



Igniting the Fire Within: Culturally Relevant Expository Writing

Adam C. Whitaker

Elevate Achievement Educational Services, Atlanta, GA

ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of an action research study that explored the impact of culturally relevant writing instruction in an English classroom. Research practitioners have used terms such as *real-life* (Moore-Hart, 2005), *innovative* (Kinloch, 2009), and *culturally relevant writing pedagogy* (Winn & Johnson, 2011) to denote the type of experiential and relevant writing instruction that should be occurring in classrooms. These terms are synonymous because they require students to leverage their culture, perspectives, interests, and personal experiences as inspiration for writing. The discussion begins by presenting the literature on culturally relevant literacy instruction. Then, the author discusses the steps for implementing this pedagogical approach and provides key insights on the subject matter.

KEYWORDS

writing instruction;
culturally relevant writing pedagogy;
culturally relevant literacy instruction

As a lifelong learner and English Language Arts educator, I have always wanted my students to have a passion for writing. One of the ways that I developed my students' writing knowledge and skills was through culturally relevant writing instruction. Over the past 18 years, I have taught students who had negative attitudes and dispositions regarding writing. Many of the students I served were reluctant to engage in class, reluctant to read, and, more importantly, reluctant to write.

I often thought to myself: *How do I ignite my students' passion for writing?* When I reflect on my writing passion, I equate it to that of a fire. For me, this is a powerful juxtaposition because, in the right environment, a fire is very difficult to put out. In the same way, I created an instructional environment that converged around student choice and culturally relevant texts, fueling my students' passion for writing. This article presents the findings of an action research study that explored the impact of using culturally relevant writing pedagogy to build students' expository writing skills. In this paper, I discuss how I leveraged this pedagogical approach to create a space for students to take on issues reflecting their cultural, social, and personal experiences. By facilitating relevant instruction, I legitimized students' voices and ignited a fire for writing that could not be extinguished.

The diversity in today's schools requires that teachers use diverse pedagogy strategies to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Researchers have cited writing as a major educational issue in the United States. At the elementary level, there is a strong emphasis on learning to write (Graham et al., 2013). At the secondary level, the writing instruction does not challenge students to make connections with issues or show depth and breadth of knowledge (Applebee & Langer, 2011).

To increase the writing capacity of students, particularly students of color, there is a need for more culturally relevant approaches to writing. Winn and Johnson (2011) noted,

Writing is a natural fit for pairing culturally relevant pedagogy to create meaningful learning opportunities for all students. Though teachers must be strategic and deliberate in ways in which they consider content, curriculum, and culturally relevant pedagogy right alongside writing instruction and assessment, doing so can have a positive effect on the educational outcomes in our classrooms. (p. 87)

According to these scholars, culturally relevant writing instruction challenges students to write for authentic audiences, leverages the ideas, voices, and perspectives of students, and inspires them to engage critically with the world.

Culturally Relevant Literacy Instruction

Literacy is defined as “the ability and willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from printed text in ways that meet the requirement in a particular social context” (as cited in Callins, 2004, p. 3). Culturally relevant literacy instruction “bridges the gap between the school and the world of the student and is consistent with the values of the student’s own culture” (as cited in Callins, 2004, p. 4). Literacy instruction that is culturally situated places emphasis on using reading and writing strategies that are relevant to the culture, background experiences, and frames of reference of students. Researchers (Au, 2001; Irizarry, 2009; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015; Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Rozansky, 2010; Winn & Johnson, 2011) have found that one method for implementing culturally relevant literacy instruction is through integrating texts that connect to student’s cultural background and experiences. Au (2001) maintained that integrating texts that connect with students’ lives “may help them gain insight about themselves, their families, and discover the value of their own experiences” (p. 7).

