

CULTURAL LITERACY

FOR THE COMMON CORE

STEPS TO
POWERFUL,
PRACTICAL
INSTRUCTION
FOR ALL
LEARNERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



About the Author	ix
Foreword	xi
By Mary Kim Schreck	
Introduction: The Six-Step Framework	1
Becoming Culturally Literate: The Six Steps	3
The Research Behind the Six-Step Framework	5
Sound Communication	5
Essential Questions	6
Good Teaching Practice	7
Positive, Powerful Instruction	8
How to Use This Book	8
Chapter 1: Build Teacher-Student Relationships by Honoring Visibility and Voice	9
Chapter 2: Work and Plan Together Through Collaborative Conversations	10
Chapter 3: Use High-Yield, Research-Based Strategies	10
Chapter 4: Teach Standards-Based Lessons	10
Chapter 5: Use Feedback to Self-Assess Learning	10
Chapter 6: Engage in a Cultural Literacy Journey	10
Beginning Your Journey	11
1 Build Teacher-Student Relationships by Honoring Visibility and Voice	13
Expectations	14
Increasing Visibility	17
Resource Selection	18

Welcoming Behavior	19
Check-In Procedures	21
Discovering Student Interests	23
Within Instruction	23
At the End of the Lesson	24
Decreasing Invisibility	25
School Directory	28
Poetry Books	29
Authentic Issues.....	29
Exit Slips.....	30
Check Out	31
The Teacher Goodbye.....	31
Using Voice as an Observation Tool	35
Conclusion.....	37
2 Work and Plan Together Through Collaborative Conversations	39
Fierce Conversations	42
The Power of Words	44
Walkthroughs—Stepping Outside the Individual Classroom	46
Literacy Coaching.....	52
Conclusion.....	55
3 Use High-Yield, Research-Based Strategies	57
How Do We Think About Strategies?	59
Goal Setting.....	60
SMART Goals	63
Metacognitive Strategies	64
Academic Language	72
Critical-Thinking Skills	75
Student-Supported Strategies	78
Proximity	79
Novelty	79
Humor	80
Conclusion.....	81

4 Engage Students in Standards-Based Lessons	83
Elementary Lesson: Using Mind and Body While Growing Literacy Skills ...	86
Middle School: Developing Public Speaking Skills for the 21st Century	91
High School: Teaching Critical-Thinking Skills Through Architecture.....	95
Cultural Literacy: Discovering How the Past Affects the Present	100
Focusing on a Topic With Text Sets.....	109
Conclusion	119
5 Use Feedback to Self-Assess Learning	121
Flipping Feedback	123
Using Feedback Charts in a Diverse High School Classroom	125
Using Feedback in Fierce Conversations With Oneself	134
Using Student Feedback for Teachers	143
Using Self-Assessment as Feedback for Professional Growth	150
Conclusion	153
6 Engage in a Cultural Literacy Journey	155
Looking Inside: Our Inner Selves.....	156
Uncovering Our Personal Biases.....	159
Examining Culture.....	160
Sharing Our Racial Identity.....	161
Naming Racial Identity in Elementary Schools	163
Naming Racial Identity in Middle and High Schools	163
Supporting Racial Identity Development	164
Journeying With Whole-School Involvement	170
Journeying to Equity and Excellence in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro	
City Schools	170
Journeying Up Close and Personal With North Glendale	
Elementary School.....	173
Journeying in a Rural/Suburban High School	184
Conclusion	186
Afterword	189
References and Resources	191
Index	201



INTRODUCTION

The Six-Step Framework

Those teachers who are students of their own impact are the teachers who are the most influential in raising students' achievement.

—John Hattie

As educators, how do we become students of our own impact? How do we learn about the effects we are having on learners in our classrooms? John Hattie (2012), author of *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*, shares with us a way to do exactly that; he suggests we shift our mind frame—that we become students while supporting our students in becoming their own teachers. Teachers and students participate together as learners. When we do this, we reflect on and evaluate what we do in classrooms. We question ourselves. We engage in what Hattie (2012) calls “visible teaching and learning,” which occurs when “learning is the explicit and transparent goal, when it is appropriately challenging, and when the teacher and the student both (in their various ways) seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained” (pp. 17–18).

