# Cultures, Knowledge Traditions, and Social Systems of Schooling I (TLL 1582)
# Spring 2026 Living Syllabus

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| **Instructor:** | Ghirmay Alazar, PhD<br>Phone: 720-254-9838 | **Class Meetings:** | Mon. & Wed. 3pm-4:15pm |
| **Email**: | galazar@pitt.edu | **Class Term:** | Spring (1/12-4/24) |
| **Office Hours:** | By Appt. | **Class Location** | Posvar 5108 |

*The syllabus online is the official syllabus for this course. Updated versions will be identified as "Revised Syllabus" with date. The most recent changes will be highlighted.*

## Course Description

This course introduces issues of freedom and liberation and considers frameworks of access, equity, and inclusion in relation to school contexts. We do this by providing an overview of sociocultural and sociopolitical aspects of education and inviting students to situate themselves and their own educational histories within a broader understanding of the role(s) of schools in society. Students will examine significant knowledge traditions and learn how the educational praxes of knowledge traditions and language shape sociocultural and sociopolitical systems. This course takes culture as a key conceptual component for understanding: the traditions themselves; how structural, systemic responses to those traditions create repressive conditions; and how cultural knowledge is used to shape liberatory systems. The study of culture will be anchored in schools and counterpart learning contexts and will help students understand the networks of systems and knowledges within which schooling operates.

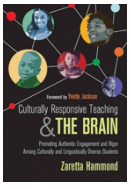
## Guiding Questions

How do sociocultural and sociopolitical frameworks impact freedom and liberation in schools, and how can they address access and equity issues?

How do knowledge traditions and languages shape sociocultural and sociopolitical systems in education, and how can this understanding lead to more equitable practices?

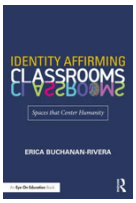
How can reflecting on personal educational histories help students understand the role of schools in society and promote inclusive and liberatory environments?

## Required Texts and Supplies




- Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students 1st Edition by Zaretta L. Hammond

- Identity Affirming Classrooms 1st Edition by Erica Buchanan-Rivera
- Regular Notebook




## Course Assignments

Assignments should be submitted in CANVAS by the established due date. Special circumstances will be considered if discussed with your instructor **prior** to an assignment being late.

Course grades will be determined by scores on all required course assignments as follows:

| **Assignments** | **Points** |
|---|---|
| Personal Reflections (6 @ 5 pts each) | 30 |
| My Culture | 5 |
| Shadow Work | 5 |
| Mirror Work | 5 |
| Attendance and Participation | 15 |
| Midterm Exam | 10 |
| Final Exam | 10 |
| Final Assignment: Liberatory Classroom Vision | 20 |

## Course Schedule *(subject to change as deemed appropriate by professor)*

| **Week** | **Topics / Guiding Questions** | **ASSIGNMENTS** |
|---|---|---|
| **1** 1/12 & 1/14 | Class Introduction.<br>How does cultural knowledge impact both repressive and liberatory aspects of education? | Personal Reflection 1 due (1/14) |
| **2** 1/21 | How do culturally responsive teaching principles align with neuroscience research on learning | Read: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)<br>Part 1: Sec 1-2 (pages 11-35) |
| **3** 1/26 & 1/28 | How can educators apply culturally responsive strategies to build students' cognitive and emotional resilience? | Read: (CRT)<br>Part 1: Sec 3-4 (pages 36-69)<br>Personal Reflection 2 due (1/28) |
| **4** 2/2 & 2/4 | How can educators create identity-affirming classrooms that honor students' cultural backgrounds and promote equity? | Read: Identity Affirming Classrooms: Introduction and Chapter 1 (pages 1-48) |
| **5** 2/9 & 2/11 | What role does self-reflection play in helping educators recognize and address biases in their teaching practices? | Read: Identity Affirming Classrooms: Chapter 2 (pages 51-71)<br>My Culture due 2/11 |
| **6** 2/16 & 2/18 | How does culturally responsive teaching activate the brain's cultural operating system and create a learning environment that supports independent learning? | Read: (CRT)<br>Part 2 Sec 5 (pages 72-86)<br>Personal Reflection 3 due (2/18) |
| **7** 2/23 & 2/25 | What strategies create a culturally responsive environment that supports independent learning and builds cognitive capacity? | Read: (CRT)<br>Part 2 Sec 6 (pages 88-107)<br>Shadow Work due 2/25 |
| **8** 3/2 & 3/4 | How can curriculum and classroom practices be designed to center student voices and affirm diverse identities?<br>Midterm Exam – During Class | Read: Identity Affirming Classrooms: Part II Chapter 3 Chapter 2 (pages 75-100) |
| **9** 3/9 & 3/11 | Spring Break | |

