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Maintaining the Curricular Philosophies of a Multicultural Education Course: From Face-to-Face to eLearning Environments

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It is not easy to transfer a face-to-face course to an online environment; multicultural education is one such course. While multicultural education courses and other traditional face-to-face courses are being delivered online, there is a need to understand how these online courses maintain their learning objectives. Furthermore, the issue of how a successful multicultural course can be enhanced through electronic learning (eLearning) environments must be addressed. Thus, this article will discuss the issues surrounding the transfer of a traditional face-to-face course to an eLearning environment, and how this significant shift in learning environments translates into maintaining the quality of learning objectives. While recognizing and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our teaching styles and curricular philosophies, educators can make informed decisions about what will work within our online courses.

Teaching multicultural education online may not come easy for those of us who are accustomed to teaching in the traditional face-to-face environment. Since multicultural educational pedagogy is driven by student-student interaction and dialogues about controversial issues such as race and racism, discrimination, gay issues, and religious diversity, face-to-face environments help facilitate these discussions.

While multicultural education courses and other traditional face-to-face courses are being delivered online, how these online courses maintain their learning objectives and materials must be addressed. For educators whose areas of expertise are outside of the realm of instructional design and technology, this inquiry may present a challenge. Also, there is a need to understand how pedagogy, curricular philosophies, and the instructor's awareness of the cultural and ethnic differences in the classroom can influence the learner. Furthermore, there is a need to understand how a successful multicultural course can be enhanced through electronic learning (eLearning) environments. Thus, this article will discuss the issues surrounding the transfer of a traditional face-to-face course to an eLearning environment, and how this significant shift in learning environments translates into maintaining the quality of learning objectives. In addition, recognizing and enhancing the sensitivity to cultural influences of the online student through course activities and instructor facilitation will be discussed.

FROM TRADITIONALLY TAUGHT TO ONLINE DELIVERY

It is not easy to transfer a face-to-face course to an online environment. The graduate-level multicultural education course, that I facilitate, is one of four component courses for all graduate education degrees. Because of the administrative mission to offer entire degree programs online, the resulting faculty challenge has been to develop an online course environment that is quality-equivalent to the core courses, yet is enhanced through the eLearning environment. This illuminates the issue surrounding the process towards modifying what is instructionally designed within a face-to-face multicultural education course so that the course can be delivered online, while still maintaining the learning objectives and underlying curricular philosophies of the course.

Other types of courses (e.g., history, psychology, literature) may have similar philosophical angst. For example, Hammer and Kellner (2001) asserted that instructors of the Holocaust find it difficult to teach one of the most history-shaping events in recent history because "simply citing statistics and retelling the story of the concentration camps and murder of over six million Jews and other ethnic nationalities and minorities cannot adequately grasp or instill the enormity of this event" (p. 1). This statement supports the claim that some material that is useful in class is not easily transferred

to eLearning environments. For example, in my multicultural class, discussions on controversial issues such as gender bias and racism are often buoyed by the body language of the students because body language speaks volumes about personal thoughts. When students are able to see the speaker, it bolsters the debates and enhances the learning experience for the discussion participants. However, multimedia technology does provide enrichment towards teaching historical events and other multicultural topics to students, which enhances the online learning environment through humanizing the event. In short, historical events are made “real” for the learners by giving them an opportunity to understand the event through the experiences of those who lived it. According to Hammer and Kellner, “the interactive dimension of new technology can potentially involve students more integrally into historical research and enhance moral understanding, thus providing powerful pedagogical tools to teach tolerance and promote a multicultural and an antiracist curricula” (p. 2). Therefore, a traditionally taught course that is reorganized to meet the challenges afforded by online delivery offers one way to keep learners engaged in their learning and interested in the class because the course remains learner-centered. The primary focus of the course is to create an environment wherein the learners develop a sense of ownership within the eLearning environment. One objective is for the learners to believe that they can make worthwhile contributions to the class, and what they contribute will be valued. My philosophy is supported by Gorski’s (2000) findings that “education must become more fully student-centered and inclusive of the voices and experiences of the students” (p. 1). Thus, student-centered learning is essential for any eLearning environment, as it promotes academic success for all learners.

