

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Communication Centers

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Introduction

For many years students with diverse backgrounds have played an important part in the higher education landscape and made-up significant percentages of students at colleges and universities across the United States. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) demonstrated that diversity in college enrollment has increased with each decade (NCES, 2023). The Open Doors international student data reports an average of one million international students per year studied in the U.S. between 2013 and 2021 (Institute on International Education, 2021), and in the 2023-24 academic year, the U.S. hosted 1.1 million international students (Institute on International Education, 2024). Foltz and Miller (2023) explained that many international students and immigrants are English Language Learners (ELL) and may need additional English language support. Diverse student backgrounds provide an important opportunity for communication centers, and “communication centers should be mindful of the diversity of not only clients coming from the university but also those from neighboring communities. This diversity includes English language learners” (Foltz & Miller, 2023, p. 35).

Currently, higher education faces uncertainty as many state and federal measures that target diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) resources and programs gain steam. In March of 2025, The Ohio State University responded by closing its DEI office and dropping the Student Life’s Center for Belonging and Social Change. Ohio State’s President, Ted Carter, explained “We are announcing initial changes in order to maintain programs that support all students and remove barriers to their success...our goal is to ensure that Ohio State continues to be a place where all are welcomed and treated with respect, while also following the letter and spirit of the laws and regulations that govern us” (Weldon, 2025, para 6). In August, *The Chronicle* (2025) reported data tracking various changes that were made in response to political pressure and anti-DEI legislation at 396 college campuses in 47 states and the District of Columbia. In the current environment, students with diverse backgrounds may find fewer campus and community resources available to them and many resource centers based on identity and diversity programs have been cut or banned based on federal or state legislation. For example, Auburn University closed its Office of Inclusion and Diversity and relocated office staff to other positions, the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville eliminated its division of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and reallocated all resources and staff to other campus departments, and the University of Florida closed its Center for Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement, eliminated its Office of the Chief

Diversity Officer, terminated 13 full-time employees with DEI-related roles, eliminated all DEI-related roles, and reallocated \$5 million in DEI-related funds (Gretzinger et al., 2025).

Serving and supporting students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds requires awareness and commitment to engaging in culturally responsive practices that connect with students as individuals and affirm their cultural identity. Given ongoing DEI resource cuts and this challenging environment for students, communication centers and other spaces such as writing centers or student success offices that have not been directly targeted by federal or state legislation are in a unique position to serve both marginalized students and the greater campus community by offering supportive spaces for all students to learn, grow, and develop. Scholars have established how communication centers typically provide supportive and safe spaces where students can make connections, collaborate, build confidence, and find their voice (Carpenter & Apostel, 2012; Cuny et al., 2012; Prentiss, 2021). Thus, due to many of the DEI support reductions, communication center staff need to ramp up their efforts and be prepared to intentionally foster a space that is seen as safe and supportive to help students by engaging in culturally responsive practices. In a 2023 Best Colleges survey, the data indicated that “over half of students (55%) reported that they would consider transferring if their college abolished diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives” (Nam & Bryant, 2025). This data suggests that a majority of students value diversity and higher education programs and resources designed to support students with diverse backgrounds. Communication centers should recognize that when DEI initiatives and support are cut, it sends a powerful message to diverse students that they do not matter and are not valued. Communication centers can work to mitigate some of these negative impacts and seek to offer culturally responsive practices and support to students while offering communication center services. In sum, the uncertain and changing environment around DEI resources provides communication centers with the opportunity to fill some of these gaps and offer all students spaces where they can learn, grow, and flourish. Using the framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and building on the work of various communication centers’ scholars, this paper explores applications and ideas for serving diverse student groups within the context of communication centers.