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|---|---|---|
| **10**<br>3/16 & 3/18 | How can educators use student-centered practices to create inclusive and affirming learning experiences? | Read: Identity Affirming Classrooms:<br>Part II Chapter 4 (pages 103-117)<br>Personal Reflection 4 due (3/18) |
| **11**<br>3/23 & 3/25 | How can teachers design classrooms to support diverse learners' brain development? | Read: (CRT)<br>Part 2 & 3 Sec 7 - 9 (pages 108-151) |
| **12**<br>3/30 & 4/1 | How can teachers build student agency and sustain culturally responsive practices for long-term learning growth? | Read: Identity Affirming Classrooms:<br>Part II Chapter 4 & 5 (pages 103-138)<br>Personal Reflection 5 due (4/1) |
| **13**<br>4/6 & 4/8 | *Speaker: Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera<br>How can educators move beyond traditional classroom management to co-create a 'space' that actively encourages and protects student authentic self-expression? | Read: Identity Affirming Classrooms:<br>Part II Chapter 6 (pages 142-159)<br>Mirror Work due 4/8 |
| **14**<br>4/13 & 4/15 | Putting it together – student selected topic(s)<br>Final Exam – During Class (4/15) | Personal Reflection 6 due 4/13 |
| **15**<br>4/20 & 4/22 | *Class time for Final Assignment: Liberatory Classroom Vision.<br>*Final Assignment Presentation (small group) | Final Assignment Due 4/22 |

## Course Expectations and Policies

### Preparedness and Professionalism

You are expected to read all assigned readings and participate in discussions or activities for which the readings serve as a springboard. You will be expected to integrate aspects of readings into your assignments.

Remember, this is a professional course as well as an academic course. As part of course participation you should be demonstrating that you are learning and applying professional standards generally expected of educators in matters of timeliness and professional courtesy. Professionalism includes constructively articulating critical peer feedback.

### Attendance

To be an active member of our community of practice, it is important that you attend class. Per Teacher Education program guidelines, you are permitted two absences from our course this term. You should reserve your excused absences for illness or unavoidable personal conflicts. If you do decide to miss one or more class meetings, then I ask that you please notify me by email that you will be missing class and then check in with a classmate to determine what, if anything, you can do to be fully prepared for your return. Note that often it will be impossible to make up the learning opportunities you miss. Therefore, although you will not lose points for missing one or two class meetings, your missing of class may result in a lower final course grade due to your reduced learning opportunities. Should you miss more than two class meetings, I will deduct 4 points off of your final grade for every additional absence (to ensure your success in this class, please note that five or more absences will unfortunately lead to a failing grade for the course). Chronic lateness will also result in a lower final grade

## Grading

Grades will be assigned on the basis of both process and product.
Please note no A+ will be assigned

| *Percentage of Points Earned* | *Letter Grade* | *Level of Attainment* | *Grade Points* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 94-100 | A | Superior | 4.00 |
| 90-93 | A- | | 3.75 |
| 88-89 | B+ | Adequate | 3.25 |
| 83-87 | B | | 3.00 |
| 80-82 | B- | | 2.75 |
| 78-79 | C+ | Minimal | 2.25 |
| 73-77 | C | | 2.00 |
| 70-72 | C- | | 1.75 |
| <70 | F | Failure | 0.00 |

Please note that we do not award A+ grades in teacher education courses. Additionally, the Pitt Teacher Education Course Grade Requirement states that you must earn a minimum of a C in all teacher education major coursework, and you must complete all coursework in order to pass each course. Additionally, you must receive at least a B- on all major assignments in order to pass your teacher education courses.

Note also that Pennsylvania Department of Education requires that you enter a teacher education program with and maintain an overall 3.0 GPA. If you do not maintain a 3.0 GPA, you will be prohibited from student teaching or earning certification.

## Incomplete Grades

I very rarely grant end-of-semester G grades. At Pitt, a G grade can be issued when a student has unfinished coursework due to extenuating personal circumstances. G grades are not issued when, in actuality, a student needs to repeat the course. If you wish to request a G grade, then you should contact me as soon as possible, and no later than 2 weeks before the end of the semester, so that we can determine whether this is appropriate and make a contract for you to complete outstanding work. If we both agree to a G grade, and your advisor and/or department leaders also agree, then we will write a document that describes in detail what you need to do to complete the course work and the time frame (not to exceed one academic year) within which you must do so. Upon receiving all work, I will evaluate the work and submit your permanent grade.

## Late Assignment Policy

The nature and pace of this course requires that you do not fall behind in assignments. If an extension is needed for an assignment, this must be arranged before the due date and will be granted for only the most extenuating of circumstances. Otherwise, late work will not be accepted. If lateness results in your inability to complete all coursework, then you will fail the course.

## Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a key component of professionalism. All students are expected to adhere to standards of academic honesty. Any student engaged in cheating, plagiarism, or other acts of

academic dishonesty will be subject to disciplinary action. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity at http://provost.pitt.edu/faculty-resources/academic-integrity-freedom/academic-integrity-guidelines.

Learning how to use generative artificial intelligence tools is important. However, the goals of this course are for you to develop knowledge and approaches to historical inquiry that matter for working within US schools today as part of your developing critical praxis. This requires wrestling with complex ideas and seeking to reconcile your own experiences and prior frames of understanding with what you are learning. Additionally, please note that generative AI tools rely on probabilistic or predictive models to generate content. The content these tools generate may appear correct but can also be incomplete, inaccurate, taken without attribution from other sources, and/or biased. For these reasons, you may not use generative AI tools to produce work for course assignments, including first drafts.

**Civility Commitment**

As future teachers, we will operate from a standpoint that everyone believes that all students deserve a quality education in a safe setting. The same can be said for university learning. A university classroom is, by definition, space where a free exchange of ideas must happen, but where consideration for others, their views, and their life experiences is also paramount. When you are uncomfortable with an idea, it is your right to speak up about that. As we learn with and about people with very different life experiences and beliefs from our own, it is imperative that we respect these perspectives and use respectful language in discussing and challenging ideas. Carefully consider your language choices to ensure that all learners feel safe and valued. If at any time, you are uncomfortable please feel free to speak out and/or speak to me privately.

**Statement on Classroom Recording**
To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

## My Commitments as an Instructor

**Diversity and Inclusion Statement**

I welcome students of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, genders, gender identities, gender expressions, national origins, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, ability, and other visible and nonvisible differences. All members of this class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment for every other member of the class.

**Names and Pronouns**
I will gladly honor your request to address you by your name and pronoun (that may differ from the school records). Please advise me of this preference early in the term so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. You may email me or tell me in person in class, whichever is

most comfortable to you! I want to be sure you feel yourself and comfortable in our class community.

**Food/Housing Insecurity**

Many students, both undergraduate and graduate, experience housing and/or food insecurity that can impact their academic work and general health. Please know there are resources available to you that are confidential. Let me know if you need support in contacting the right people/offices.

## Accommodations

**For Disability**

If you require special accommodations or classroom modifications, then please notify both me and Disability Resources and Services by the end of the second week of the term. The office of Disability Resources and Services is located in 140 William Pitt Union (412-648-7890 [voice or TDD]), and their website is at: http://www.drs.pitt.edu. If you have a physical, learning, or emotional disability, please let me know as early as you can so that I can accommodate you.

**For Religious Observances**

If a due date conflicts with your religious holidays, please notify me of which dates will pose a conflict no later than the second week of class so we can make alternative arrangements.

**For Other Special Circumstances**

If there are extenuating circumstances that impact your success, please contact me as soon as possible to schedule an appointment so that we can discuss them.

## Other Policies

**Sexual Harassment**

The University of Pittsburgh is committed to the maintenance of a community free from all forms of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment violates University policy as well as state, federal, and local laws. It is neither permitted nor condoned. It is also a violation of the University of Pittsburgh's policy against sexual harassment for any employee or student at the University of Pittsburgh to attempt in any way to retaliate against a person who makes a claim of sexual harassment. Any individual who, after thorough investigation and an informal or formal hearing, is found to have violated the University's policy against sexual harassment, will be subject to disciplinary action, including, but not limited to, reprimand, suspension, termination, or expulsion. Any disciplinary action taken will depend upon the severity of the offense. For more information, see the web site on sexual misconduct.

**TLL Student Grievance Procedures**

The rights and responsibilities of faculty and students are described in the University's Academic Integrity Guidelines at: https://www.provost.pitt.edu/academic-integrity-guidelines

The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure the rights and responsibilities of faculty and students in their relationships with each other. When a student in TLL believes that a faculty member has not met their obligations (as an instructor or in another capacity) as described in the Academic Integrity Guidelines, the student should follow this procedure:

1. The student should talk directly to the faculty member to attempt to resolve the matter.
2. If the matter cannot be resolved at that level, the student should talk to the relevant program coordinator.
3. If the matter remains unresolved, the student should talk to the Dr. Sheila Conway, TLL Student Liaison.
4. If needed, the student should next talk to the SOE associate dean of students (currently Dr. Andrea Zito).
5. If the matter still remains unresolved, the student should file a written statement of charges with the dean's designated Academic Integrity Administrative Officer (currently Dr. Andrea Zito).