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CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN ART EDUCATION

Critical Race Theory (CRT), first posited by Black legal scholars, emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a framework for legal analysis based on the presupposition that racism is endemic within societies and institutions. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a founding critical race theorist and law school professor, introduced CRT as a verb because the concept is constantly evolving (George, 2021).

As art educators, we strive to improve our praxis through reflection. In this way, we are continuously learning and growing. In recent times, CRT has made the news with scholars and community members affirming support for CRT or opposition to it. CRT provides a theoretical underpinning for exploring systematic racism. The concept calls attention to race as a social construct, and how such constructs impact societal decisions and perspectives. At the same time, it is important to note that CRT may differ depending on the populations served. For example, [Tribal critical race theory \(TribalCrit\)](#) and a [Filipino/a/x critical race perspective \(FilCrit\)](#) are inclusive and appropriate for working in Tribal and Filipino/a/x communities. These community-specific theories honor diverse cultural ways of knowing and being. In other words, these varying theoretical perspectives guide us in making connections with the communities we serve.

Likewise, Lisa Delpit's¹ work on the culture of power (1988) may help us make connections concerning CRT as a theory and bridge the theory with our praxis as art educators. According to Delpit, "those with power are frequently less aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (Delpit, 1988, p. 282). As art educators strive to understand CRT better while acknowledging the culture of power described above, how do we navigate fear, discomfort, and systems of power? How do we make "good trouble" and "stand in the gap," instead of occupying the sidelines in art education? The following example may help art educators connect theory to practice while considering how we might integrate CRT and racial perspectives in an educational setting.

In Lebanon, Missouri, high school students attended a virtual Globally Strong Culture Fair during spring 2021. Each week they had Zoom guests from all over the world. These special guests shared personal stories that connected to the region, community, and local culture. Students submitted a sketchbook entry of notes and drawings for each guest, and their culture fair

research and projects. Guests included refugees from Somalia and El Salvador, who told stories of their struggles as historically marginalized peoples seeking U.S. citizenship. One of the guests was a chemist working for a company currently manufacturing the Moderna vaccine against COVID-19. These conversations helped students make personal connections to people outside of their segregated, homogeneous communities. Moreover, these exchanges helped dispel the fear and ignorance that make discussions about systems of race, power, and privilege difficult.

As we lean in and consider how to best serve our students from diverse communities, we must do so in culturally sustaining/revitalizing ways—the topic of a previous Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission column. We suggest considering CRT as a means to empower marginalized voices within schools and other educational settings, help learners think critically about schools and other institutions that influence and shape their lives, and inspire students to challenge systems of racial and ethnic injustice. Finally, we close our column with a call to action. For this column, we pose questions to ask yourself when working to advance CRT and to address the potential opposition to it in your learning environment:

- How can art educators stand in the gap² instead of feeling comfortable as an ally with an easy way out from the uncomfortable?
- How do we come to terms with our nation's often shameful history and how that impacts power dynamics in our communities?
- How can we teach our students to acknowledge uncomfortable conversations about the culture of power and structural racism in art education?
- How can we transform the existing perspectives that silence the dialogue necessary for diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives to be honored, heard, and included in the art classroom? ■

References

- Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 280–298.
- George, J. (2021, January 12). A lesson on critical race theory. *Human Rights Magazine*, 46(2). www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/a-lesson-on-critical-race-theory

1 Lisa Delpit is an award-winning author and renowned scholar in the field of education.

2 According to Webster's *Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, "To stand in the gap is to expose one's self for the protection of something; to make defense against any assailing danger, to take a place of a fallen defender or supporter."



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