Theoretical Perspective & Relevant Literature Review

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a multicultural approach to teaching that not only highlights, but values cultural diversity. The CRP perspective uses students’ cultures as a starting point to promote student learning, cultural competence, and critical awareness (Ladson-Billings, 2021). CRP “helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p.18). The need for CRP in disciplines such as physics (Mathis et al., 2023) math (Shultz et al., 2024), and visual and performing arts (Hindle et al., 2011) has been discussed by scholars, as well as the need for educators to improve their own cultural competence (Byrd,

2016). Using CRP, centers' staff can take steps to improve communication and their own cultural competence to better welcome students from diverse backgrounds.

Relevant Communication Center Literature

Several communication center scholars have highlighted the importance of considering communication center practices and the impact these practices may have on students with diverse backgrounds. Ladva (2020) challenged communication centers to evaluate their core work of supporting students and promoting justice and then examine how racism distracts from this work. Specifically, Ladva recommends communication centers “engage what Baker-Bell has called ‘Black Linguistic Justice’” (p. 5). Communication centers work can make a difference by protecting and valuing Black Language (BL) and “we can interrupt such devaluation with respect towards and inquiry into BL” (p. 16). Building on Ladva’s work, Nguyễn (2021) highlighted the importance of evaluating speaking center pedagogy and defined an antiracist center as “one that challenges generations of institutionalized racism and white supremacy. It is one that welcomes the challenges surrounding conversations about race and actively works to end disparities” (p. 127). Furthermore, Nguyễn argued that communication centers should be places that empower students, so materials and tip sheets offered at a center should be careful not to institutionalize the students within by providing narrow definitions of success or exclusively using White Mainstream English or examples of all-white speakers to demonstrate correct oral citation.

In Silva and Wiebel’s (2024) work, they also argue for the importance of resisting the limiting definition of “proper literacy” as the standard for speaking well. “Despite our awareness as educators of the wide range of performative options for spoken language as a tool to connect with diverse audiences, our materials can end up promoting the ideal of standard edited written English, a formulation rooted in a particular conception of middle-class whiteness, as the baseline for effective speaking” (p. 4). Silva and Wiebel’s essay explored how the classical rhetorical idea of *techne* helps to center the process of rhetorical creation and may provide an approach to challenge the expectations of proper literacy and offer a tool for constructing materials that offer a more creative and powerful approach to what constitutes effective speaking. *Techne* shifts the focus away from simply producing the same speech or “product” again and again or in a uniform way and offers speakers a flexibility to create and measure success “by assessing the choices made as creative and powerful responses to the shifting environment, rather than adhering to preconceived notions of a speech that sounds ‘pretty’” (p. 15).

Stengrim and Kaufulu (2024) presented a theory of micro-geography as a framework for utilizing a “bottom-up approach to inclusivity” that communication centers can employ to center and maintain diversity and equity values in everyday practices. Understanding communication centers as micro-geographies helps focus our attention on how “communication centers are made up of sets of formalisms (practices and cultures) which make both communication and communication centers designated spaces whose prevailing characteristics could be exclusionary or sustaining of race, gender and sexuality, dis/abilities, indigeneity, neurodiversity and non-

traditional languaging practices” (p. 23). Moreover, this framework provides an opportunity to consider communication centers’ values, space, and practices that emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that “encourage continuous introspection, self-reflection, and creative engagement with the space, our staff members and the speakers with whom they consult” (p. 30). In the paper, Stengrim and Kaufulu recounted how one communication center hired a student artist to paint a large mural to promote a sense of belonging and provide an opportunity to process and share personal trauma. No specific outcomes were prescribed for the mural and over time various ways of interacting and space utilization emerged organically as people peeked in on the mural’s latest progress. There was also a space containing a whiteboard where people would doodle, express themselves, or informally communicate with one another while another small private space was dedicated to mental health where students could feel free to study, relax, nap, or cry. The authors noted that while these efforts were not formal DEI efforts, the “subsequent changes to the microgeography of the communication center emerged organically and *from below*” and fostered communication and community in ways that challenged traditional ways of setting up and using the space (p. 27). Furthermore, the mural welcomed and encouraged “diverse perspectives by vividly depicting an array of historical figures from across the globe” (p. 26).