Similarly, Irizarry (2009) found that one teacher’s literacy instruction for African American and Latino students involved the use of rap music. Students were able to use their language preferences, such as African American Vernacular English and Spanish language, to craft raps about their identities and dreams for the future. He suggested that using popular culture music and communication practices congruent with the lives of students increased students’ writing capacity. Rozansky (2010) provides another example of integrating culturally relevant texts in the classroom. She conducted a case study that explored an 8th-grade reading teacher’s understanding and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. This was seen through the teacher providing students the opportunity to discuss personal tragedies, such as a student’s cousin who was shot by a police officer, and selecting articles that connected to students’ lives. These articles consisted of topics about unfairness, lack of opportunity, or various types of oppression that connected to students’ experiences.

Meanwhile, other researchers (Johnson & Eubanks, 2015) explored the impact of anthem essays in an 8th-grade middle school classroom. The anthem lesson diverged from traditional writing assignments because it focused on students analyzing anthems such as *The Star-Spangled Banner* and *Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing* and then choosing contemporary anthems such as Modest Mouse’s *Float On*, Janelle Monae’s *Queen*, and Beyonce’s *Run the World* and then analyzing how these texts connected to their identity, experiences, or cultural background. The authors found that when teachers connect writing instruction to texts aligned with students’ experiences, it provides rich opportunities for them to learn about themselves, learn about others, and make meaning of the world.

Murphy and Murphy (2016) agreed that reading should be used as a conduit for building student writing proficiency. The authors conducted a mixed methods study to explore the impact of culturally relevant approaches to writing instruction with Latino students in a pre-collegiate English program. The authors used culturally relevant texts written by Latino authors to build students' writing capacity in (1) descriptive, (2) narration, (3) exemplification, and (4) persuasive writing. Texts were chosen based on the author's Latino heritage and relevance to the lives of the students. The text needed to be 1,000 to 1,800 words. Students read the text associated with each genre of writing and created an original piece of writing using the text read as a model. The authors discovered that student enthusiasm increased, and they felt the texts were relevant to their lives and experiences. All things considered, the literature in this section gives credence to the importance of using culturally relevant approaches to facilitate writing instruction. The sections that follow will make connections to the literature in this section and explain how culturally relevant writing instruction can be utilized to build students' expository writing skills.

Culturally Relevant Writing in Action

Step 1: Cultural Questionnaire. One of the initial steps required to enact culturally relevant writing involved students completing a cultural questionnaire (Figure 1). The cultural questionnaire was a critical component of the writing process for two important reasons. Firstly, I wanted to build my cultural competency and learn about my students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, customs, and their family makeup, as well as understand more about their country of origin. Secondly, I wanted to *empower* students and help them *see their culture* (Milner, 2011) as an asset for writing about content and topics important to them.

Before the beginning of the writing lesson, students answered the cultural questions independently or interviewed a member of their family who was familiar with their cultural background. I encouraged my students to interview family members because I wanted them to begin to think about how their family culture and history influenced their cultural sense of self (Heuman, 2009). Throughout the unit, students were encouraged to leverage this reflective tool as a resource for creating their writing products. Student responses from the cultural questionnaire provided rich descriptions of their cultural background, and students leveraged the content as a resource for creating their expository essays.

Figure 1: Cultural Questionnaire

Instructions: Answer the questions that deal with your culture, social, and personal experiences. It may be beneficial to consult someone in your immediate family (i.e., mother or father) or extended family (i.e., grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, cousin) if you have difficulties answering any of the questions. Work carefully! Make sure you respond to each question in 5–7 sentences.

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|--|--|
| 1. What is your definition of "culture?" | 15. Do you have any eating habits/rituals that are specific to your culture? |
| 2. How do you define "family?" | 16. Define and describe the most important (or most celebrated) holiday of your culture. |
| 3. Who holds the most "status" in your family? Why? | 17. If you are from a culture that speaks English as a second language, do you speak your native language? If not, why? If so, will you teach your native language to any children you have? |
| 4. How do you define success? | 18. How are displays of affection viewed in your culture? |
| 5. Do you consider your parents to be successful? | 19. What is considered most disrespectful in your culture? |
| 6. How important is education in your family? | 20. What is considered most respectful in your culture? |
| 7. Is punctuality important to you? Why or why not? | 21. What would you say is, from your perspective, the most held misconception about people of your culture? |
| 8. What is the most important meal of the day? | 22. Have you ever experienced racism? In what form? |
| 9. Do you eat foods that are indigenous to your culture? Why or why not? If you answered yes, name some of the foods that you eat. If you answered no, what types of foods do you eat? | |