In my online multicultural education class, one of the ways that learners become the focus of the course is through the use of discussion board questions focused upon controversial topics such as separation of church and state, gender bias, and generalizations about cultural learning styles. I use these types of discussion activities to include student viewpoints within the course. For example, the learners are required to discuss the issue of tracking (rigid group placement) and how this practice has affected their learning and their teaching practices. In another example, learners are asked to participate in a group chat about the issue of white privilege and then the group must post their thoughts on the discussion board. I find that these two discussion topics have the propensity to be much more intense in an online course rather than in a face-to-face setting. A possible reason why this may be the case is that learners may feel less inhibited to express their opinions

about controversial subjects since their peers cannot see the learner's body language and facial gestures when addressing these topics. Another plausible explanation for the intense discussions is a possible sense of anonymity—a student knows other students names from group assignments and posted e-mails, but they may not know each other personally.

Lively online class discussions offer the learners a sense of ownership in the course—in short, the learner begins to take full responsibility of how much he or she will succeed in the online course because participation in class discussions is not only a significant aspect of the course grade, but it also offers multiple snapshots of multicultural education. Perrin and Mayhew (2000) stated that “distance education can be more stimulating and encourage more critical reasoning than the traditional lecture class because it allows the kind of interaction that takes place more fully in small group settings” (p. 1). Marshall (2001) also lent support to this statement in the claim that “electronic media and multimedia technologies promote communication and interaction between diverse groups with the purpose of helping students learn more about content...” (p. 1). Given this, traditional face-to-face courses can be successfully integrated into eLearning environments while maintaining appropriate, quality learning objectives; however, it also begs the inquiry as to how to transfer the curricular philosophies of the instructor into the online course so that student-centered learning remains a primary focus?

CURRICULAR PHILOSOPHIES AND ELEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In a traditionally taught face-to-face course, there are a number of teaching styles and/or teaching philosophies that can be easily displayed by the instructor through body language, verbal communication, and interactions with the students. I find that the teaching style I display in my face-to-face course is very similar to the teaching style in my online multicultural education course. I believe that the teaching style of the instructor is conveyed online through how the instructor responds to and/or addresses e-mail communications from the students, offers feedback on assignments, and communicates well-organized course learning objectives to the students.

Teaching style is defined as the methods that a teacher uses to guide students through a successful learning process; it is how an instructor imparts

information to the learner, as well as, develops the learning environment. Currently, there are a number of creative pedagogical practices and initial results indicate success in face-to-face learning environments. Three such practices are: (a) culturally relevant instruction; (b) mastery learning; and, (c) inclusive pedagogy. The instructor's underlying curricular and/or instructional philosophy influences teaching style. Thus, culturally relevant teaching, mastery learning, and inclusive pedagogy impact eLearning environments as well, because these practices focus on the learner to humanize the course (Willis, 1993).

Ladson-Billings (1995) defined culturally relevant instruction as a type of pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Mastery learning, a second style of teaching, is defined by Bennett (1999) as "a teaching concept that breaks subject matter down into a series of units to be learned sequentially" (p. 377). Just as culturally relevant teaching and mastery learning focus on the learner, inclusive pedagogy is very similar. Collaborative learning, with the student as the center of the learning environment, is an example of an inclusive pedagogical teaching style. The Center for Instructional Development and Research (2003) suggested that inclusive pedagogical practices also include materials that recognize the diversity of student populations and incorporate student experiences into the learning environment.

With my face-to-face graduate level multicultural education course, my teaching style vacillates from inclusive pedagogy to culturally relevant teaching. I try to maintain this same style within my online multicultural education course environment to accommodate a variety of activities through which the learners display their mastery of designated learning objectives. I incorporate the learners' viewpoints into the activities for the course and build a supportive foundation where the learners learn the course material in increments, rather than overwhelming them with terms and theories about multicultural education. Although the course is online, student diversity and ethnicity may vary. I am made aware of the ethnicity of the students by their individual history papers that invite students to discuss their cultural backgrounds. I use this information to enhance the activities towards a more learner-centered and informative experience. For example, in one activity, the learners must address issues related to how cultural learning styles have influenced their learning, as well as their instructional styles and philosophies.

Just as in my face-to-face course, I vary the types of activities and assignments so that the learners have an opportunity to be successful. Group and individual projects, chat and discussion board postings, and lecture notes are significant components within the online course. Required assignments include one group project, two group discussion postings, individual quizzes, three individual discussion board postings, two individual papers, and one individual culture study that culminates into the course capstone project.

