

# 7. Designing for cultural responsiveness

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## Introduction and chapter objectives

Culture shapes our thoughts, perceptions, actions, and communication styles. It plays a pivotal role in mediating our learning experiences. Consequently, even in a learning environment where teaching methods, resources, curriculum, and relationships remain consistent, students may have diverse experiences. This variance arises because learning and experiences are processed through the lens of cultural viewpoints, prior knowledge and experiences.

This chapter explores the importance of acknowledging and celebrating cultural differences, and creating learning experiences that are relevant to diverse learners. It provides practical advice for learning designers to design learning experiences that are culturally responsive. The chapter will:

- unpack the notion of design for cultural responsiveness,
- discuss why we should design for cultural responsiveness,
- provide strategies and examples on how we can design for cultural responsiveness, and
- explore some challenges that we may encounter in the journey of designing for cultural responsiveness.

# Culturally responsive design

In today's globally connected era, learning designers are tasked with the vital responsibility of shaping curricula and pedagogical approaches that resonate with the diverse cultural tapestries of learners' cultural backgrounds. This evolving landscape emphasises the criticality of designing learning environments that recognise, honour and actively harness the rich cultural assets each learner contributes. Within this section, we will explore the intricate dimensions of designing for cultural responsiveness. To set a firm foundation for this exploration, we will commence by clarifying the core definition of culture.

## Culture

Culture represents a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses evolving worldviews, traditions, beliefs, knowledge and relationships that underpin a group's actions and perspectives (Hargraves, 2022). While culture can be seen in tangible elements like cuisine or attire, it delves deeper and manifests in implicit behaviours associated with values, beliefs, social roles and communication. Culture can be collectively nurtured and shared among groups that are unified by history, geography, linguistics, religious beliefs or socio-economic status. However, culture remains fluid and multifaceted. Individuals can have different experiences and perspectives even within the same culture. This leads to nuanced variations even among individuals within the same cultural group.

## Design for cultural responsiveness

Culturally responsive design embraces, deeply values and celebrates the diverse cultural heritage, knowledge, skills and dispositions that students bring into a learning environment. The design prioritises creating a learning environment that draws on students' inherent cultural backgrounds and experiences as a resource (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). Learners in this environment are provided with opportunities to interact and collaborate with one another to learn from one another and develop multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. This means the foundation of learning and educational design becomes intertwined with students' unique cultural perspectives, frames of reference, language and communication styles (Wages, 2015). Culturally responsive design not only champions academic growth, it also fosters strong interpersonal relationships.

It is important to highlight that culturally responsive design is distinct from concepts such as diversity and inclusion initiatives. While diversity and inclusion initiatives try to increase the representation of minority groups in a learning environment, they may not necessarily address the inadvertent cultural biases or stereotypes within the curriculum. Culturally responsive design goes beyond mere representation. It actively weaves cultural backgrounds and experiences into the very fabric of the design.

Learners actively construct knowledge within a social context, based on their prior knowledge, cultural background, and experience (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2019). Their understandings continually evolve through interactions with their environment, peers and broader societal influences. Learning is not a mere passive absorption of information. It is a dynamic

process shaped by interpersonal exchanges and cultural scaffolding.

Learners bring their unique and personalised knowledge, skills, and dispositions into a learning environment. Each learning experience is encompassed by the environment or context with which the learner engages (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Their understandings are shaped by their unique cultural and diverse backgrounds. Therefore, it is vital to value and weave diverse cultural experiences into educational design.

Culturally responsive design weaves learners' cultural backgrounds and life stories into course design, and harnesses the cultural insights, prior experiences and perspectives from diverse learners to make learning more personalised, relational and effective for them. Designing for cultural responsiveness draws on a wealth of diverse cultural insights, knowledge, skills and attitudes that varied learner groups contribute to educational settings. The design appreciates the distinct attributes of majority and minority students. Its objective is to equip learners to live in an increasingly multicultural world.

## **Educational theories underpinning designing for cultural responsiveness**

Designing for cultural responsiveness is underpinned by three pivotal theories: Constructivist Learning Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. In this section, we will outline the origins and core tenets of these theories, and their relationships to cultural responsiveness.

## Constructivist Learning Theory

The origin of the Constructivist Learning Theory can be traced back to Jean Piaget's work on cognitive structures and developmental stages (Zajda, 2021). His research unveiled that children actively construct their understanding of the world by interacting with their environment. This perspective was expanded upon by Lev Vygotsky, who introduced the notion of socio-cultural influences on cognitive development (Daniels et al., 2007).

From a constructivist perspective, learning is a process where individuals construct new knowledge based on their prior knowledge and experiences (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This implies that learning is not passive but active, emphasising exploration, interaction, and reflection.

Within the constructivist paradigm, learners' cultural and experiential background is very important to their learning. They construct new knowledge based on and through the lens of their cultural knowledge and experiences. By integrating these into the curriculum, learning designers can make learning more meaningful and relatable. Designing for cultural responsiveness can foster a deeper, more holistic understanding of subjects, promoting both cognitive and emotional development.

## Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory originates from Lev Vygotsky, who believed that individual cognitive development and societal influences are inextricably linked. Vygotsky argued that our cognitive development is heavily influenced by our socio-

cultural context. Tools from our culture – language, symbols, and societal norms – mediate our learning.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is a social process, deeply intertwined with culture, interaction and the tools and artefacts of the society of which we are part (Nguyen & Williams, 2016). Individual cognitive processes are fundamentally rooted in social interactions and the context. Learners are not seen as isolated individuals in this perspective. Instead, they are viewed as part of social, cultural, historical and institutional networks. These networks influence their learning experiences, knowledge acquisition and cognitive development.

Vygotsky believed that cognitive development is mediated by cultural tools, like language, and by the interactions within one's community. These tools and interactions become the pathways through which knowledge is co-constructed. Culturally responsive design is about ensuring that these pathways are as diverse, inclusive and representative as possible. It recognises that for a learner from a different cultural background, a story, an example, or even a phrase might hold a completely different connotation.

Designing for cultural responsiveness is an embodiment of the principles of sociocultural theory. It recognises that every learner brings rich cultural backgrounds, languages, experiences, knowledge, and beliefs into the educational space. These are very important to who they are and how they learn. Culture, society, and interactions shape their learning experiences (Rogoff, 2003). Culturally responsive design in education aims to tailor learning resources, instructional strategies, assessment methods and the educational approach to resonate with the diverse cultural backgrounds of learners. This does not entail creating a different learning plan for each student; rather, it is about incorporating varied perspectives,

narratives, histories, and values into the mainstream content (Gay, 2018). It is about ensuring that multiple voices are heard and represented, and that no single dominant culture overshadows the others.

## Culturally relevant pedagogy

The term was introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings in the 1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It emerged as a reaction to educational environments that marginalised students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is about creating a holistic learning environment where learners feel valued, are motivated to learn, and are equipped to bring about positive change in society. It has three components: student learning, cultural competence and sociopolitical/critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

- Student learning: At the forefront of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is a commitment to ensuring learners achieve their full potential. It is important to promote intellectual growth without sidelining or undermining a learner's cultural identity.
- Cultural competence: This facet actively seeks to establish a symbiotic relationship between learners' home cultures and the educational environment. Rather than a scenario where learners' cultural identities are secondary or overlooked, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy advocates for these rich cultural narratives to be interwoven into the educational fabric. This not only contextualises learning but also empowers learners to recognise and value their culture in parallel with others, thus promoting a classroom culture of mutual respect and understanding.

- Sociopolitical consciousness: Beyond just acknowledging diversity, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy propels learners towards critical consciousness. It urges them to engage with, interrogate and challenge societal norms and structures that perpetuate inequalities. By doing so, learners are imbued with a sense of agency, transforming them from passive recipients of knowledge to active contributors working towards a more equitable society.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy encourages learning designers to view diversity not as an obstacle but an asset. It is about infusing curricula with diverse cultural perspectives, thus making education more holistic and reflective of the world we inhabit. By adopting this pedagogical approach, designers ensure that learners do not feel compelled to choose between academic success and cultural identity – they can, and should, have both.

Constructivist Learning Theory, Sociocultural Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy collectively champion the idea that culture, experiences and backgrounds of learners are central to the learning process. Constructivist Learning Theory emphasises that individuals actively shape their knowledge through experiences, highlighting the need to incorporate cultural understanding to foster the learning experience. Sociocultural Theory underscores the intricate nexus between individual cognition and the encompassing socio-cultural context. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy emphasises the triad of student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. As we reflect upon these theories, it becomes patently clear that to design for cultural responsiveness is to recognise and celebrate the rich tapestry of diverse learner backgrounds. It means weaving an educational narrative where diverse cultural inputs are at the forefront, fostering a holistic and enriching learning experience.

## **Why should we design for cultural responsiveness?**

In an era characterised by rapid globalisation and increasing intercultural interactions, the importance of designing for cultural responsiveness cannot be overstated. Designing for cultural responsiveness values and celebrates the cultural heritages of all learners. This section will unpack the answers to the question of why we should design for cultural responsiveness.

## Learners' engagement and educational performance

**'The diverse languages, literacies, and cultural ways of knowing and being of students of minority cultures are sometimes perceived as deficiencies that need to be overcome in order for students to learn the dominant language, literacies, and cultural ways of school. From this point of view, students are seen as culturally deprived because they do not have sufficient experiences of the knowledge and values of the dominant culture, and are subject to low expectations for achievement and family involvement. This can lead to a sense of disconnection from the school for many students and families.'** (Hargraves, 2022, para. 6)

A culturally responsive approach can enhance learners' performance and engagement (Chuang, 2016). Conversely, lack of understanding for learners' cultures has been shown to be detrimental to their academic success (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Research has consistently shown that students learn best when the content is relatable, relevant and resonates with their experiences. By incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, educators can tap into students' prior knowledge and lived experiences, making the learning process more intuitive and engaging.