10. Did you ever live with your grandparents or extended family?	23. What can be done about racism and prejudice, in your opinion?
11. Do you actively participate in organized religion?	24. Do young people today have a sense of culture?
12. How important is religion in your family? Why?	25. Have you ever felt excluded based on your Culture or Gender?
13. If religion is important in your family, do you plan to pass this on to your children? Why or why not?	26. Do you remember excluding others based on Culture or Gender?
14. Are the roles of men and women specifically defined in your family? If so, what are they?	

Step 2: Writing Interest Form. The next step in engaging in relevant instruction involved assessing student writing interests. The writing interest form (Winn & Johnson, 2011) was used to gather information about students' reading/writing preferences, the last text students read, activities they participated in and outside of school, and they ranked their writing preferences for expository writing on a scale from 1–3. This was a valuable tool because it supported students in making sure that the texts selected were culturally relevant for the students in the English I course. The open-ended questions in the survey provided rich details about students' reading preferences, and the ranking of the writing preferences provided numerical data so that the percentage of students who preferred expository writing could be determined.

Data from the writing interest form revealed that 12.6% ($n = 8$) of students identified expository writing as their first preference, 39.6% ($n = 25$) of students identified expository writing as their second preference, and 47% ($n = 30$) of students identified expository writing as their third preference. The writing interest form was an essential component of the research study as it provided critical data that supported the researcher in selecting culturally relevant texts for students.

Step 3: Lesson Planning. After assessing student writing interest, the next step involved planning for the lesson. Lemov (2021) maintains that teachers sometimes prioritize learning activities instead of first framing the objective. Researchers (Kaplan et al., 2017; Laidlaw-Alamguer, 2012) contend that deconstructing a standard to develop mastery objectives is an essential component of lesson planning, and engaging in this process ensures that lesson objectives are aligned with the learning standard.

The standard was identified from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). English I is an End of Course Test (EOCT) in the state of Texas. At the time of the study, E1.15A was a high-leverage standard that students were required to master at the ninth-grade level. The following components were deconstructed: (1) knowledge/skill, (2) genre, (3) verbs, and (4) content knowledge. Table 1 provides an example of the deconstruction process.

Table 1: Deconstructed Standard

Standard	Knowledge & Skills	Genre	Verb(s)	Content
E1.15A Students write expository and procedural or work-related texts to communicate ideas and information to specific audiences for specific purposes.	Writing/Expository and Procedural Texts	Expository	Write Communicate	Expository, Procedural, Work-related Texts Ideas, Information, Audience, Purpose

Once the deconstructing standard process was completed, the next step involved selecting texts that were culturally relevant to the lives of the students. Students chose one text from 10 expository options to read and analyze. Data from the writing interest form indicated that 72% of students preferred reading online materials. As a result, the text options consisted of both text and multimedia videos. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) explored the leisure reading habits of urban adolescents. The authors found that students in the study preferred reading on the internet and suggested that the definition of reading must change to include websites, e-books, e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, instant messaging, and listservs. Fisher and Frey (2018) reported that using videos as a tool for writing in the classroom provides students the opportunity to use their critical thinking skills and content knowledge to understand, analyze, and evaluate the world around them.

In another study, Shimray et al. (2015) reported on students' mobile reading habits and how students have shifted from print to online texts. The authors posited that reading on the internet is a popular practice for young people because they are constantly spending their time reading electronic resources as well as scanning and surfing the internet. Reading online is a preference because the development of digital mass media has low cost, ease of access, and up-to-date content. Seok and DaCosta (2017) explored the gender differences, propensity, and preferences for digital and printed text. The authors maintained that the advancement of technology and the convenience of smartphones have provided a variety of options for content to reach students. In addition to providing students access to a variety of texts, the researchers explain that online reading has a positive impact on learning outcomes. Table 2 provides a list of expository text options provided for students.

