Facilitating Critical Reflection and Discourse in Online Master's Degree Programs

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Problem Statement

As online degree programs flourish throughout the world, the need for critical reflection and discourse is increasingly evident. Without this type of scholarly engagement, students in online degree programs miss the vital transformational experiences that comprise the essence of teaching and learning.

What We Have Done

To address this problem, the presenters are developing and evaluating an instructional process intentionally designed to foster transformational learning experiences through critical reflection and discourse. The development of the instructional process began with a review of our educational philosophy. Next the key terms were defined, and current theory was examined. From this conceptual framework the instructional process emerged.

The review of our educational philosophy revealed three salient themes related to transformational learning:

- Two ways of knowing: intuitive and cognitive (heart and mind)
- Two dimensions of the learning process: autonomy and interconnectedness
- Multiple ways of constructing knowledge

Key terms were defined as follows:

- Critical Reflection: attentive consideration, meditation, contemplation, evaluation, and appreciation.
- Discourse: mutual interchange of thoughts, ideas, and concepts
- Transformation: substantively altering the present condition, or passing from one state to another.

Examination of the theory base encompassed the areas of critical reflection, discourse, and transformational learning.

The instructional process that emerged is as follows: (a) identification and examination of worldview, (b) critical reflection, (c) discourse, (d) synthesis and evaluation, and (e) extension. This instructional process is being evaluated through student products.

Why the Work is Important

Historically in traditional face-to-face programs, critical reflection and discourse are known as key processes in fostering transformational educational experiences. The challenge of online educational programs is to produce comparable depth and richness in learning in order to equip the great historians, philosophers, novelists, scientists, statesmen, etc. that are needed in our modern world. Our instructional process is an initial attempt to address this challenge. As presenters we look forward to the opportunity to interact with and receive feedback from other distance educators and researchers.

Key Components of the Poster/Demonstration

The poster/demonstration will consist of a display board, handouts and a laptop computer. The display board will be divided into three parts. The conceptual framework (themes, definitions, and theory base) will be displayed in the first section. The problem, instructional process, and accompanying student products will be found in the next section. Implications for practice, in the form of "Seven Tips for Facilitating Transformational Learning in an Online Environment," will be displayed in the third section. Handouts detailing the instructional process will be available. On a laptop screen, participants will be able to review examples of individual applications and group interactions.