Language and communication style are closely intertwined with cultures and social class (Lareau, 2011). This can create challenges for certain minority learners to communicate, connect and engage with learning environments (e.g., classrooms, universities, online courses). Pressure to

conform to the sociocultural and sociolinguistic norms of a dominant culture group may lead minority learners to feel alienated from a learning environment (White & Lowenthal, 2011).

A sense of belonging plays a pivotal role in determining a student's academic success and emotional well-being. When students see their cultures, languages, and experiences reflected in the curriculum and teaching methodologies, they feel valued and included. On the contrary, overlooking cultural diversity or perpetuating stereotypes can inadvertently alienate students, leading to feelings of isolation and disengagement. White and Lowenthal (2011) argue that perceived alienation may cause learners from minority groups to withdraw from their tertiary studies. Furthermore, studies have found that learners of colour frequently encounter microaggressions, both within the campus environment and during classroom interactions, and they feel that their perspectives are unheard in curriculum (Suarez et al., 2018).

Bishop and Berryman (2010) conducted a research project on culturally responsive professional development in New Zealand. The educational inequalities in New Zealand are prominently visible in schools between Māori students and their Pākehā (New Zealand European) counterparts. Within these mainstream educational settings, Māori students often exit the schooling system prematurely. They are more frequently subjected to school expulsions and suspensions than their Pākehā peers. This phenomenon is not unique to New Zealand. It is reflective of similar disparities faced by marginalised student populations in other nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The research goal was to help educators to raise academic performance of New Zealand's indigenous Māori students. The research found that the culturally responsive approach not only

narrows the gap between top-performing and struggling students but also elevates overall academic performance.

Taking a culturally responsive approach can potentially enhance educational achievement (Gay, 2002). Multiple scholars assert that a culturally responsive approach can be pivotal for the academic success of learners from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds (Green et al., 2017; Ware, 2006). It can contribute to learners feeling valued and connected to an online learning environment (Green et al., 2017). It enhances performance across all cultural groups and ensures that learners, irrespective of cultural background, can receive support and encouragement to fulfil their educational aspirations (Hindle et al., 2020).

## Globalisation

Beyond academic outcomes, one of the primary objectives of education is to prepare students for life. In a world where intercultural interactions are commonplace, the ability to communicate, collaborate and empathise with individuals from different cultural backgrounds becomes crucial. Culturally responsive classrooms serve as training grounds for these vital life skills. By exposing students to diverse perspectives and promoting intercultural dialogues, educators foster critical thinking, open-mindedness, and a genuine appreciation for diversity.

Nowadays, learning environments (e.g., online courses, face-to-face classrooms, schools) have become more diverse due to migration, international collaborations, and technological advancements enabling online education. Learners are from various cultural backgrounds. Designing with cultural responsiveness in mind acknowledges the lived realities of our

globalised world, where intercultural competency is no longer a luxury but a necessity. By designing and fostering an environment that respects and integrates diverse cultural inputs, educators prepare students for an interconnected global future.

## Decolonial movement

The decolonial movement aims to shape education systems to better represent the diverse cultures, histories, and experiences of learners and address the existing power imbalances in these systems (Kukulka-Hulme et al., 2023). In many countries, the mainstream educational systems and curricula have been predominantly shaped by colonial legacies, which often prioritise Western perspectives and marginalise indigenous/minority knowledge, practices and worldviews. This systemic bias has contributed to achievement gaps between different cultural and socio-economic groups. By intentionally designing for cultural responsiveness, educators can challenge these longstanding Eurocentric norms and give voice to the previously silenced narratives. This helps to ensure that all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds, have equitable access to quality education and opportunities to excel.

To wrap up the discussion on why we should design for cultural responsiveness, culturally responsive design does not solely benefit minority or marginalised learners. When curricula integrate diverse perspectives, they offer a richer, more nuanced view of topics, benefiting all learners. This encourages learners to step out of their comfort zones, challenge their preconceived notions, and gain a more holistic understanding of the world around them.

The process of incorporating cultural responsiveness also offers

profound professional development opportunities for educators. It necessitates a continuous process of self-reflection, learning, and adaptation. As educators deepen their understanding of diverse cultures, they become better equipped to cater to varied student needs, enhancing their efficacy and adaptability.

## **How can we design for cultural responsiveness?**

### 1. Laying the groundwork: Preliminary steps

#### *1.1 Knowing yourself: Self-awareness and reflection*

In the realm of educational design, it is important to understand and acknowledge our own beliefs and attitudes. These foundational beliefs directly influence the design of learning materials, interaction and overall educational experiences.

