

Introduction

I began the work of designing culturally sustaining curriculum, and supporting others to do so, in 2014 when I was an administrator for a network of public charter schools called Acero Schools (previously UNO Charter School Network) in Chicago. I oversaw curriculum and assessment for sixteen schools serving students in grades K–12. The network had been started almost twenty years earlier by Latino community organizers to address overcrowded and underresourced district schools in Latino communities in Chicago. The schools had a solid reputation in the community and were well regarded in the city for driving academic achievement. During my time there, the network was the top-performing charter organization according to the city’s School Quality Rating Policy.

While Acero had an impressive “for us, by us” ethos, that character was not yet showing up in the academic program. Acero parents took ownership of the schools, and network leadership could easily mobilize them. There were arts and music offerings (including a particularly impressive mariachi program) that honored the culture and heritage of the people who had built the network. The schools were named for Latinx authors, poets, and leaders, but students did not learn about them. While the students came primarily from Latino households and many spoke Spanish at home, the curriculum on balance was fairly traditional—especially in the humanities, where kids studied traditional Anglo-centric topics in history and literature. Much of my work, therefore, was organized to integrate the ethos and ideals of the organization into the academic program. I worked

with leaders across the organization to design equity into the academic program, such that students would be able to leverage their full set of cultural and linguistic assets in their academic pursuits.

At about this time the state of Illinois began the process of adopting new social studies standards based on the C3 (College, Career and Civic Life) Framework for Social Studies State Standards established by the National Council for the Social Studies in 2010. These new standards would be content agnostic—a departure from the state’s existing standards, which articulated a list of historical events and characters that students would learn about. The focus instead would be on building a set of skills to guide historians, economists, geographers, and engaged citizens. The new standards would not come with a prescribed curriculum. Early conversations at the state level suggested that schools might design curriculum using the C3 Framework as a guide.

The move away from a prescriptive set of social studies standards created an opportunity for Acero to adopt a curriculum that represented the community we served. That there was policy to support the ideal future state—one where students from the Latino community could consistently study the histories and narratives of people who looked like them, had similar experiences, faced similar challenges, and enjoyed similar triumphs—was electrifying.

Summer after summer, I brought together a group of instructional leaders and teachers representing various schools and grade levels to create standards maps using the new framework. We also discussed our plans and possible next steps. We imagined finding a social studies or humanities curriculum that would cultivate students’ sense of belonging and enfranchisement through an ever-deepening knowledge of Latino activists, artists, authors, and civil servants.

As we moved from mapping to looking for resources, however, our enthusiasm was dampened. There were few existing texts that centered the Latino experience in the way that we envisioned. This came as a surprise. Available resources focused only on activism or times when Latino issues became national news, falling short of the fuller expression of community life that we’d hoped for. These seemed to have been created with the general public in mind, not for Latinos seeking to deepen their knowledge of

their own histories. While there were some curricula from a previous era, when the civil rights movement had resulted in a push for ethnic studies to be offered in public schools, these materials were not aligned with current thinking about social studies education. New pedagogies organized around inquiry and application in the world outside of school were not reflected in those materials. They were fundamentally built on a different template than all current curriculum.

We decided that if no curriculum yet existed, we would adapt and implement a framework for designing curriculum that would reflect the identity of our community. But while many frameworks for curriculum design were available, none of them gave any significant weight to cultural relevance or guidance for how to design curriculum for students from marginalized communities. There was simply nothing available.

This, too, came as a shock. Many of us had read Friere, Ladson-Billings, and Gay in our preservice training. Django Paris's call for a culturally sustaining pedagogy "to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" was so clear and resonant. Certainly we were not the only educators serving in communities of color, seeking to have the character of our community alive in our classrooms as these scholars had inspired us to do. I had been prepared to build consensus on a plan for cultural relevance, purchase materials, and support their use. Plan B was to implement an existing framework for designing culturally relevant curriculum and support its use. But there was no such curriculum, and there were no guide books for designing one.

To build a culturally sustaining curriculum for our students, I leaned on previous professional experience as a curriculum designer and facilitator of curriculum development. Past work had allowed me to bring educators together with content experts to design new courses of study. These included single courses, programs for multiple schools in a district or network of schools, and whole-school models. The foci ranged from entrepreneurship to digital journalism to arts integration. I'd had success with this recipe. When the process created opportunities for educators to bring their classroom-based expertise and subject-matter experts to bring their field-based knowledge to bear, the final product reflected the best of both.

