

**Empowering Novice Educators: Best Practices for Creating a Rigorous and Inclusive
Curriculum**

Deon E. Avery

American College of Education

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Dr. Eliel Hinojosa

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Education is the cornerstone of personal and societal advancement. A rapidly evolving world demands an educational approach that prioritizes lifelong learning, where students continually adapt to new challenges in their personal, professional, and civic lives (UNESCO, 1996). Central to this vision is student-centered education, an approach that positions the learner at the heart of the educational experience. Student-centered learning fosters independence, adaptability, and a deep sense of personal responsibility (UNESCO, 1996). Unlike traditional methods that often focus on passive knowledge absorption, student-centered learning empowers individuals to actively construct their own knowledge, equipping them with the skills to navigate uncertainty and complexity (UNESCO, 1996).

Education must cultivate a holistic understanding of self, others, and the world to prepare students for the demands of modern society. Educating the whole child through student centered learning requires educators to foster emotional intelligence and interpersonal understanding among students (UNESCO, 1996). Students must understand themselves and others to support mutual respect, collaboration, and peaceful coexistence in the global community. Education must balance personal development with the collective needs of society, enabling students to manage conflicts intelligently and engage constructively in shared endeavors (UNESCO, 1996).

Achieving student-centered learning calls for an integrated framework grounded in the four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be (UNESCO, 1996). The four pillars provide a comprehensive foundation for student-centered education, addressing intellectual, practical, social, and personal dimensions of learning (UNESCO, 1996). The framework empowers educators to design meaningful learning experiences that nurture the whole student, ensuring academic success and the development of

well-rounded individuals who are equipped to contribute thoughtfully and effectively to their communities.

Promote Dialogue and Empathy with Quality Resources

When selecting resources, educators should evaluate the quality and relevance to diverse student needs. Teachers must look for materials that reflect a variety of cultural perspectives, offer differentiated content, and align with curriculum standards. The Human Library program is a resource that provides a unique platform for fostering the four pillars of education by engaging students in meaningful dialogue with human books (Bundalian et al., 2020). These human books are individuals who share their personal experiences to help students explore diverse perspectives. The human books are often from marginalized backgrounds (Bundalian et al., 2020). Interacting with human books supports intellectual growth by allowing students to move beyond traditional learning resources, gaining firsthand knowledge of different cultural, social, and personal contexts (Bundalian et al., 2020). Students who interact with individuals from marginalized communities develop a deeper understanding of issues such as mental health, cultural diversity, and prejudice (Bundalian et al., 2020). The conversations encourage critical thinking and broaden students' worldview.

Human books equip students with the practical skills that align with the pillar of learning to do. By engaging in structured discussions, students practice active listening, thoughtful questioning, and respectful dialogue (Bundalian et al., 2020). The interactions teach students how to navigate sensitive topics and communicate effectively, preparing them for collaborative and professional environments (Bundalian et al., 2020). The program's structured conversations foster an environment where students can practice communication skills in a safe and supportive setting (Bundalian et al., 2020). The experiential learning derived from interacting with human

books helps students build confidence in addressing challenging societal issues, fostering a sense of responsibility and adaptability.

The Human Library excels in promoting learning to live together as students who participate in these sessions are exposed to narratives that challenge stereotypes and encourage inclusivity (Bundalian et al., 2020). By engaging directly with human books from diverse backgrounds, students gain empathy and appreciation for differences, which are critical for coexisting in multicultural societies (Bundalian et al., 2020). The program reduces prejudice by allowing students to see beyond societal labels and connect with the humanity of everyone (Bundalian et al., 2020). This transformative experience nurtures values of mutual respect and understanding among participants.

The program facilitates learning to be by encouraging students to reflect on their values, biases, and identities (Bundalian et al., 2020). The reflective conversations with human books enable students to develop emotional intelligence and self-awareness, helping them grow into well-rounded individuals (Bundalian et al., 2020). The students learn to better understand themselves in relation to others, fostering personal growth and resilience. The program's emphasis on introspection allows students to become more compassionate, ethical, and grounded individuals (Bundalian et al., 2020).

Promote Collaboration and Community with Technology

Google Drive serves as an invaluable technological tool for facilitating collaboration among students. The use of Google Drive aligns well with the four pillars of education. The platform enables both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, making it possible for students to work together regardless of time or location (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). Through shared documents, students can edit, comment, and provide visible feedback, fostering an environment

where they learn to know by engaging deeply with subject matter and each other's perspectives (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). The use of comments and revision tracking supports critical literacy activities, where students interrogate multiple viewpoints and address sociopolitical issues collaboratively (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). This form of collaboration enhances cognitive engagement and develops students' ability to think critically and creatively.