Every learning designer brings with them a tapestry of experiences, beliefs and values rooted in their own cultural upbringing. These beliefs are often shaped by personal experiences, societal narratives or established educational approaches. Recognising and understanding one's own cultural identity is essential, which entails delving into one's family history, traditions, values and even biases.

We usually operate within a framework of beliefs and assumptions. These impact the design decisions, from content selection to educational paradigms that underpin the design.

The ripple effect of the design decisions can have profound implications. For instance, learners perceive their capabilities and potential within the confines of the designed environment. A design infused with biases, even inadvertently, can alter a learner's self-efficacy and belief in their potential.

A significant component of self-awareness is challenging one's own assumptions about different cultural groups. Stereotypes can limit a designer's understanding of learners' potential, preferences, and challenges. Some common examples could be that all Asian learners excel in mathematics, and that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds lack ambition. Another common oversight in educational design is the inadvertent creation of content that caters predominantly to mainstream cultural norms, thereby sidelining learners from diverse backgrounds. To counteract this, designers can maintain a balanced expectation, ensuring that content, resources and tools are universally accessible and resonate across cultural divides. Elevating design expectations for inclusivity can bridge the gap between mainstream and diverse learning experiences.

Culturally responsive learning design entails continuous self-reflection. Designers should periodically evaluate their strategies and tools, biases, and cultural nuances. By recognising areas where existing beliefs might be limiting or even counterproductive, designers can pivot towards more inclusive and holistic strategies. A culturally responsive designer is more than just a content curator; they are advocates for an inclusive learning ethos. Such designers challenge mainstream narratives and methodologies, always searching for approaches that resonate with diverse learner profiles.

Self-awareness and reflection is an ongoing process. Feedback from students, peers, and community members can be

invaluable in this reflective process. External perspectives can shed light on blind spots that one might have. Journaling, peer discussions or even structured professional development activities could also be very useful for reflective practice.

## Prompting questions for self-awareness and reflection

- What personal beliefs and biases might I unknowingly bring into my designs?
- How can I mitigate the influence of my personal biases?
- How might my own cultural background and educational experiences shape the way I approach design?
- How can I broaden my perspective?
- Am I making assumptions about learners based on stereotypes, or am I truly understanding and addressing their unique needs and backgrounds?
- Do I ensure that the content I design is reflective of diverse cultural perspectives and not just predominant or familiar ones?
- Do I consistently challenge and update my design methodologies to ensure they are current, relevant, and cater to the evolving diverse needs of learners?
- Am I dedicating enough time and resources to continuous learning about cultures, experiences

and histories different from my own to enrich my design practices?

Self-awareness and reflection are foundational for designing cultural responsiveness. Embarking on the journey of self-awareness and reflection might be uncomfortable at times. We might unearth deep-seated biases or realise past mistakes in our teaching practices. It is important to approach these realisations with a growth mindset. Every insight is an opportunity for growth, enabling us to create a more culturally responsive and effective learning environment.

## *1.2 Getting to know the learners*

Knowing learner demographics and their respective needs is central to the design and implementation of a culturally responsive educational context. By understanding who the learners are, where they come from, and what unique requirements they might have, learning designers can shape instruction, content and assessment to be more relevant, inclusive and effective.

Before addressing the specific needs of learners, it is important to gather comprehensive data on the learner population. This encompasses not only age, gender and ethnicity but also languages spoken, socio-economic backgrounds, religious beliefs and other cultural identifiers. Such a nuanced demographic profile aids designers in predicting potential needs, challenges or preferences among learners.

Once demographics are mapped, the next step is to delve deeper into specific needs or challenges linked to these

demographics. For instance, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners might need additional language support, while learners from certain religious backgrounds might have specific holiday observances. By identifying these needs, learning designers can better prepare and adjust the learning environment.

## Examples of methods to get to know the learners

- Distributing surveys to learners can provide direct insights into their expectations, challenges or suggestions for the curriculum. These surveys should be anonymous to ensure honest feedback and can be tailored to gather information about both academic and non-academic needs.
- Open dialogues or focus group discussions with learners can offer richer qualitative data on their needs. Such platforms encourage learners to voice concerns, share experiences and provide feedback, aiding designers in understanding and addressing specific needs.
- Examining past data, such as performance metrics, drop-out rates or feedback forms, can help identify recurring challenges or needs tied to specific demographic groups. This historical perspective can inform current strategies and interventions.

- In many institutions and companies, there are specialised staff members – like counsellors, language specialists or special needs educators – who can offer insights into the specific needs of different learner groups. Collaborating with these professionals can provide learning designers with targeted strategies and resources.

Learner demographics and needs are not static; they evolve over time. To remain culturally responsive, designers should ensure that analysis of demographics and needs are regularly updated, allowing them to stay attuned to any shifts or emerging trends. Understanding learner demographics and their specific needs is foundational to culturally responsive education. By recognising, understanding, and addressing these needs, with ethical considerations in mind, learning designers can offer a learning environment that is culturally responsive for diverse learners.