When all went well, those programs worked in real-world classrooms and engaged students in practices that were authentic to the field: entrepreneurship looked and felt more like what entrepreneurs actually do; digital journalism was patterned on current practices, not outdated or watered-down “newsroom activities.”

As colleagues we decided that our students were worth the risk of entering into a design process that we could find no guideposts for. Because there was no guide, we did not know if what we produced would land. We did not know if others would criticize it. We were unsure of how much use it would get. All of these uncertainties weighed on us, but they were preferable to the alternative. Having done our due diligence, we knew that the alternative was a totally unacceptable reality in which students had zero opportunities to authentically study the histories of their community via the formal curriculum. Even if what we produced was not perfect, we were convinced to move forward. We could analyze our own efficacy against very simple criteria: students in grades 6–12 would have x opportunities to study Latinx history, y opportunities to read Latinx authors, and z classroom examinations of *testimonio* from their community. These efforts and their willingness to confront the cognitive dissonance presented by the work ahead were worthwhile, as x , y , z would ultimately represent a greater value than their current values of *seldom*, *maybe in college*, and *never*, respectively.

I developed a design process that included significant research and discovery, peer review for alignment with standards, and consultation with an expert. Dr. Héctor García Chávez, who chaired the Latino Studies Department at Loyola University Chicago, agreed to meet with us, offer perspective on the work, and provide resources from his personal library. Each step of the design process was organized to authentically reflect Latinx scholars’ thinking and interpretation of their history and literature. The work of the educators was to “curricularize” that perspective such that teachers across our network of schools could implement it.

Each school had a schedule that worked for it. Most allocated more time to English language arts (ELA) than to social studies. Each staff was different: the teachers who would embrace a culturally sustaining curriculum did not all teach the same subject or grade level. We wanted to give this curriculum the best possible chance to be implemented well, and the

maximum possible number of teachers the opportunity to use it and offer feedback. To that end, the curriculum that we designed was modular and interdisciplinary. It was modular in the sense that these projects could be brought into an existing course, and the teacher could choose where in the sequence they would fit best. Some teachers combined multiple projects to create an elective. The curriculum was interdisciplinary in that it referenced history, literature, and civic engagement. Seasoned language arts teachers could use their well-developed instructional muscle to teach this curriculum in an ELA course. Social studies teachers similarly could see the curriculum's natural fit in their classes due to its history and civics focus.

Since this first endeavor I have run multiple design cohorts with educators from across the country. These engagements have typically been sponsored by an organization that has identified culturally sustaining curriculum as an unmet need in its community, and have ranged from day-long design sprints to remote experiences spanning months. Originally designed to support the development of curriculum centered on the Latinx intellectual tradition, the process has been reused and repurposed. Designers in subsequent cohorts have used the same process to design curriculum centered on other intellectual traditions that have been excluded from typical academic programs. Professionals including teachers, school leaders, curriculum designers, and nonprofit and community leaders have taken that on. They have been inspired by the same desire for their students to be cultivated in their own intellectual tradition, sometimes unwilling to tolerate the erasure that they themselves experienced in their schooling. Professionals using this process for curriculum design come from many states, two dozen at this time, and inquiries or units that have been produced through this process are being implemented in forty-three states.

Educators who have used this process to design curriculum have produced not only useful materials, but also a change in mind-set. The process itself is educative, allowing for previously nebulous ideas about equity in education to become tangible. Mary O'Brien-Combs, a designer in the 2018 cohort, described this shift as impacting not only her understanding of curriculum, but also her aims as an educator:

For the past several years, I've approached teaching with a grave sense of urgency, intensely concerned with fully arming students with everything

they'll need to navigate a dismissive higher-education system. Through the process of collaboration, discussion, and exploration of resources as part of this project, my view has shifted. I now no longer feel I have to coach my students on the quickest way to get around a sleeping ogre, but to instead pause, focus, and take a thoughtful aim in learning about their own inherently spectacular legacy of strength.