This is a major shift in focus for many educators. No longer the “sage on the stage,” teachers now partner with students to learn together. Hattie (2012) points out that it is the “specific mind frames that teachers have about their role—and most critically a mind frame

within which they ask themselves about the effect that they are having on student learning” (p. 18) that makes the difference in the classroom. He asks us to see ourselves as evaluators of our efforts on students.

Fortunately, this approach fits perfectly with the Common Core State Standards and the shifts in instructional practice required to implement them. As Mary Kim Schreck states in the foreword to this book, the CCSS are a “masterful vehicle” to increase rigor and level the playing field for all learners. The standards also offer new opportunities for teacher creativity and passion and guide us away from scripted lessons that shut down critical thinking and joy in learning. Instead, teachers now can search for primary texts and materials that engage and connect with students and their cultures.

Engaging learners’ cultures can be an exciting venture for educators, and in this book, there are many suggestions on how to do just that—to become culturally literate. Being *culturally literate* means having an awareness of one’s own culture as well as the cultures of others. It requires a continuous journey to learn what we don’t know—about our own cultural practices and the practices of others—and the embedding of culturally responsive instructional practices within our own teaching practice. Culturally responsive instructional practices norm differences and support every student as a unique individual whose voice is an honored and valued part of the classroom. This creates a classroom climate conducive to the implementation of the Common Core standards.

Although the CCSS attempt to address different cultures by emphasizing writings by diverse authors, they were never intended to dictate the culturally responsive pedagogy needed for today’s learners in 21st century classrooms. What is culturally responsive pedagogy? Choosing authors from different backgrounds to read in our classrooms? That is one aspect of being a culturally responsive teacher. Culturally responsive pedagogy, however, embraces much more than that strategy, positive as it is. *Culturally responsive pedagogy* occurs when we make all learners visible in the classroom and give them a voice; by doing that, we are building the groundwork for the collaboration needed in today’s work world. Culturally responsive pedagogy, like the Common Core standards, includes teaching students to use critical thinking to investigate their own cultures and the cultures of others by connecting to and engaging with the diversity in our classrooms as well as in the larger world. It also norms diversity, making it okay to be culturally different. In fact, it celebrates differences instead of only searching for similarities. Culturally responsive pedagogy uses technology to power lessons and connect learners to others in lands that are

geographically distant, but only seconds apart, to prepare learners to become global citizens. Culturally responsive pedagogy demands we connect the content of our lessons to students' lives, so we must understand the lives our students truly live. This leads to intense self-reflection and investigation of our own prejudices and biases. Using culturally responsive instruction to implement the Common Core breaks down barriers and supports a classroom community poised for learning.

Cultural literacy is awareness of one's own culture and others' cultures coupled with the skills to communicate and interact respectfully with those from cultures that differ from our own. This does not mean that every educator must know and understand every existing culture—an impossible feat, for sure—but it does mean that, as educators, we must understand our own culture. If we are white, for example, we must understand what it means to be part of the dominant culture. We must also strive to know and understand the cultures of the students we teach, yet know that we may never wholly understand. As a result, we must be comfortable knowing that there is much we “don't know we don't know,” and we must be open to continue learning. We must be willing to admit to our students that we don't know, and admitting to this unknowing is one of the most challenging aspects of becoming culturally literate.

Becoming Culturally Literate: The Six Steps

Cultural literacy, in many ways, shares attributes with *global literacy* as defined by Vivien Stewart (2010). She writes that global literacy includes the following elements:

- Knowledge of other world regions, culture, economies, and global issues
- Skills to communicate in languages other than English, to work in cross-cultural teams, and to assess information from different sources around the world
- Values of respect for other cultures and the disposition to engage responsibility as an actor in the global context (p. 103)

Cultural literacy begins with the understanding of one's own culture as the starting point for gaining knowledge and respect for other cultures. To become culturally literate, we must take a cultural literacy journey. Cultural literacy is not something you master; rather, it is something you continue to practice in order to improve. The journey begins with communication. Educators committed to cultural literacy must decide the best strategies to use for communicating among staff members.