### *1.3 Engaging with communities*

When it is possible, learning designers should engage with the communities from which learners originate. Communities are reservoirs of cultural capital. They house traditions, languages, stories, and histories that can enrich the learning experience. By tapping into these resources, learning designers can create a curriculum that both mirrors learners' backgrounds and broadens their horizons. This not only validates the identities of learners but also fosters a sense of belonging and appreciation

for diverse cultures. Incorporating community voices in curriculum design ensures that the content is both relevant and culturally sensitive.

Engaging with communities also equips designers with a nuanced understanding of cultural norms, values, and expectations. This knowledge can influence the design of the content and learning activities, communication strategies, and assessment methods. For instance, understanding the cultural significance of certain holidays or practices allows the scheduling of assessments or significant learning activities in ways that respect and accommodate learners' cultural engagements.

## Examples of methods to engage with communities

- Conducting workshops, focus groups or community consultations can provide invaluable insights into what should be incorporated in the curriculum, how it should be presented, and which pedagogical methods might be most effective.
- Building partnerships with local community groups, cultural organisations and elders can help in offering authentic learning experiences. Guest speakers, field trips, or collaborative projects can provide learning designers with firsthand insights

into various cultures. Additionally, these partnerships can support designers with supplemental resources and guidance in delivering culturally responsive instruction.

- Maintaining open communication between educational institutions and communities is vital. This could take the form of digital communication platforms, regular community meetings or feedback sessions. Such channels ensure that community members actively participate in the learning design process and can voice concerns, provide suggestions or share resources.
- Collaborating with community advocates or cultural ambassadors enhances community engagement efforts. These individuals, often esteemed within their communities, bridge the gap between institutions, companies and community members, facilitating a mutual flow of information and trust.

Engaging with communities is very beneficial for culturally responsive design. By establishing robust ties with communities, learning designers can curate a learning environment that celebrates diversity, recognises cultural richness and ensures every learner feels acknowledged, respected and valued.

## 2. Designing for cultural responsiveness

### *2.1 Empowerment through representation*

For learners, seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, resources, and instructional design is a potent indicator of belonging and validation (Green et al., 2017). Designing with cultural responsiveness through representation ensures that learners feel acknowledged, valued, and empowered. Here are examples of how to infuse representation in educational design.

#### Examples of empowerment through representation

- Use diverse resources: When choosing materials for inclusion in the curriculum, whether they are texts, multimedia resources, or case studies, learning designers should actively seek out sources from diverse authors, creators, perspectives, and historical accounts. Learners should encounter a multitude of voices and narratives, ensuring that no single story overshadows the rest. When learners encounter multiple viewpoints, they are more likely to see the richness and depth of a subject.
- Employ a co-design approach: A co-design

approach involves actively engaging a range of stakeholders including teachers or academics, cultural experts, community members and people from indigenous cultures in the design process. By adopting this approach, learning designers can ensure that the learning experiences and materials are culturally responsive and relevant to learners' diverse backgrounds. This engagement allows for a more holistic and inclusive design process, where the voices and perspectives of those who are often marginalised or excluded from educational discourse are brought to the forefront.

- Utilise visual representation: Incorporate diverse images, symbols, and illustrations in learning materials. Visual cues are powerful mediums of communication, and culturally inclusive visuals can foster a sense of belonging for learners from various backgrounds.
- Highlight diverse role models: Feature achievements and contributions of individuals from various ethnic, racial, gender and socio-economic backgrounds. This provides learners with role models they can identify with, fostering motivation and aspirations.
- Encourage diverse voices: Create a learning environment in which learners from different cultural backgrounds feel safe and encouraged to share their experiences, insights and perspectives. This not only enhances representation but also enriches the learning experience for all.
- Incorporate culturally relevant scenarios: When

designing case studies, scenarios or examples, ensure they resonate with diverse cultural contexts. This allows learners to connect learning with their lived experiences, making the content more relatable and impactful.

- Invite experts: When designing courses and programs, experts can be invited and get involved in different stages of the learning design process. For example, Māori and Pacific/Indigenous experts are invited to work on the design and development of courses and programs of New Zealand institutions. These experts can work collaboratively with the team to brainstorm a course plan (an outline of the content, assessment and learning activities), writing some sections of a course, design some learning activities and assessment tasks, and/or review content and assessments. Inviting guest speakers from various cultural, professional or socio-economic backgrounds can introduce learners to a variety of lived experiences and expert knowledge. These engagements can also inspire learners by showcasing diverse role models and thought leaders in the field.
- Celebrate cultural events: Acknowledge and celebrate significant cultural, religious and ethnic events and festivals. This fosters a culture of respect and appreciation, underlining the importance of every culture in the educational community.
- Regularly review and update: The landscape of culture is dynamic and ever evolving. Regularly

review and update learning materials to ensure they remain relevant and reflective of current cultural nuances and realities.