Educators who use these materials in their classrooms tend to increase their use semester over semester, year over year. Where a teacher has used one project in a given semester, they are likely to use two the next. Where a teacher has used two to three over the course of a year, they are likely to create a semester-long elective the next. Designers like Ericka Streeter-Adams, from the 2018 and 2019 cohorts, describe dramatic changes in their students' engagement and investment, taking pride in and ownership of their learning:

From the onset you could see the curiosity arise in my scholars' eyes and the pride they exude knowing and feeling connected to the discourse. As opposed to students being the audience of a stale and stagnant lecture, within this curricular paradigm they have become the "experts," leveraging their cultural insight, awareness, and wonderings. The scholars value the discussions, and the tasks have taken on a new life. The conversational tone has become more universal and relevant, and owned by each individual scholar. In this culturally equitable environment we have leveraged the community of thinkers. It feels like a cultural and academic rebirth.

Regardless of their role or level of expertise in curriculum design, I refer to these professionals, while they are engaged in this process, as "designers." While you are driving, you are considered a driver. Likewise, while engaged in design the teachers, nonprofit leaders, instructional leaders, and community members who take on this work are designers. This book is intended to guide the reader through this process of discovery, creative struggle, and shrewd decision-making as designers.

Designers, welcome.

About the Book

The purpose of this book is to provide the rationale and step-by-step guidance that teachers and school leaders, working with scholars and others, can use to produce rigorous, standards-aligned, culturally sustaining hu-

manities units. Modular in nature, these units can be used as part of an existing course or in combination to create new courses for middle and high school students.

I call the units produced by this framework “culturally sustaining” because I believe they are consistent with Django Paris’s use of this term in the 2012 essay where he coined it. Paris posited that today’s scholars and practitioners may stand on the shoulders of the scholars who gave us culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies in order to go further:¹

Recently, however, I have begun to question if the terms “relevant” and “responsive” are really descriptive of much of the teaching and research founded upon them and, more importantly, if they go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of communities marginalized by systemic inequalities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our multiethnic and multilingual society. In this essay, I offer the term and stance of “culturally sustaining pedagogy” as an alternative that, I believe, embodies some of the best research and practice in the resource pedagogy tradition and as a term that supports the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. In the face of current policies and practices that have the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society, research and practice need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality.

This book is intended to operationalize Paris’s culturally sustaining pedagogy as the Inquiry Design Model did for inquiry-based teaching and project-based learning did for constructivism. When practitioners make powerful educational philosophy and pedagogies operational (with tools, products, and step-by-step processes), powerful things happen. Communities of practice come together. There are tangible tools that change the daily educational experience of teachers and students. There are products that can be critiqued and improved upon through iteration.

I have organized the book into three parts. Part I introduces the “why” and “what” of the new canon and places the work in a historical, methodological, and pedagogical context. Part II is devoted to the sequential steps involved in building culturally sustaining curriculum units. The final section, Part III, provides educators with tools to successfully integrate

these units into the context of their courses, schools, and communities in a way that, in Paris's words, "supports the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future."

The process presented in this book has been practiced by many, revised, remixed, and codified. The steps can be taken in as little as two weeks or as long as three months, depending on the needs and obligations of the designers. These steps are in no way easy, but, if they are followed, the results are transformative. The steps are organized to apply the designers' attention to the cultural relevance and authenticity of each design decision. The product should be a project or unit of study that authentically represents the intellectual tradition of the community that it is being written for. An LGBTQ+ project should examine parts of that experience from the LGBTQ+ perspective. A project about Muslim American literature will ask the questions Muslim American authors struggle with. A unit on Chicano muralists might ask students to propose a mural design that demonstrates deep knowledge of that artistic tradition.

Each design step is preceded by a discussion of its theoretical basis. This includes a description of the scholarship to support why the design step might differ from common practices in curriculum design and research on ways that common practices and the formal curriculum have failed students in marginalized communities. These sections presume that most readers have had either professional or personal experiences of the K–12 schooling system that have ingrained in them ideas and beliefs that need to be confronted. This is not an indictment of the designer, but a recognition of the ways that the system of schooling has systematically marginalized the histories and narratives of nondominant communities. Where designers seek to create something different than has been available in the past, they cannot employ past methods. And in order to do something new—something that for many will feel uncomfortable or nonintuitive—most of us need to know *why* we are doing something new.