Understanding the challenges English Language Learners (ELLs) face is another important consideration for communication centers’ staff. Foltz and Miller (2023) examined second language acquisition and language pedagogy and offered helpful best practices for training consultants and working with ELLs. To help ELLs develop, Foltz and Miller recommended focusing on five areas (i.e., communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities) “with a particular focus on intercultural communicative competence that advances the goal of intercultural citizenship” (p. 37). Using intercultural citizenship (IC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) frameworks, the authors recommended training consultants on intercultural competence and citizenship, ELL specifics, and interpersonal communication skills when working with ELL students in communication centers. Moreover, the paper discussed the importance of revisiting the goals and mission of the communication center and setting the stage for success by creating a safe and comfortable space within the communication center’s walls, holding workshops for ELL students, and structuring tutoring sessions in ways that help ELL students thrive. In sum, Foltz and Miller (2023) argued that “Communication centers should be prepared to continue working with ELLs as they represent a special body of students that could benefit from more specialized services provided by communication centers especially as they relate to oral communication skills and ICC” (p. 46).

Prentiss (2021) argued for the importance of leveraging a commitment to IDEA (i.e., Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) in our communication centers work and directly reflected on Ladva’s (2020) challenge “to consider the prevalence of White Mainstream English (WME) as the standard of ‘good’ communication on our campuses” (p. 108). In the last section of Prentiss’s essay, she recommended crafting IDEAL spaces through the use of storytelling, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), and a growth mindset to “empower students who may have

not felt included in our past efforts” (p. 111). Specifically, Prentiss suggested using the CRP framework to intentionally connect a student’s cultural experience to their learning through engaging in intentional discussions with students, actively listening to student concerns and aspirations, and communicating with an awareness of our own experiences and culture. This paper builds on the recommendation to utilize the CRP framework and explore additional applications for serving and supporting diverse student groups within the context of communication centers.

Application of CRP’s Primary Components in Communication Centers’ Work

Student Learning Focus

Communication centers can prioritize a student learning focus in the center by training consultants to provide comprehensible input and improve listening practices. This section will detail specific suggestions and guidelines for training consultants to engage in ways that center and support student learning from a CRP perspective. Because student learning is one of the pillars of CRP, communication centers must provide comprehensible input for all students during tutoring sessions. In particular, communication center tutors need to prioritize comprehensible input when working with ELL students. No matter how brilliant the tutoring comments or approach, the whole session will fail if students are unable to understand the tutor. Students only improve their language skills when input is comprehensible (Krashen, 1982). One framework developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics that helps many content area teachers adjust their teaching to provide comprehensible input is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model (Echevarria et al., 2004). The SIOP Model encourages teachers in subjects such as math or chemistry to speak more slowly, enunciate their words, and use simple sentence structures in order to provide comprehensible input. Applied to communication centers, tutors need to be intentional about providing comprehensible input and should also be encouraged to avoid idioms, local cultural references, and some homophones unless they spend extra time explaining the word or phrase. Take “Does that make sense?” as an example. First of all, “sense” sounds remarkably similar to “cents”. Secondly, one would be unlikely to find this type of expression in a beginner ELL textbook. Rather than use this potentially confusing phrase, encourage tutors to ask students something easier like, “Do you understand?” Ironically the phrase we often use to check for understanding is in itself difficult to comprehend.

Two other simple strategies that one of the authors often uses when teaching ELLs is to use pauses between sentences and economize her language use. Pauses between sentences reduce the density of the speech and using fewer words gives the students less to process. While it is tempting to jump into long and wordy explanations of a topic when you are met with confused looks, it is sometimes better to just wait and give the student a silent space where they can try to process your speech. In addition, tutors can write down words when misunderstandings arise. It is much easier to parse written words than spoken words. Writing down a word or sentence that seems to be unclear will make it easier for a student to break down the language. Furthermore,

writing down a sentence or a word will slow the tutor down and give the student more space for language processing. It is also important to remember that as humans, we often don't worry about short bits of speech that we don't understand. If you hit a wall where a student cannot understand your exact language, it is completely reasonable to move on. For example, there is no reason to explain an idiom or saying such as "bite the bullet," "spill the beans," or a "Sisyphean task" during a tutoring session. Students don't need to understand every word or expression to grasp the main points. It is more efficient and less frustrating to use simpler and more straightforward language.

