

# PUTTING

*Relationships*

# FIRST



**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE-  
SUSTAINING EDUCATION**

*Across  
Learning  
Environments*

*How likely are you to run into one of your students at the grocery store, a restaurant, or the dentist's office?*



Another way to frame this question might be: **do you live and teach in the same community where your students live and go to school?**

While there is no right or wrong answer to that question, it is helpful to start with the easiest way to know our students – live where they live, shop and eat in the same places, and wait at the same bus stop. Our students would certainly see us as “real people”; they could know a little something about us.



In turn, we would have a greater understanding of the community culture, youth culture, popular culture, and all the other forms of home culture that they bring to school. We could leverage this deep cultural knowledge to develop multiple means of engagement, expression, and representation in our instructional design.

*We would have a tremendous head start on the essential task of building positive relationships with our students.*

While living and working in the same neighborhood simply isn't possible for every teacher, another inroad to knowing our students better is to take the step of increasing our cultural competence. The collective and ongoing effort to increase cultural competence is a key factor in the impact teachers have on the lives of students, whether we see them in the grocery store or not. We can still make our knowledge of culture (the “C” in “CRSE”) a top priority. The New York State CRSE Framework is very clear about the words responsive and sustaining.

**To respond to a cultural context, we have to know, understand, and value it as an asset in students' lives. To sustain a cultural context, we have to recognize cultural pluralism and refrain from attempting to change our students' fundamental identities.**

# WHAT IS CULTURAL PLURALISM?

Cultural pluralism is defined as **“the societal condition in which minority groups within a society can maintain their distinctive cultural identities, values, and practices provided that they are consistent with the laws and values of the wider society.”**

Cultural pluralism stands in contrast to cultural assimilation, the process in which an ethnic minority “adopts the beliefs, languages, and customs of the dominant community, losing their own culture in the process.” A stark example of cultural assimilation is the historical practice of removing indigenous children from their homes to enroll them in publicly funded boarding schools from 1819 to 1969. The purpose of these schools was to forcibly assimilate American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children into the dominant culture by prohibiting them from speaking their languages or practicing their religious and cultural traditions.

## WHAT IS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE-SUSTAINING EDUCATION?

“

Culturally responsive education is about teaching the students in front of you. To do this requires that one work to get to know their students and develop meaningful relationships with students while engaging in the students’ communities. However, culturally responsive education must also be sustaining, that is it must work to encourage cultural pluralism and not cultural assimilation. Home and youth culture should be welcomed into the classroom as areas ripe for discussion. Differences should not just be seen as strengths, but they should also be maintained because they are what make students and families unique.” The New York State *CRSE Framework*, p.13

”

This call to be both responsive and sustaining applies equally to our virtual classrooms and our in-person classrooms. In Module 1, Session 3, we explored the ways that relationship-building extends far beyond the “team-building time” in the first week of school.

We need to know what our students are interested in and what their goals are for themselves in order to make responsive decisions about curriculum, materials, teaching strategies, classroom management, and assessments.

*We need to know our students before we teach them.*

*Research indicates positive teacher-student relationships can*

strengthen academic achievement,

reduce chronic absenteeism,

promote self-motivation,

strengthen self-regulation, and

improve goal-setting skills.

(SOURCE: [APA](#))

Let’s look at three foundations of building culturally responsive and sustaining relationships with our students, in service to academic achievement, social development, positive classroom climate, and equity in education.

# 3

## FOUNDATIONS OF BUILDING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

### START WITH YOURSELF

Begin with critical reflection, self-awareness of unconscious bias, empathy development, and cultivating self-knowledge.

### CULTIVATE CURIOSITY

To build relationships, stay curious about our students, their families, and communities.

### CENTER LEARNING

Actively focus on the assets of students to build greater student ownership of their learning.



# START WITH YOURSELF



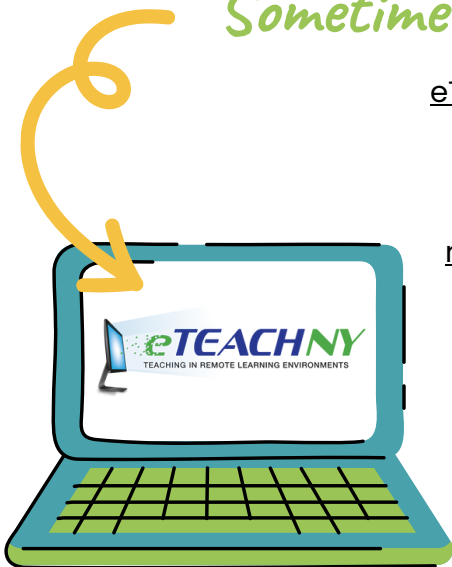
**CRSE begins with the process of self-awareness, specifically, awareness of our own implicit biases – the attitudes or stereotypes that we may not be fully conscious of that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions.** While the influence of social messages affects everyone, we can mitigate the effects of our biases with mindfulness, empathy development, consciousness, and increasing and cultivating self-knowledge.