Empowerment through representation is an essential pillar of culturally responsive design. It transcends acknowledgement and moves towards holistic cultural responsiveness, where every learner feels seen and validated. When educational design mirrors the diverse tapestry of its learners, it sends a powerful message: every story matters, every perspective is valuable, and every learner is integral to the educational journey. Through culturally responsive design, educators have the profound opportunity to not just inform, but to empower and inspire, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive, understanding, and harmonious future.

## *2.2 Assessment and feedback*

Within the realm of education, assessment and feedback are pivotal components. When the educational landscape is marked by a tapestry of diverse cultures and backgrounds, the design of assessments and the way feedback is given must be approached with cultural responsiveness. Below are some examples of how to ensure assessments and feedback are culturally sensitive and inclusive.

## Examples of assessment and feedback

- Use diverse assessment methods: Different cultures may prioritise different modes of expression and understanding. Incorporating a mix of assessment styles – from written assignments and oral presentations to reflective journals, group projects and portfolios – ensures a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' grasp of content from various angles. Traditional tests may not capture the full range of a learner's understanding, especially if the learner comes from a background where different cognitive or communicative skills are emphasised. This variety acknowledges and respects the diverse ways in which learners from different cultures may best express their understanding.
- Provide choices in assessment: Rather than a rigid assessment structure, offering choices can be empowering. Some learners might excel in written tests, while others might shine in oral presentations or project-based assessments. Providing multiple avenues for learners to demonstrate their understanding acknowledges diverse skill sets and expressive styles.
- Provide flexible assessment timelines: Recognise that significant cultural, religious or familial events might clash with pre-set assessment

timelines. Providing flexibility or alternative assessment dates ensures equity for all learners.

- Incorporate self and peer assessments: Self-assessment encourages learners to reflect on their work from their cultural perspective, while peer assessments can foster cross-cultural understanding as learners engage with and evaluate the work of their peers from diverse backgrounds.
- Provide contexts in performance tasks: When designing performance-based tasks, ensure the contexts or scenarios provided are culturally neutral or offer multiple culturally relevant options. This approach ensures that learners can engage with tasks in a meaningful way, rooted in their own experiences or understanding.
- Design culturally relevant assessment content and tasks: Design assessments that are free from cultural bias. Questions and tasks that assume familiarity with specific cultural references or experiences can inadvertently disadvantage some learners. Instead, opt for universally understood contexts or provide a balanced range of culturally diverse examples.
- Provide feedback that respects cultural nuances: Language and tone in feedback should be constructive and compassionate. Avoid idiomatic phrases or culturally specific references that might not be universally understood. Acknowledge the diverse methodologies and thought processes that learners might employ, understanding that there are multiple ways to

approach a problem or topic.

- Pursue professional development: Continuous professional development can equip learning designers with the skills needed to design and implement culturally responsive assessments.

Assessments and feedback serve not only as tools for measuring understanding but also as reflective mirrors for learners. These indicate how the educational system perceives and values them. When designed with cultural responsiveness in mind, assessments and feedback can become powerful instruments of inclusivity, equity and mutual respect. It is essential that these tools, integral to the learning process, are wielded with an awareness of diverse cultural backgrounds to ensure learners feel seen, understood and valued.

### *2.3 Active engagement and participation*

Achieving active engagement and participation is imperative for educational design work. In diverse classrooms, the challenge lies in ensuring that engagement and participation are culturally responsive. By acknowledging and addressing cultural nuances and variances, educational designs can offer experiences that resonate universally, yet remain deeply personal. Here are some examples of how to foster culturally responsive active engagement and participation.

## Examples of active engagement and participation

- Design learning activities where learners can share their cultural heritage, knowledge, skills and dispositions. Examples are: (1) a discussion forum (an ice-breaker activity) at the beginning of a course where learners can introduce themselves, their cultural heritage, languages they can speak and their most important holidays in a year; and (2) oral presentations that allow for the sharing of cultural perspectives on a specific topic.
- Employ inclusive pedagogical approaches: Adopting pedagogies that honour different ways of knowing and learning is vital. For example, storytelling might resonate with some cultures more than analytical discussions. Similarly, collaborative activities might mirror community-oriented cultures, while individual projects might appeal to cultures that value autonomy.
- Encourage learner-led exploration: Learners can be instrumental in bringing diverse perspectives into the learning environment. Tasks that allow learners to delve into their cultural backgrounds or research global contexts can lead to enriching class discussions and knowledge exchange.
- Design contextualised content: Learners should

see their experiences reflected in the content. Case studies, examples and scenarios should pull from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This inclusivity validates diverse experiences and encourages active engagement from all learners.