When misunderstandings occur with ELLs, it is easy to always blame the misunderstanding on the ELL. While it is very possible that the misunderstanding or lack of communication is due to a student's English level, it is the skillful tutor who can provide comprehensible input to students. This is a two-part process for tutors. First, tutors need to modify their speech to make their language comprehensible. Secondly, tutors will need to expend extra effort to understand accents that are different from the dominant culture. Tutors that show a willingness to modify their speech and also do the hard work of listening well to ELLs should be noticed and praised. Prentiss (2021) pointed out the importance of actively listening to student concerns and aspirations, and Cuny et al. (2012) highlighted the important role empathic listening plays in building relationships within the communication center context. Listening is a unique and precious skill that communication centers should recognize and value.

As other communication scholars have noted, educating tutors on intercultural communicative competence and intercultural citizenship to facilitate and enhance interactions in multicultural and international settings is important work (Foltz & Miller, 2023). It is also critical that tutors understand that many ELLs have advanced degrees and knowledge in their first language. One author has found that the refugees and immigrants in her classes often feel trapped by their English level. They have advanced degrees and an extensive wealth of experience as teachers, nurses, engineers, and dentists, but then they find their vast life experience is trapped behind a language barrier. A sensitive tutor will be rewarded by hearing the many rich experiences of students from around the world if they will slow down their language and give language learners space to share their stories. Foltz & Miller (2023) also explained that while communication anxiety is not unique to language learners, it is probably more acute for a greater percentage of learners. This is important because a negative affective filter (which includes anxiety) will inhibit language learning (Krashen, 1982). Slowing down our speech, using simpler grammar, and avoiding idioms is essential for reducing learner anxiety and thus promoting student academic success.

In sum, ELLs will not be able to learn if they are not provided with comprehensible input. They will not magically absorb language and so it is essential that tutors do their part in providing comprehensible input to ELLs. It is important to remember that this may be a new skill for tutors to develop so they will need time and training to grow in this skill. The first step in providing comprehensible input is becoming aware of our own language. As part of tutor training, tutors could be asked to transcribe five minutes of their own speech. Most people are

rather horrified to see the meandering nature of their own speech. Raising awareness of our own speech patterns is a possible first step in providing more comprehensible input to ELLs. Finally, it is important for tutors to be aware of personal biases that would make some of the methods identified for providing comprehensible input inappropriate for some students. Maintaining a slow speech pattern when an international student speaks with advanced vocabulary and grammar can also be a sign of disrespect because it may demonstrate an unwillingness to accept that people who look or sound in a certain way could have advanced English skills. While it is important to guard against showing this type of disrespect, it is also important to meet the very real needs of ELLs. This can best be done by having deep respect and interest in the lives of our international students and ELL. Tutors should be trained to listen to student speech and adjust accordingly.

Cultural Competence

Communication centers should be intentional and set the stage for consultations that celebrate diverse cultural perspectives. The following section will detail specific suggestions for creating an environment that signals cultural competence as well as offer ideas for training consultants to be more culturally competent when working with students.

Music and art are often a deep and beautiful part of culture. When students hear music from the background or see art that connects with them, it can give them a sense of belonging. After a class period where one of the authors played salsa music during a classroom exercise, a student from Colombia approached the front of the classroom and thanked her for the music. Playing music in the communication center from various students' cultures validates their culture. When one author traveled in China, she constantly heard English pop music because English is a high-status language. From the kindergarten to the grocery store, American music was often present. However, the lyrics were often inappropriate for the five-year-olds dancing to it. Ask students to recommend music that is appropriate for our communication centers and then demonstrate appreciation for their culture by playing the music that is meaningful to them. Similar to the mural example in Stengrim and Kaufulu's (2024) work, displaying pictures of art from various cultures can also provide a sense of belonging and inclusion.