Design steps are followed by examples of real designers who have used the process described in this book to create projects for their own use and to be used by others. I'll also describe the challenges these designers faced and the decisions they made. Readers will see the way that their projects evolved step by step. The designers demonstrate that even with different

themes and content, the process produces resources that have shared qualities and character. The project maps they produced are introduced in the chapters, and their final published curricular units are shared in their entirety in the appendixes and are also freely available as open educational resources.

These designers were participants in a design cohort in early 2019 sponsored by Gradient Learning (the organization that runs the Summit Learning Program) and C3Teachers, a community of teachers and teacher educators engaged in using inquiry in social studies education. Both organizations involved their leaders in planning, facilitating, and reviewing the projects that were produced. The projects that are featured in this book as examples, along with others, are available at no cost to partner schools on the Summit Learning Platform, and to the general public on C3teachers.org.

It is important to stress that the designers featured in this book all have different roles in their respective organizations. Each entered into the process having a unique motivation and seeking to write for a distinct community. I included a variety of designers intentionally in the hopes that readers will be able to see ways they can use their own particular expertise and assets to engage in the design process. These designers include the following:

Malika Ali is the Director of Pedagogy for The Highlander Institute, where she develops programs to support culturally sustaining and responsive pedagogy, instructional equity, and innovation for schools throughout New England. Malika's engagement with the design cohort was inspired by a desire to build skills in curriculum design and also to produce resources that would resonate with students in the Eritrean and Ethiopian community where she lives in Providence, Rhode Island. She is a former Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, having taught STEM subjects in Providence Public Schools. Malika identifies as the daughter of strong and brilliant Eritrean refugees.

Cameron (Cam) Lloyd is a Lead Curriculum Designer for EL Education, a national education nonprofit that provides curriculum, professional development, and support to schools nationwide. Cam works on a large curriculum team, building capacity in team members and developing

resources relating to accessibility and intervention. He worked as an elementary school teacher and reading specialist in Washington, DC, New York, and Seattle before shifting to full-time program development. Cam was motivated to participate in the design cohort in part to develop his facility with curriculum development to augment his expertise in literacy programming. Cam was also inspired to fill a gap that he saw in upper elementary school curriculum addressing LGBTQ identity.

David Alfafara is the Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction at Victoria Soto High School in Chicago's Gage Park neighborhood. David oversees a large staff and is responsible for professional development, curriculum, and instruction for a school serving predominantly Latinx and Black students. David has taught and had leadership roles in a variety of charter schools in Chicago following a successful career in business. David's engagement with the design cohort was inspired by his knowledge of ways that the formal curriculum fails to address the experiences of the Black and brown students in urban schools.

Annabeth Edens is the Social Studies Department Chair and teacher at Royal Spring Middle School outside Lexington, Kentucky. Annabeth has consistently engaged in curriculum development in her practice, led design efforts in her school, and served on advisory boards for the state. She is committed to culturally responsive teaching practices and deeply familiar with inquiry-based design. Annabeth was engaged with this design cohort to continue to build her capacity for curriculum design, and particularly to grow in her ability to design with a focus on equity and with her African American students in mind.

How to Use This Book

There are a few ways individuals, school-based teams, or multischool teams might use this book and the associated materials. The first potential use is to follow the steps and design projects. In this case, the design process will familiarize the individual or group with the theory and pedagogy that undergirds these projects. That familiarity will enable the use not only of the projects they design, but also of projects designed by others using this process. Designers might then add to or build new courses using both types of projects.

The second potential use is to read the book solely to become familiar with the pedagogy and design principles in order to implement projects designed by others. In this case, there may be a core group designing new projects and an additional group using the book to prepare them to teach those projects. Individuals may read the book, prepare and teach existing projects, and use that experience to design their own projects at a later time.

The wrong approach would be reading this book with the notion that groups or individuals will need to create all their own projects. That idea is both daunting and runs counter to the spirit of this work. If we are to build a body of work sufficient to constitute a new canon of curriculum that better reflects our students, we must rely on one another and engage in this work as a community. So, if you plan read this book in order to design projects, know that others have gone before and their work is available to you for reference or inspiration. If you plan to read this book in order to prepare to teach projects, know that there are good projects readily available to you. This work began as a community effort, and you are invited to engage with the work in that same spirit—as a member of an ever-growing community.