

# Designing Counter-Narratives: Constructing Culturally Responsive Curriculum Online

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## ABSTRACT

The growing field of online education has developed inside a cultural context rooted in racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of inherent bias. Likewise, the design and development of online curriculum is not excluded from the biases that have historically plagued face-to-face curriculum. In this article, the authors call online teachers into action by encouraging them to adopt an engaged instructional design praxis that builds learning environments inclusive of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Through the use of culturally responsive teaching, online teachers can create spaces of counter narrative that address curricular blindnesses and promote social justice.

## KEYWORDS:

Counter-Narratives, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Curricular Blindnesses, Online Education, Social Justice Praxis

## INTRODUCTION

As social justice teachers, it is important for us to understand the political, social, and cultural contexts in which the burgeoning growth of online education is occurring. Racial, gender, and ethnic biases that teachers bring with them into the virtual classroom can directly impact the ways in which they engage students, especially students of color. Not only are teachers changed by the hidden ideologies they maintain but their students are also negatively affected. When teachers bring their inherent biases into their classrooms, those biases impact students' self-efficacy and confidence. In her essay, Audre Lorde (1978) referred to the inherent biases of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia as "human blindnesses" that are rooted in "the inability to recognize or tolerate the notion of difference as a beneficial and dynamic human force" (p. 31). Human blindness and the devaluing of human difference create what we term *curricular blindnesses*. Curricular blindnesses are policies and practices rooted in racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia—blindnesses that fail to recognize and value diversity in the curriculum. Unacknowledged racist beliefs and discriminatory practices of teachers allow for the vicious cycle of deficit thinking to continue in American education, which subsequently maintaining the curricular blindnesses both in traditional and online education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to provide critical reflections on racial and gendered curricular blindnesses within the curriculum, both classroom-based and online while providing culturally responsive alternatives through the use of critical teaching and design practices. As co-authors of this article, we generally talk about curricular blindness that occurs within online courses in higher

education without focusing on a specific discipline because we are aware of the far-reaching impact of inherent racial and gendered bias across disciplines.

Critical reflections and culturally responsive design practices addressed in this article are grounded in education for social justice. Through the use of critical race theory (CRT) and Black womanist theory (BWT), we introduce key components necessary for developing critical online pedagogy as a means of addressing the human and curricular blindneses inherent in higher education. In short, we agree with Christian and Zippay (2012) in that “teachers must develop a knowledge base that includes knowledge about culture—their own and that of others and attitudes and beliefs necessary to teach diverse students effectively” (p. 38). As the field of online education continues to expand and grow, especially with massively open online courses (MOOCs) that reach the world, it is of vital importance that teachers become leaders in developing curriculum and course offerings that act as counter-narratives to the dominant narratives of White supremacy and gender oppression.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Race and Womanist Theories**

To interrogate and critically analyze the curricular blindneses in both traditional and online courses, CRT and BWT are used as theoretical groundings for the analysis. CRT has been used throughout the field of education to analyze curriculum. It has informed educational praxis, research design, and interdisciplinary ways of evaluating issues of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Seeking to introduce racial issues into the examination of law and society, scholars of color began using CRT as an alternate tool for discourse analysis as it offers scholars alternative viewpoints to dominant Anglocentric perspective (Lynn, 1999). In their examination of the field of education, Lynn and Adams (2002) found that CRT “allows scholars to acknowledge [the] racist epidemic in American culture...and allows for the recovery and use of the relevant histories of People of Color” (p. 88). In short, CRT can be used as the basis for examining the condition of people of color through a racial lens without negating other aspects of their identity such as gender and class (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002; Yosso, 2002). Through the CRT lens, we gain a pivotal awareness of the need for a more socially just curriculum—a curriculum that makes room for counter-storytelling and that exposes racial curricular blindneses (Carbado, 2002; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). By using CRT in online teaching, instructors “make changes to their online teaching strategies in a way that challenges the status quo, and ultimately facilitate transformative learning for the students themselves” (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015, p. 20).

BWT was developed as an alternative to inherent biases of sexism and racism within Afrocentrism and feminism, respectively. The emergence of the “womanist/Black feminist milieu began to take shape in the nexus of the civil rights and women’s rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s” even though the roots of resistance reach back to the work done by Black women to end slavery (Ross, 2015, p. 361). The term womanist was first used by Alice Walker to characterize the Black woman-centered philosophy and became popularized by Black feminist scholars like Katie Cannon, Margaret Shaw, and Layli Maparyan. BWT provides a framework for examining the intersections of race, class, and gender in the curriculum, scholarship, and research. “Race, gender and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). BWT challenges these neo-liberal frameworks by providing a holistic worldview that places the experiences of Black women, and other women of color, at the center of understanding, thus removing them from their lived experiences at the margins (Woodley, 2013).

By centering the female experience in theory and research, BWT creates a context for understanding gendered, racial, and cultural experiences (Blackmon, 2008; Kolawole, 1997; Ross, 2015). The womanist worldview and its associated social movement is “rooted in the lived experience of survival, community building, intimacy with the natural environment, health, healing, and personal

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