Google Drive supports the pillar of learning to do by encouraging students to actively participate in authentic, task-oriented collaboration (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). Features such as folder organization by unit, font color differentiation for clarity, and multimodal document inclusion make the platform user-friendly and conducive to hands-on learning (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). Students assume roles within collaborative projects, mirroring real-world professional environments. This practice equips students with the technical and interpersonal skills needed to navigate future challenges in academic and professional settings, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Dail & Vásquez, 2018).

Google Drive promotes learning to live together by fostering a sense of community and mutual respect among students. The platform provides a space for students to engage in dialogue, challenge stereotypes, and work toward common goals (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). This collaborative effort nurtures empathy and emphasizes the importance of diverse perspectives in achieving a shared understanding (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). The instructor's active role in providing feedback and facilitating discussions further enhances this communal aspect, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. By extending the classroom into an online space, Google Drive allows students to experience and practice social justice-oriented collaboration, thereby preparing them to contribute meaningfully to society (Dail & Vásquez, 2018). While Google Drive is a versatile platform, novice teachers should also explore other tools like Kahoot for

formative assessment, Canva for creative projects, and interactive whiteboard applications for dynamic instruction. These tools enhance engagement and offer varied approaches to meet diverse learning preferences.

Place-Based Education as a Tool for Advocacy and Inclusion

Place-based education (PBE) embodies the four pillars of education by fostering deep connections between students, their communities, and the broader sociopolitical landscape. Through experiential and advocacy-driven curricula, PBE transitions the focus from exchange value, which commodifies urban spaces for capital gain, to use value, which emphasizes accessibility, participation, and collective rights in urban areas (Convertino, 2023). By integrating community spaces into learning, PBE equips students with knowledge that is rooted in the lived realities of their communities which enables them to critically examine complex social issues like gentrification and displacement.

The pillar of "learning to do" is upheld through active engagement in community-based projects, internships, and urban exploration. At Midtown High School (MHS), an alternative public charter school, marginalized youth engaged with their city through issue-based learning to fight against gentrification (Convertino, 2023). The activities fostered practical skills and empowered students to challenge social injustices like gentrification and advocate for their communities (Convertino, 2023). Students were able to translate personal experiences into broader advocacy, connecting their intersectional identities to social and political issues. "Learning to live together" was reinforced through everyday encounters facilitated by PBE, where students interacted with diverse urban residents, fostering inclusivity and resisting exclusionary practices. There was a collective sense of belonging that highlighted the importance of inclusivity in urban spaces (Convertino, 2023). By being visible and vocal in the city, students

challenged efforts to marginalize youth and advocated for equitable access to these shared spaces.

PBE nurtures "learning to be" by empowering students to discover their agency and sense of purpose (Convertino, 2023). PBE encourages students to view themselves as active participants in shaping their communities, cultivating self-awareness and resilience. The urban PBE model exemplified by MHS demonstrates how education can transform marginalized youth into advocates for justice and inclusion, affirming their right to equitable educational and communal spaces (Convertino, 2023).

Mindfulness as a Catalyst for Positive Classroom Culture

Mindfulness plays a critical role in supporting the four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. Mindfulness equips students with the essential skills for holistic development by reducing the mental clutter associated with school (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021). Mindfulness involves observing one's thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations with acceptance rather than reacting to them impulsively. Research reveals that mindfulness mitigates the adverse effects of exhaustion and depersonalization to enhance focus and self-regulation (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021). The benefits align with the pillar of "learning to know," as students can better manage distractions, focus on their studies, and cultivate a deeper understanding of the knowledge they encounter.

Mindfulness supports "learning to do" by fostering emotional resilience and adaptive behaviors. The findings of Bilgiz and Peker (2021) reveal that mindfulness reduces the likelihood of maladaptive responses to stress, such as excessive reliance on smartphones and social media. When students can regulate their emotions and maintain a balanced approach to challenges, they are better equipped to apply their learning in practical contexts (Bilgiz & Peker,

2021). The emotional competence provided by mindfulness is critical for achieving personal and professional goals in dynamic environments.

The practice of mindfulness contributes to "learning to live together" by enhancing social awareness and interpersonal skills. Students who practice mindfulness are less likely to engage in behaviors that strain relationships, such as excessive technology use that detracts from face-to-face interactions (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021). Mindfulness promotes empathy and active listening, fostering healthier connections with peers, teachers, and family members (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021).

Mindfulness supports "learning to be" by empowering students to understand and nurture their inner selves (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021). Through mindfulness, students develop a non-judgmental awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, fostering self-acceptance and personal growth. (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021). Mindfulness acts as a buffer against the mental health challenges associated with burnout and misbehavior, enabling students to achieve a balanced sense of self amidst the pressures of modern education (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021). By integrating mindfulness practices, schools can help students embody the four pillars, promoting well-rounded, resilient learners.