Table 2: Expository Text Options

Author/TV Studio	Title of Text/Video Media
Soledad O'Brien	<i>Latino in America</i>
Good Morning America/ PBS	<i>Two Men Interviewed/Police Chief News Conference</i>
Allison Graham	<i>How Social Media Makes Us Unsocial</i>
Debbie Sterling	<i>Inspiring the Next Generation of Engineers</i>
Joseph Weber	<i>House to Vote on School Gun Violence Bill</i>
Jon Pareles and Zachary Woolfe	<i>Kendrick Lamar Music Pulitzer Prize</i>
Rumeana Jahangir	<i>How does Black Hair Reflect Black History</i>
Rozina Sabur	<i>Ramadan 2018: How Muslims Celebrate the Revelation of the Koran</i>
Marilyn Price-Mitchel	<i>The Psychology of Youth Sports</i>
Monsy Alvarado	<i>As Trump Crackdown Continues, More Immigrants are Choosing to Self-Deport</i>

Step 4: Lesson Delivery. The first step in preparing students for culturally relevant writing involved them selecting an expository text based on their lives, experiences, or cultural background. After this, students who selected the same text were assigned in pairs to annotate their

text using visual annotations (Figure 2). As mentioned by Fisher and Frey (2018), the process of taking notes during reading is an essential practice for closely reading a text.

Students annotated their text for the following content: (1) vocabulary, (2) thesis, (3) topic sentence, (4) supporting details, (5) text structure, and (6) author's craft. If they chose a multimodal text, then they answered comprehension questions (Figure 3) as they watched the visual text. Multimodal texts were provided as an option for students because it was important to deepen their critical thinking skills (Hobbs et al., 2022) and to provide students an opportunity to write about their stances on contemporary social issues important to them (Unsworth & Mills, 2020).

Figure 2: Visual Annotations

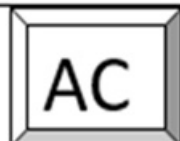
Visual Annotations	
Instructions: Use the Visual Images below to annotate an expository text. Read the descriptions below on how to use the visual images.	
Visual Images	How to use?
	Use this visual image when you encounter unknown <u>vocabulary</u> words in a text. Next, use context clues to determine the meaning of the unknown words.
	A <u>thesis</u> is a statement that summarizes the claim of an expository text. Use this visual image to identify the thesis of an expository text.
	A <u>topic sentence</u> is a sentence that captures the meaning of a paragraph. Use this visual image to identify the topic sentence of a paragraph in an expository text.
	<u>Supporting details</u> are words or phrases or statements that support topic sentences in a paragraph. Use this visual image to identify the supporting details of a paragraph in an expository text.
	<u>Text structure</u> refers to how an expository text is organized. Use this visual image to identify the text structure of an expository text. (i.e. description, sequence, <u>cause</u> and effect, compare and contrast, and problem and solution).
	<u>Author's Craft</u> are the tools that an author uses to create a text. Use this visual image when you are identifying elements of author's craft employed in a text.

Figure 3: Multimodal Comprehension Questions

Number	Question
1	Who is the target audience (and how do you know)?
2	Who might benefit from this message? Who might be harmed by it?
3	Why might this message matter to me?
4	What is this about (and what makes you think that)?
5	What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied?
6	What is left out of this message that might be important to know?
7	How credible is this (and what makes you think that)?

Once they completed reading and annotating their texts, students created an expository writing prompt aligned with the text they selected. The purpose of this process was for students to create a prompt (Figure 4) aligned with how they would be assessed on the EOCT. This process required students to identify a topic, select a quote that connected to their topic, create a critical thought question to stimulate reflection, and then create a writing task that they would use to write their text. As students began the writing process, they were reminded that their expository writing should be connected to their lives, experiences, or cultural background. Additionally, students were also reminded that they could use their cultural questionnaire as a resource or inspiration to craft their essays.