The journey encompasses a six-step framework for building literacy for the Common Core. This framework is a tool to use during the implementation of standards-based instruction and as you are planning and delivering instruction, reflecting on your interactions with students and colleagues, knowing your impact, and monitoring your personal progress as you continue to grow in cultural literacy. The six steps are described in figure I.1.

<p>Step 1: Build Teacher-Student Relationships by Honoring Visibility and Voice</p> <p>Teachers acknowledge, validate, and honor each learner. They norm difference and create visibility to engage each individual learner and create a community of learners. They also honor their own voices and those of colleagues.</p>
<p>Step 2: Work and Plan Together Through Collaborative Conversations</p> <p>Teachers work in professional learning groups using collaborative conversations to plan standards-based instruction using a lens of cultural literacy. They engage in professional walkthroughs in collaborative teams.</p>
<p>Step 3: Use High-Yield, Research-Based Strategies</p> <p>Teachers use high-yield, research-based strategies as they deliver instruction.</p>
<p>Step 4: Teach Standards-Based Lessons</p> <p>Teachers deliver high-quality, standards-based instruction using authentic assignments and differentiated instruction.</p>
<p>Step 5: Use Feedback to Self-Assess Learning</p> <p>Teachers use formative assessment and student feedback to monitor and adjust instruction to ensure that all learners master the standards and use self-reflection to assess instruction and professional growth.</p>
<p>Step 6: Engage in a Cultural Literacy Journey</p> <p>Staff members work in collaborative conversation groups to continue their journey to learn what they “don’t know they don’t know” about themselves and others.</p>

Figure I.1: The six-step framework for building cultural literacy for the Common Core.

The Research Behind the Six-Step Framework

The six-step framework is powerful, practical, informal, and interactive; it is intended to be a guide tied directly to the Common Core State Standards that you use to improve your instruction, embed culturally responsive instruction, build better relationships with your students, and achieve better results in student learning. It relies heavily on the research of John Hattie (2009, 2012) and Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane Pollock (2001). Research feeds practice, and in this book, we share what works in classrooms based on the research and the experiences of real-world educators. First, the framework is built on sound communication.

Sound Communication

In *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction*, Jim Knight (2013) suggests the following communication strategies: “Listen, ask good questions, find common ground, control difficult emotions, and love your partners” (p. 236). Even though Knight’s suggestion to find common ground is a good one, at times, we may be on *uncommon ground*, such as when discussing issues of culture or race. Admitting, accepting, and embracing difference and our uncommon ground can be powerful for educators. Working through a process to uncover our differences can allow us to understand what is at the root of our emotions and how we might best learn from and love our colleagues and work together to support the needs of educators and students of color.* Knight’s suggestions speak to what we need to do for our colleagues and our students—love them as human beings first, in order to do hard work with them and obtain the best outcomes for them.

In addition to Knight’s communication strategies, the four agreements of courageous conversation found in *Courageous Conversations About Race* by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006) help educators through the six-step framework: “Experience discomfort, speak your truth, stay engaged, and expect and accept nonclosure” (p. 17).

These four agreements offer a protocol for the cultural literacy journey. Realizing we will not solve the issue of inequity or racism that has permeated our society for centuries allows us to focus on the immediate and personal rather than on what we cannot control. Singleton and Linton’s suggestions to experience discomfort and accept nonclosure communicate that the journey will not be easy and will not end; however, it will be rewarding, as evidenced throughout this book in the stories of

* Throughout the book, the term *of color* is used to designate a variety of groups, including people of color, communities of color, students of color, and others. I use this term because it is inclusive of all individuals in nonwhite groups. In addition, I use *of color* rather than the term *minority* because *minority* may imply inferiority, and it carries a numerical connotation that no longer works since, in some states, students of color are not the minority in number in our schools.