Insights from an Educator: Promoting the Four Pillars of Education Through Classroom Practices

Ms. Teacher, a Haitian American high school history teacher, brings a unique perspective to her classroom, shaped by her personal and professional experiences. Her background as an ESOL student learning English as a second language informs her approach to fostering cultural understanding, empathy, and collaboration among her students. The strategies and practices shared by Ms. Teacher demonstrate how educators can promote the four pillars of education

within the classroom. Through thoughtful lesson design and a focus on cultural awareness, Ms. Teacher cultivates a learning environment that emphasizes critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration. Ms. Teacher's lesson, "What Do You See vs. What You Don't See," helps students reflect on visible and hidden aspects of identity through pictures. By drawing on her experience as an ESOL student, she challenges students to recognize assumptions and fosters cultural awareness. Ms. Teacher's use of shared cultural elements, such as the universal presence of rice and beans in many cuisines, connects students to both the differences and commonalities among cultures, enhancing their understanding of global perspectives.

Ms. Teacher integrates practices that emphasize hands-on learning and collaboration. Group activities and structured roles, such as speaker or researcher, encourage active participation and ensure accountability. A project on forms of government required students to create visual presentations and taught them to manage responsibilities and work as a team. Ms. Teacher uses technology tools like shared documents and applications such as Desmos and Flippity to promote digital literacy and effective communication. These approaches help students develop practical skills essential for real-world problem-solving.

Ms. Teacher prioritizes cultivating empathy and inclusivity, aligning with the pillar of learning to live together. By creating a social contract with her students, she establishes a foundation of mutual respect and understanding. Addressing conflicts openly and facilitating constructive conversations teach students how to resolve disagreements respectfully. The practice of greeting students individually demonstrates her commitment to fostering a classroom culture where all students feel seen and valued, regardless of their backgrounds. The focus on respectful interactions prepares students to engage harmoniously within diverse communities.

Ms. Teacher emphasizes self-reflection and personal growth, key aspects of learning to be. Through tools like reflection journals and scaffolded assignments, she encourages students to examine their own learning and development. Ms. Teacher supports diverse learning needs and empowers students to take ownership of their educational journeys by offering differentiated materials and giving students choices in their engagement. Ms. Teacher's methods exemplify how an educator can seamlessly integrate the four pillars of education into classroom practice, creating a holistic learning environment that prepares students for both academic success and meaningful participation in a multicultural world.

Table 1

Teacher Interview Responses Categorized by the Four Pillars of Education		
Pillar	Response	Details
Learning to Know	Response 10	Adjusted lessons for students with IEPs and ELL backgrounds using scaffolded graphic organizers and paired activities for better comprehension.
	Response 11	Acknowledges the need to improve scaffolding and resource selection to ensure assignments are <u>grade-level and engaging</u> .
Learning to Do	Response 7	Encourages effective teamwork through small group activities, assigning specific roles, and monitoring group projects in real time.
	Response 4	Uses shared drive documents and Chromebooks to teach students about roles, responsibilities, and <u>respectful collaboration</u> .
	Response 5	Employs “Teaching Tolerance” as a digital tool to guide students through courageous conversations and <u>conflict resolution</u> .
Learning to Live Together	Response 1	Uses activities like “What You See vs. What You Don’t See” to help students understand their own identities and others’ perspectives.
	Response 2	Connects students through cultural similarities, such as shared foods, and encourages discussions about individual backgrounds.
	Response 3	Creates a social contract to set expectations for empathy and respectful interactions, while addressing misunderstandings in real time.
	Response 6	Builds respect by personalizing interactions, maintaining transparency, and fostering open communication to <u>make students feel valued</u> .
	Response 8	Guides respectful conflict resolution by allowing students to share their perspectives, emphasizing the importance of thinking before reacting.
Learning to Be	Response 9	Evaluates development of empathy, cooperation, and cultural awareness through observations and reflection journals.
	Response 7	Encourages personal accountability by <u>assigning individual roles in group tasks</u> .
	Response 3	Reinforces the idea that students are capable of learning from mistakes in a structured and understanding environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of the four pillars of education—learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be—is essential for fostering well-rounded learners who are prepared for the complexities of modern society. The innovative approaches explored, including the Human Library program, Google Drive collaboration, place-based education, mindfulness practices, and culturally responsive teaching, provide actionable strategies for embedding these pillars into education. Each method emphasizes critical thinking,

practical skill development, empathy, and self-awareness, creating opportunities for holistic growth and meaningful engagement with diverse communities.