One of the authors has had many opportunities to work with Muslim students. While she often passes out candy in her classes, during the month of Ramadan, she makes a point of not giving out candy. When she explained the change in her actions, her Muslim students expressed appreciation for her respect. Several Muslim students indicated that they did not expect her to change her actions, but she hopes they feel seen, respected, and even a sense of belonging when she accommodates their deeply held religious beliefs. The same approach can be taken in communication centers, but this would require communication center directors and consultants to be keenly aware of the students they serve.

Finally, hiring tutors who have gone through the grueling process of learning another language should be prioritized. People who have struggled through the language learning process will have insight into the experience of ELLs that others do not. While any bilingual tutor will

have an advantage, individuals who have learned another language as an adult will have an additional layer of awareness of the complexities of learning a language.

Socio/political or Critical Awareness

Using the CRP theoretical perspective, communication centers should prioritize socio/political and critical awareness and train consultants to include socio/political or critical awareness into consultations when possible. Socio political/critical consciousness is the ability to critique the environment and the problems encountered (Ladson-Billings, 2021). This section will highlight how being informed about different world Englishes and the various ways in which cultures structure formal essays can improve tutors' critical awareness.

Specifically, learning about world Englishes may be a helpful starting point for increasing personal awareness of your own prejudices. One of the authors was teaching students in China that “in hospital” was not grammatically correct. She was embarrassed when her students approached her with a dictionary and asked her why the phrase “in hospital” was in their dictionary. She felt embarrassed because the source of this knowledge was British and she was unwilling to criticize British English. However, not all Englishes receive the same status. Tutors should be sensitive to power differentials that would devalue the English of countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Singapore, or Jamaica where English is an official language and the language of instruction. If a student disagrees with a grammatical correction, tutors should be willing to listen to the student’s argument and also provide their own grammar source for why they suggest a change rather than only using the privilege afforded by having American English as their first language. Simply saying, “because it feels right to me” is not an acceptable answer when a first language English speaker from a less dominant country doesn’t think it “feels right.” Purdue’s Online Writing Lab (n.d.) provides a brief summary of world Englishes that may be helpful for consultants or tutors in communication centers.

When working with students on the organization of a written document, tutors should also be aware that different cultures have different ways of structuring formal writing. Bhowmik and Chaudhuri (2022) invite teachers to “encourage students to explore their awareness of the differences between L1- and L2-specific cultural thought patterns that result in different composition styles, rhetorical structures, and argumentation” (p.1417). Their second strategy recommendation is to assist students in attending to audience expectations. “The objective is to encourage learners to engage with differences in writing patterns not as a way to assimilate with dominant pedagogical expectations, but to utilize the idea of appropriation to advance one’s understanding of why English academic writing uses particular rhetorical structures and its impact on the audience” (p. 1418). By explicitly recognizing the differences in structures, students can express the values of their own system and may want to express frustration that the values of their system cannot be contained in the dominant discourse. Tutors can be trained to validate students as they struggle through deciding how or if to shift their writing voice in their new context.

Conclusion

This paper briefly synthesized the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and highlighted why and how communication centers should utilize CRP when working with students from different backgrounds. Using a CRP lens, this paper offers guidance for connecting a student's cultural experience to their learning through providing comprehensible input, actively listening to student concerns and aspirations, intentionally celebrating diverse student backgrounds, and communicating with an awareness of our own experiences and culture. Furthermore, prioritizing tutor training and helping them to grow in cultural competence as well as using center space to create a place where diverse cultural perspectives and critical awareness are celebrated is critical to serving students effectively. At a time when more traditional DEI services are seeing reductions and cuts, CRP offers a helpful framework for meeting a need by serving and supporting diverse student groups within the context of communication centers.

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