I also interact with my students in the form of online discussions concerning assignments and lecture notes, and feedback relating to work completed by the students. Thus, I find that it is possible to maintain the learning objectives and quality components of a traditional course, as well as, teaching style so as to enhance the learning environment, while facilitating a course online.

ONLINE TEACHING AND RECOGNIZING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AMONG STUDENTS

To maintain the components of a face-to-face course and a teaching style that takes into account a diversified group of learners, the teacher must be aware of the different cultural groups that may be represented in an online course. It is important to recognize the cultural differences of the students and how these differences influence the ways in which learners process information, whether this information is received by way of the web or face-to-face. Some students may be field-dependent learners who organize information to be learned as it is given and favor guidance, or field independent learners who provide their own structure and favor independent study (Bennett, 2003). Bennett (2003) also contended, “when teachers misunderstand their students’ cultural behavioral styles, they may underestimate their intellectual potential and unknowingly misplace, mislabel, and mistreat them. They may underestimate their students’ cognitive abilities, academic achievement, and language skills” (p. 199).

Teaching practices or styles displayed by instructors within the learning environment, whether in a traditional or eLearning environment, have a tremendous effect on the learner meeting the stated course learning objectives. Mismatches of the students’ learning styles and the instructor’s teach-

ing style can negatively influence the academic achievement of the students (Bennett, 2003). Furthermore, according to Gorski (2000), teaching styles must be flexible to accommodate the variety of ways in which students learn. Therefore, the teacher's ability to identify with his or her students and understand cultural differences the students bring to the class is tantamount towards addressing the needs of every student. This statement is clearly underscored by the comments of Guild (2001), who stated that "knowing each student's culture is essential for providing successful learning opportunities. Understanding learning differences will help educators facilitate structure, and validate successful learning for every student" (p.14).

Thus, an awareness of cultural learning styles is extremely important when facilitating a course in the eLearning environment. For example, in my online multicultural education course, two of the most heatedly debated topics are racism and discrimination. The learners must respond to questions revolving around white privilege, stereotyping, and affirmative action as a part of one course activity. When they have successfully addressed each question individually, they are to chat with their groups to further enhance their responses. What often occurs during this exercise is that the learners begin to realize how their culture has influenced their beliefs, and ultimately their responses to the questions. What makes this type of activity all the more enlightening for the learners is a discussion concerning the learners' own ethnic groups and how being a member of a particular ethnic group may offer advantages or disadvantages within different societal structures.

I specifically ask controversial questions to bring the cultural identities of the students into focus. In doing so, I offer to them an opportunity to embrace their personal identity and appreciate the cultural differences between their peers. Furthermore, this exercise gives them the opportunity to express themselves within a comfortable arena that values the contributions of the students in the class. Marshall (2001) noted, "student-generated threads facilitate a class learning community that allows those of diverse cultural and national origins to perspective-take while simultaneously examining their own ideas about cultural diversity" (p. 1). Ultimately, this is what I hope to achieve with my students by the end of the course.

Another way that I try to weave the cultures of the learners into the course assignments is by including an activity whereby the learners discuss how their learning styles may be different from their peers in the course and how their cultural upbringing may have influenced the ways through which

they learn. The assignment includes a discussion surrounding the learners' learning styles, their culture, and how both of these aspects may affect them as a professional educator. Thus, this assignment addresses: (a) the learners' needs to understand what their learning styles are and how these styles affect their education, and (b) the influence of culture on our learning process. Since the majority of my learners are teachers and preservice counselors and administrators, this information is very useful for them personally, as well as, professionally. Preservice counselors and administrators must be able to identify with and help the growing diverse student population within the educational system. Public school students are becoming more diverse culturally, ethnically, and economically. Therefore, the challenge is to address the learner's needs throughout every realm of schooling; this cannot be done until educators are made aware of these multicultural and socioeconomic challenges, and are equipped to address these challenges appropriately and successfully.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As academia continues to move further into the Information Age and as more traditional face-to-face courses are delivered online, educators must understand how to transfer their teaching style online as well. As capable communicators and instructional facilitators within face-to-face environments, further developing an online teaching style will continue to help our distance education students become more successful. While recognizing and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our teaching styles and curricular philosophies, educators can make informed decisions about what will work within our online courses. As academic courses continue to keep up with the demands of not only technology, but also the culturally and ethnically diverse distance education student, so too must our teaching style and curricular philosophies.

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