Programs like the Human Library and place-based education directly address societal challenges by fostering inclusion, equity, and advocacy. Technological tools, such as Google Drive, enhance collaboration and critical inquiry, while mindfulness practices offer strategies for emotional regulation and resilience. Culturally responsive teaching, as exemplified by Ms. Teacher, highlights the importance of inclusive pedagogies that affirm student identities and promote mutual respect. By embracing these strategies, educators can create environments that nurture academic success along with the social, emotional, and ethical development of students. These approaches highlight the transformative potential of education in preparing individuals to navigate and contribute to an interconnected world with empathy, adaptability, and purpose.

References

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Appendix A

Interview

1. Can you share an example of a specific lesson or material you use to help students understand their own identities and learn about others' perspectives?

I use a lesson called "What Do You See vs. What You Don't See." In this activity, students list things they can observe about a person and things that are less visible, such as personal experiences or cultural background. I draw on my own experience as an ESOL student learning English as a second language. Many people assumed I was African American and already fluent in English, which wasn't the case. This experience taught me how often assumptions are made. I use visuals and images to help students make connections and translate their thoughts into English, fostering understanding of hidden aspects of identity.

2. How do you choose resources to teach students about cultural differences and similarities in a way that is meaningful and clear to them?

I use texts, idioms, anecdotes, and my lived experiences. I also encourage students to share stories about themselves and their cultures to better understand their backgrounds. I often focus on similarities across cultures, like food. For example, rice and beans are staples in many cultures. Food has always been a powerful way to connect with students and learn about their identities and experiences.

3. What kinds of activities or materials do you use to encourage students to practice empathy and work together in your classroom?

I always start with a social contract where students decide how they want to be treated and how they will treat one another. I explain that while children will make mistakes, these guardrails help create understanding. When something inappropriate or hurtful is said, we address it openly as a class. This practice helps students reflect and grow.

4. Can you describe how you use technology to help students share their ideas and collaborate respectfully with their peers?

My students use Chromebooks and work together on shared documents through a shared drive. I coach them on roles and responsibilities within groups, such as managing absences and ensuring effective communication. This structure helps them collaborate more effectively and respectfully.

5. Are there specific digital tools or programs you use to guide students in resolving conflicts or having constructive discussions? How do you use them?

I use resources from "Teaching Tolerance," which offers enriching activities to facilitate difficult but necessary conversations. These tools provide frameworks for courageous discussions about identity, equity, and inclusion.

6. What specific steps do you take to create a classroom environment where students feel respected and valued, regardless of their cultural backgrounds or beliefs?

I make it a point to greet every student personally as I move around the room, often while collecting their phones. This personalized interaction helps students feel seen and valued. I am transparent with my students about challenges in the classroom, and I openly communicate when changes are needed. This honesty helps build trust and fosters an environment where students feel heard.

7. How do you encourage students to work together effectively toward common goals? Can you give an example of a time this worked well?

I use a lot of small group activities and tools like Desmos and Flippity to randomly group students. I assign specific roles—such as speaker, designer, question handler, and researcher—so everyone contributes. For example, in a project on different forms of government, students collaborated to create a poster and a flip chart. I monitored their shared documents in real time to ensure accountability. The result was a well-prepared and engaged group presentation.

Interview

8. When students have disagreements or conflicts, how do you guide them to resolve these through respectful conversation and understanding?

I give each student the opportunity to share their feelings and encourage them to agree to disagree when necessary. I explain the potential consequences of reacting impulsively and emphasize focusing on the bigger picture. Sometimes, I separate students briefly to give them time to reset before addressing the issue together.

9. How do you evaluate whether the materials and strategies you use are helping students develop skills like empathy, cooperation, and cultural awareness?

I rely on monitoring, observations, and reflection journals written by students. These tools provide insights into how effectively students are developing these critical skills.

10. Can you share an example of a time when you adjusted a lesson or classroom activity to better meet the needs of students from different cultural or learning backgrounds?

In one of my classes, I had 14 students with IEPs, and many others were ELLs, with some falling into both categories. I used graphic organizers with scaffolded text to make learning accessible instead of relying solely on whole texts. I also offered students choices in how they engaged with the material and paired them strategically based on strengths and skills. Activities like turn-and-talk and think-pair-share helped facilitate deeper understanding, and I provided a final check to ensure comprehension.

11. What is one specific area where you would like to improve or learn more about fostering cultural understanding, empathy, or teamwork among your students?

There is always room for improvement. I want to better scaffold assignments to ensure they are grade-appropriate and engaging. I am constantly looking for new resources that connect meaningfully to my content area.