- Use real-world tasks across cultures: Tasks that encourage learners to dive into cross-cultural scenarios or address global challenges compel them to view issues from various perspectives, fostering cultural responsiveness.
- Design inclusive collaborative spaces: Design platforms that celebrate diverse voices and experiences that enhance engagement. Encouraging discussions around cultural experiences, and comparing and contrasting them, can lead to rich, enlightening exchanges.
- Use reflection through cultural lenses: Providing learners opportunities to reflect on how a specific topic or lesson resonates with their cultural perspective encourages deeper connections and promotes understanding across different backgrounds.
- Provide feedback that honours diversity: Offering feedback should be done with cultural sensitivity in mind, acknowledging different perspectives and understanding that there is not always a 'one-size-fits-all' answer. Feedback should be constructive, validating diverse approaches to problem-solving.
- Support varied interaction styles: Some cultures value group discussions and collaborative learning, while others might emphasise

introspection and individual exploration. Flexible paths should accommodate these varied interaction styles, ensuring each learner finds a conducive environment to voice opinions, share insights or reflect.

- Use gamification with universal appeal: While gamifying learning experiences, choose elements like storylines, characters, names and challenges that are inclusive, ensuring they cater to a diverse audience and do not sideline any specific group. Some examples of names include: Marama – female character, Māori from New Zealand; John – male from England; Fhon – female from Thailand.
- Design for autonomy and cultural choice: Allowing learners to select culturally relevant resources or explore topics relevant to their backgrounds promotes autonomy and deepens engagement. By making cultural choices available, educational designers allow learners to carve out a personalised and relevant learning journey.
- Provide space for feedback: Open channels for feedback allow learners to share what perspectives they feel are missing or misrepresented. This continuous feedback loop ensures the content remains updated and reflective of diverse voices.

When striving for active engagement and participation, designing for cultural responsiveness is essential for today's diverse learning environments. Every learner deserves content

and experiences that honour, respect, and reflect their cultural backgrounds. By integrating culturally responsive strategies into the design, designers can promote active participation and build bridges of understanding and respect across diverse learner groups. The goal is to create a learning environment where every voice is heard, every experience is validated, and every perspective is welcomed.

## *2.4. Multilingual approach*

In the complex tapestry of today's globalised educational context, a significant number of learners come from multilingual backgrounds, bringing with them a rich linguistic repertoire. As we push towards more culturally responsive learning environments, employing a multilingual approach becomes more and more popular. This can cater to diverse learner profiles, enrich the learning experience and promote deeper understanding and wider engagement. By offering content in multiple languages or providing translation tools, learning designers validate these diverse linguistic assets, and help to remove the language barriers.

### Examples of multilingual approach

- Use multilingual tools and resources: Integrating tools like auto-translation software, multilingual glossaries or subtitle options can bridge linguistic

gaps. Such tools empower learners to engage with content in their preferred or native language, promoting better understanding and reducing cognitive load.

- Integrate cultural and linguistic representations in content: By integrating diverse cultural narratives, idioms, examples and stories from various linguistic backgrounds, educators can make learning materials more relatable and engaging. Such representation reinforces the notion that every linguistic and cultural experience is valuable.
- Facilitate interactive multilingual forums: Facilitating spaces where learners can discuss, collaborate or ask questions in multiple languages fosters inclusivity. These forums can be supported by peer translations or educators proficient in various languages, making them accessible to all learners.
- Integrate language learning: In contexts where it is feasible, educational designers can integrate basic language learning modules. For instance, if a course has a significant number of Spanish-speaking learners, introducing basic Spanish terms or phrases related to the course content can foster cultural responsiveness and also enhance the learning experience for all participants. Embedding short courses from OpenLearn can be very useful.

Using a multilingual approach is a robust strategy to optimise learning outcomes. By acknowledging and catering to diverse

communicative and linguistic needs, learning designers can create enriched learning landscapes where learners, irrespective of their linguistic background, find the tools and resources to thrive, engage deeply and achieve their full potential.

## **Challenges around design for cultural responsiveness**

While design for cultural responsiveness is essential, achieving this is not without challenges. One of the primary challenges that educators face is the breadth and depth of cultural diversity. It is not just about culture, race or ethnicity but encompasses language, religion, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and more. Catering to such expansive diversity in a single learning environment (e.g., classroom or course) can be overwhelming. Striking a balance where multiple perspectives are included without diluting the core curriculum can be particularly daunting.

There is a thin line between understanding cultural tendencies and falling into the trap of stereotyping or overgeneralising. There is significant intra-cultural diversity, meaning members of the same cultural group can have varied experiences and beliefs. Designing educational content that respects this nuance without resorting to reductive stereotypes is a complex endeavour.

Many learning designers recognise the value of cultural responsiveness. However, they may feel ill-equipped to implement it due to a lack of resources or adequate training. Standardised curricula and educational materials are often in a dominant culture and sideline diverse perspectives and experiences. Designers wanting to incorporate varied cultural

elements might struggle to find comprehensive, accurate, and accessible resources that would allow them to design a culturally responsive learning experience. They might need to spend considerable time outside of their regular duties to source, verify, and adapt materials – a task that becomes daunting in the face of time constraints and workload. Moreover, there is the pivotal issue of training. Not all designers have been equipped with the tools or strategies to design in a culturally responsive manner. Without adequate training, they might either shy away from attempting to be culturally responsive for fear of getting it wrong or, with the best intentions, might inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or misconceptions.