Many of the students commented on how they enjoyed the autonomy of creating their writing prompt. Tommy (all names are pseudonyms) explains how he chose an article about the psychology of sports. He grew up playing sports and aspired to major in psychology in college. Therefore, the article connected to his current interests and future aspirations:

I am able to be creative about what I want to write about based [on] what I have read from the article. When you write, your writing must come from experience of what the topic is about. The article was about sports psychology [and it was] something I could relate to. I related to this article because I have grown up playing sports and I want to major in Psychology.

Jackson captures the same sentiments in his writing reflection. He commented, “The part of the instruction that I really enjoyed was making my own prompt. It helped me write about something I clearly understand.”

Figure 4: Culturally Relevant Prompt

Written Composition: Expository

English I Prompt

If words are the use of the 11 word plays a integral role in back culture.

If the word "race" was to be utilized by anyone, it is an example of cultural appropriation.

Step 1:
 You are going to create your own expository prompt based on your own cultural, social, and personal experiences. In the box below select a broad quote that aligns with the topic that you are going to write about. It maybe beneficial to review the example on the back and search the internet for quotes. Consider complete the following steps in reverse order (3,2,1).

Quote: "Race, Religion, Ethnic Pride, Nationalism does nothing but teach you how to hate people you have never met."
- Doug Stanhope

Step 2:
 Create a critical thought question. It maybe beneficial to review the example on the back.

How does race, a social construct, affect individuals in modern society?

Step 3:
 Create your own prompt. It maybe beneficial to review the example on the back.

Write an essay explaining the affects of the social construct of "race" on society.

Be sure to –

- clearly state your thesis
- organize and develop your ideas effectively
- choose your words carefully
- edit your writing for grammar, mechanics, and spelling

After creating their prompt, students began the drafting process. This process included using the Longhorn Box, a self-regulated writing strategy (Figure 5) used by students to craft their expository essays. Students used this tool to write their hook, thesis, body paragraphs, and conclusion. It has been documented by scholars (Campbell & Filimon, 2018; Graham & Perin, 2007) the importance of using self-regulated writing strategies to explicitly develop students' writing skills. Several of the participants commented on the advantages of using the Longhorn Box. Mason captures the commentary that most students shared about the strategy. He stated,

Using the Longhorn box method, I was able to effectively plan out my essay in the provided method. The structure of the longhorn box helped me identify what [was] needed to put into my writing.

After students finished with the prewriting strategy, students completed their essays on a 26-line template (Figure 6). For the EOCT, their essay could not extend more than 26 lines, so it was important for students to follow this guideline as they created their relevant writing products. Once students completed the drafting process, they engaged in partner feedback.

Figure 5: Longhorn Box

LONGHORN BOX				
Step 1	Introduction	Step 2	Topic Sentence- Remember to use a transitional sentence to discuss your first supporting detail. (avoid: first, second, last)	Supporting Details
Hook: Attention. The addiction that is craved within any relationship. Yet the desire that can corrupt any bond. Thesis: Technology is capable of twisting one's resolve and stature. The instant downfall of a relationship once you are hooked on its leash. An aberration to the connection.		Our society is clogged with judgements and criticisms. A couple's public performance of love can ravage the couple's personal relationship.		An individual may deem their in sufficient presence on their significant other's page as deficient love. This may cause quarrels and disputes that can shatter the bond.
		Step 3	Topic Sentence- Remember to use a transition or transition to discuss your first supporting detail. (avoid: first, second, last)	Supporting Details
		Thirst for attention. Lust. Common ideas that are mistaken for love. Yet can be taken away so easily by simple mechanics.		Technology can inflict a great deal of distractions. Relationships tend to last longer when both side of the bond receives the same amount of attention.
		Step 4	Conclusion	
		Attention is considered a necessity in every relationship. However, relational authenticity can be corrupted by technology. An individual in a relationship needs to put their partner before their technology		

Figure 6: Sample Student Essay Titled "Altruism"

The voices encompassing the mind. Clouding the thoughts, heart beats unsteady. No longer able to see as the vision has become blurry. Each day has become a game, one no longer worth living. Expectations feeds frustrations. This frustration shifting to disappointment in ourselves and others. An unhealthy attachment to an unrealistic mindset set by societal wants and beliefs.