The practice of critical reflection has been shown to impact the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of pre-service teachers. G. Faith Little of Columbia University's Center for the Professional Education of Teachers describes the core principles of critical reflection in this way:

*"Critical reflection includes meta-cognition, self-awareness, and considering multiple viewpoints – features which result in reflective action. Individuals who are able to reflect critically on their experiences are better positioned to learn from their successes and missteps so that they can be constantly improving their practice."*

*Sometimes it is helpful to have guided self-reflection.*

eTeachNY is a coalition of education partners who have come together to support the implementation of the Teaching in Remote Learning Environments (TRLE) Initiative in coordination with the New York State Education Department. The eTeachNY website contains numerous resources and professional learning experiences for teachers that reflect the best of what was learned during the shift to emergency remote teaching. Let's look at a couple of tools designed to take our self-reflection across learning environments.



The eTeachNY website offers a wealth of self-guided resources for teaching in remote and hybrid learning environments. Visit [www.eteachny.org](http://www.eteachny.org) to learn more.

## COUNTERING BIAS IN REMOTE LEARNING

This set of activities on the eTeachNY site gives us a chance to reflect on our own unconscious bias and structural systems of bias in the remote learning and teaching space. This resource challenges us to examine the roots of the digital divide that was revealed during the shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT).

A related activity developed by eTeachNY helps us uncover biases to address stereotype threats across learning environments. This self-assessment is an action step we can take to improve our remote teaching environments.



# CULTIVATE CURIOSITY

**Understanding ourselves can open up new channels of interest, curiosity, and respect for others.** This is foundational to forming positive relationships with students and creating an environment that helps students build positive relationships with each other. To persevere in spite of differences and build relationships, we have to stay curious about each other.

To fully engage with our students, we have to engage with their families and home communities, as well. Curriculum resources such as this [Community Tool Box](#) or [Respect for Diversity](#) can expand our understanding and appreciation for the complexity of cultures and identities.

## LEVERAGING CURIOSITY

Research informs us that curiosity is a powerful driver of learning. No matter which learning environment we are working in, we can also leverage curiosity to increase mutual understanding and empathy in our classrooms. The graphic below offers tools for generating curiosity in the classroom.



*And the good news: these activities are portable across learning environments.*



### Tool



### Across Learning Environments

**IN A MILLION WORDS OR LESS...**



Hard copy, Google Docs, [Flip](#)

**CLASS SCRAPBOOK**



[StoryboardThat](#), Google Slides

**STUDENT INTEREST INVENTORY**



Google Forms, [Socrative](#), [Kahoot](#)

**COMMUNITY CIRCLE**



In-person, Zoom/Meets, [VoiceThread](#) (asynchronous "circle")

# CENTER LEARNING



**Engaging with identity and diversity, modeling curiosity and interest, and partnering with students to make instructional choices are all part of the journey of centering learning rather than teaching.**

To create the conditions for positive relationships, we need to look at our mindsets about learning. Language or teaching behaviors that reflect deficit-based thinking – a focus on the problems we perceive students to be experiencing – can reinforce low expectations and low relationality between students and teachers.

Actively focusing on the strengths, assets, and opportunities that our students bring to school is an ongoing personal and professional practice that supports mutual respect and trust.

*Authors of their Learning* In a true asset-based approach, we center the thinking of our students to drive their own deeper engagement. We make a lot of decisions as teachers! To center our students as the authors of their learning, we can decide on learning routines, cognitive-demand levels, and discussion formats that send a powerful message: “You’ve got this.” **Your role: coach and cheerleader.**

**The Institute for Learning reports that these three practices can promote greater student ownership of learning and shape students’ identities as capable and empowered.**



Regularly convey that you value divergent thinking and reasoning by assigning cognitively challenging tasks with multiple entry points. Students should know that you trust them to reason using their background knowledge, skills, and insights.

Choose learning routines that de-emphasize the teacher's role of telling and explaining. Encourage students to ask questions, develop and use models, make meaning, support their conclusions, and think critically.



Open the floor to discussion and use discussion facilitation formats such as academic conversations (online or in person) to formatively assess learning and support participation.

## Avoiding Tokenism


While we should continue to expose our students to historical knowledge about people from all walks of life and while we should not shy away from the difficult task of teaching the history of oppression, as culturally responsive educators we have to avoid tokenism.

That means avoiding projects that put forth a single well-known individual (Sitting Bull, Stephen Hawking, Harriet Tubman, Harvey Milk) as representatives of their entire culture. It also means not singling out students to “represent” history.

Our CRSE lens asks us not to inadvertently reinforce stereotypes by focusing on single individuals. Non-stereotypic portrayals can reduce prejudice and negative attitudes toward people unlike ourselves.

Building strong relationships with students doesn't require living in the same neighborhood, walking the same paths, or even speaking the same language. It requires our heartfelt commitment to knowing each student as a whole person, valuing the cultural assets they bring with them, and prioritizing knowing our students before teaching our students.

# Now it's your turn!



In your next workbook activity, you will consider the following important questions.

How did you form strong relationships with students during emergency remote teaching?

How did this impact your instruction?

How might you change your relationship-building practices for teaching *across* learning environments in the future?



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# About Us

## **The TALE Academy**

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

## **The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project**

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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