In multicultural classrooms, significant language differences can pose a considerable challenge. While the content might be culturally tailored, if it is not linguistically accessible, the effectiveness diminishes. Overcoming this might require additional resources like translators, software, tools or bilingual educators, which might not always be feasible.

The utilisation of student data in educational design could raise ethical challenges. While student data can provide valuable insights, it is imperative that ethical guidelines and protocols are adhered to in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of students. These ethical concerns are magnified when non-teaching staff, such as learning designers, seek access to this sensitive information. Some universities have strict policies about non-teaching staff obtaining/retrieving student data.

Financial constraint is a significant hurdle in the journey of designing for cultural responsiveness. Developing a curriculum, learning modules and assessments that reflect a vast array of cultural perspectives demands intensive research, which necessitates the engagement of experts from various

ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Employing such a diverse group of experts is a financial commitment that many institutions and companies might find challenging. Furthermore, culturally responsive design often requires the use of diverse resources, such as multicultural textbooks, software tailored to cater to different linguistic groups and interactive tools that honour varied cultural narratives. Procuring or developing these resources involves costs that can quickly escalate. Continuous professional development sessions, workshops on cultural sensitivity and seminars on global pedagogical trends necessitate both time and money. Another financial challenge arises when trying to maintain the relevance of culturally responsive materials. As societal norms, cultural values and global events evolve, educational content must be updated regularly to remain accurate and relevant. This constant updating and revising is not just a pedagogical demand but also a financial strain.

# Summary of design for cultural responsiveness

## Key Takeaways

### What?

Culturally responsive design embraces, deeply values, and celebrates the diverse cultural heritage, knowledge, skills and dispositions that students bring into a learning environment. The design prioritises creating a learning environment that draws on students' inherent cultural backgrounds and experiences as a resource (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). Learners in this environment are provided with opportunities to interact and collaborate with one another to learn from one another and develop multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. This means the foundation of learning and educational design becomes intertwined with students' unique cultural perspectives, frames of reference, language and communication styles (Wages, 2015). Culturally responsive design not only champions academic growth, it also fosters strong interpersonal relationships.

## Why?

Learners' engagement and educational performance: Chuang (2016) highlights the positive correlation between culturally responsive approaches and enhanced learner engagement and performance. However, ignoring the cultural backgrounds of learners, or forcing them to conform to dominant sociocultural norms, can result in feelings of alienation, as discussed by White and Lowenthal (2011).

Globalisation: In the face of increasing globalisation and diverse classroom compositions, designing for cultural responsiveness in education becomes very important. Culturally responsive design prepares learners for our globalised world and enhances intercultural competencies that are crucial in today's interconnected societies. The emphasis on cultural responsiveness is not only about equipping learners with knowledge but also about fostering essential life skills like empathy, collaboration and critical thinking.

Decolonial movement: The decolonial movement is gaining momentum. It advocates for educational reforms that accurately represent diverse cultures and histories. This movement challenges the dominant, often Eurocentric narratives, and aims to rectify systemic biases and provide a more balanced educational experience.

## How?

Designing for cultural responsiveness begins with foundational groundwork that involves self-awareness and reflection, knowing the learners, and engaging with communities. Learning designers should be aware of our own cultural biases and how these may influence our work. We then get to know the learners, their backgrounds, cultures, and needs. This will help us to create relevant, inclusive, and effective learning experiences. Engaging with the communities assists us to access to valuable cultural capital. By tapping into these resources, learning designers can create a curriculum that both mirrors learners' backgrounds and broadens their horizons and so fosters a sense of belonging and appreciation for diverse cultures.

Once the groundwork is laid, learning designers can focus on key areas to ensure cultural responsiveness: empowerment through representation, assessment and feedback, and active engagement and participation. Empowerment through representation involves integrating diverse voices and perspectives into the curriculum and ensuring learners see themselves reflected in learning materials.

Assessment and feedback strategies should be designed to be culturally responsive. Educational designers

modes of expression and understanding. Choices in assessment that allow learners to demonstrate their

achievement and acknowledge diverse life experience and skill sets should be provided for them. Flexible assessment timelines that recognise that significant cultural or religious events might clash with pre-set assessment timelines should be also considered.

Active engagement and participation can be used to foster culturally responsiveness. Some examples of design for active engagement and participation includes:

- Designing learning activities where learners can share their cultural heritage, knowledge, skills and dispositions.
- Adopting teaching strategies that honour different ways of knowing. For example, storytelling might resonate with some cultures more than analytical discussions.
- Using real-world tasks across cultures that encourage learners to dive into cross-cultural scenarios.

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