Each unreleasitic expectation is a like a fox reaching for the grapes that are placed at an unimaginable height. Each day, the constant pressure clouding one's thoughts. Pressure to do their best, to be their best. Not for their own personal benefits, but for a title. For someone to be proud of their accomplishments. This title putting the person in a power-bearing position.

A continuous cycle of pressure is known to be a lead factor in the formation of a deteriorating self-confidence, and lack of will to complete tasks. Putting a person in a fragile mental state, more easily turning to depressive thoughts and loss of determination. A feeling of not having the power to make choices for themselves. Tears being the safety valve of the heart, as too much pressure has been laid upon it.

Many confuse the complexities and disparities between realities and drowning in a delusional mindset. Rash decisions are made out of self-pity, a blissful feeling no longer present. As the darkness known as sorrow, has strangled the serenity and altruism out of that being. Though it is significant to have goals, too demanding of wants only leads to the person to be placed in an unhappy position, filled with guilt for not being able to live up to the unreachable expectations. An unhealthy attachment to these beliefs set by societal figures of power, should not be intensified, to save one from drowning in a negative mental state, unable to breathe, unable to think.

In pairs, students used a writing feedback form (Winn & Johnson, 2011) to give feedback to their assigned partner. Students gave feedback on the ideas of the text, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, and voice. Moreover, the researcher provided holistic feedback for the class based on informal observations. The goal of the feedback was to create an environment in which writing was a “collective responsibility and collaborative activity” (Calhoun-Dillahunt et al., 2022, para. 24) that provided high-quality feedback for students to improve their essays. Johnathon articulated the sentiments that most students shared when they discussed the impact of the writing feedback process. He stated, “I really think communicating with others and getting their viewpoints on my work and the ideas really helped me.” Table 3 provides the reflective questions students considered as they crafted their final draft.

Table 3: Reflective Questions

Reflective Question 1	How will you address your cultural, social, or personal experiences in your text?
Reflective Question 2	How will you leverage your cultural lens and language to craft your text?
Reflective Question 3	How will you address the historical and contemporary norms of your culture to craft your text?

Students did not need to address all the reflective questions in their writing. Instead, these questions served as a checklist to ensure that students used either their experiences, culture, or interests in the creation of their product. Once students completed the writing feedback form and considered the reflective questions, students created the final draft.

Step 5: Class Presentations. The final step in this lesson involved students sharing their writing products with the class. Researchers have found that providing students the opportunity to share their writing instills ownership and pride (Winn & Johnson, 2011) and builds community (Williamson, 2019). At the end of the lesson, students presented their final products to (1) their feedback partner, (2) their writing table group, and (3) the entire class. Classroom time limits did not allow every student to share their writing product. As a result, students nominated 3 to 4 students to share their products with the entire class.

Conclusion

Culturally relevant writing instruction has the potential to ignite students’ fire for writing. This pedagogical approach prioritizes their writing choices and provides them the opportunity to write about content and topics important to them. Blessing captures this sentiment as she reflects on the steps in creating her expository essay. She explained,

I have improved on my expository essays because I used objects that are most influential in [my] life and wrote about them. It showed me that I can only write my best when I pull my own experiences into my writing.

Several students indicated that the writing instruction provided them with the inspiration to write, and they were able to create, in their opinion, some of their best work. In a conversation with Charles, a student from a past class, he stated, “You significantly exposed me to worldwide literature and essential black literature from a perspective reflective of mine, [and that] sparked the match for me. I’m forever grateful.” If teachers encourage students to pull from within, this will

ignite their writing voices and help them develop a burning desire for writing that cannot be extinguished.

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