruction, content, materials, or activities?
- How did instruction provide opportunities for learners to leverage their assets and engage in inquiry and discovery?
- How did instruction incorporate materials that equitably portray people from diverse cultural backgrounds and identities?
- What did your instruction reveal about your values around diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- In what ways did your instruction reflect your identity or worldview as a teacher educator?
- Whose perspectives are missing from the lesson?
- How were you centered during the teaching event?
- How were your students centered during the teaching event?
- What biases may be present in instructional rubrics or other evaluation/assessment tools you employed?
- What assumptions, values, and beliefs guided your lesson design and instructional moves?

### REFLECT: A New Model of Practice

Based on insights gained from your individual reflection or your collective discussion with colleagues:

- What realizations did you have about your instruction?
- In what ways did your actions (theory in use) affirm or contradict your values and assumptions (espoused theory)?
- What changes would you make to your instruction or interactions based on what you learned?
- What supports do you need to further your practice and development as a critically reflective practitioner?

<sup>11</sup> Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## Strategies for Culturally Sustaining Practice

Below is a sampling of culturally responsive and sustaining practices that may be employed in the classroom. Argyris<sup>12</sup> suggests that changes in practice focused on strategies without attending to the values that drive them are rarely effective. While the strategies listed below are important and effective, we also encourage you to utilize the reflective process detailed in the previous section regularly and collaboratively to engage in critical reflection to improve your practice.

### STRATEGIES FOR CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PRACTICES

- Systemically communicate clear expectations about what learners should know and be able to do.
- Equitably communicate high expectations for all learners.
- Model critically reflecting on your own identity and role in society. Do this often.
- Invite learners to engage in critical reflection about themselves and the world around them.
- Talk openly about the relationship between identity and experience, even if it is uncomfortable.
- Reduce lecture time to increase learner-centered activities.
- Select materials that equitably portray people from diverse cultural backgrounds and identities.
- Use current events to support the teaching of content and encourage learners to question who is privileged and who is disadvantaged.
- Learn about and acknowledge learners' histories and cultures and invite those histories and cultures into the curriculum.
- Create opportunities for dialogic instruction that centers learners and invites the co-construction of knowledge.
- Share the responsibility of instruction with learners.
- Invite learners to select content, mode, and grading requirements.
- Set clear expectations around equitable participation in class.
- Offer more than one choice for assignment and assessment type.
- De-center the authority of the instructor by organizing small groups.
- Learn how privilege and power have operated historically and connect them to current events.
- Continuously examine beliefs, assumptions, and biases, and provide spaces for learners to do the same.
- Create spaces that invite critical dialogues.
- Regularly question where there may be bias in this practice regarding race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status
- Co-create or reinforce program-wide definitions of diversity, inclusion, and equity.

<sup>12</sup>Argyris, C. (1974). *Behind the front page*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.