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Multicultural Education in the Online Environment

Distance learning often means that students are participating in a course where no physical interaction is expected. Within the last five years distance education has become synonymous with e-learning. This involves learning in an asynchronous web hosted environment and is referred to as web-based-learning or as online education. Most public universities and colleges in Washington State now offer at least some courses online.

The University of Washington provides technical certificate programs in which many undergraduates take their courses online. Bellevue Community College (BCC) has the second to third largest student population of any college or University in the State, and they are also a leader in offering online education. Currently BCC offers about one third of their courses online, and at BCC it is possible to complete a two-year Associate of Arts degree entirely through distance education.

A question that I have asked throughout this course is if multicultural learning can take place online? I assume that it is possible to incorporate multicultural learning into an online class but, if so, how might this occur? I wonder if it might be beneficial, from a multicultural point of view, to in fact have some distance education be a required component to earning a certificate and degree.

My assumption about distance education is that multiculturalism is not effectively implemented into most online courses. This assumption is based on my observations of online courses as well as my own online teaching experiences. Grant and Sleeter (Grant

& Sleeter, 2001) presented five approaches to multicultural education. According to their definitions the approach taken by most online faculty is typically the “Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different”. Grant & Sleeter state that this approach is used to help students acquire the necessary skills to fit into, and live in the “so-called average white-middle” society. “This belief is that a teacher’s responsibility is to prepare all students to fit into and achieve within the existing school and society” (p. 64). This is especially true of the technical online courses where students are expected to learn a skill that will help them to improve their careers. There is an expectation that media and animation students will use their technical skills in order to conform to the business and social norms of the media and web industry.

My Personal Connection to the Question and Concern

As an instructor of media theory and animation at Bellevue Community College (BCC) I might teach half my courses online during the academic year. It is my responsibility to be aware of how an online course might affect students’ learning. It is in my interest to understand how course material, and bulletin board discussions, can be organized to include all students and to encourage participation.

I approach this question, of how we can incorporate multicultural learning into online courses, from the perspective of a white man who grew up in Seattle, WA. I have used computers since 1982, when I was in the seventh grade. This is important to point out because my cultural perspective has made learning in an online environment second nature for me. Although I did not grow up wealthy, as understood by my social class, I have been exposed to a plethora of technology and have had a strong family structure that supported my learning. This is a much different point of view than what Valdes presents in her article *The World Outside and Inside Schools: Language and Immigrant Children*

(Educational Researcher, Vol. 27). In her research she writes about the life of a girl named Lilian and her family. "Lilian lived in a threee-bedroom apartment that was shared by two families and their other relatives" (p. 10). She lived in a neighborhood where "Dilapidated cars fill the streets [and] men who don't have jobs congregate on street corners". This led to Lilian becoming involved in gang activities and it affected her academic life. These family struggles remain prevalent with higher education students in today's courses.

I enrolled as a student into my first online course during summer 1998. It was a technical class, which taught character animation. At that time my wife and I lived in a small apartment in Kirkland, Wa. During that first quarter I did not have a computer. I accessed the course's web site by driving to the King County Library or by bicycling the ten miles out to the college. Soon, after a few quarters, I was able to buy my own computer and was able to log into the course web sites from home.

My scenario might be impossible for a woman such as Lilian to achieve. If she did not have a computer then her local library might not have the necessary services for her to take an online course. Even if she were to use a computer at home it still would not be easy for her to study. Lilian had to share her small apartment with two large families, and this would not be conducive to her learning. It is these "other" realities that online instructors, and college administrators, need to bring to the table when developing new course content and online requirements. While these cultural realities need to be considered they should not compromise the quality of the online material. They should enhance students' learning.

Different Perspectives and Concerns on the Issue

A primary social group that my questions are directed towards is higher education students and faculty that are involved with online courses. A specific focus for this question would be how gender influences online discussions.

I have several years of experience teaching online courses, and therefore according to Banks, 1997, and Erickson, 1997, I am considered to be “partial insider”. This is because I currently work in the cultural setting that I would be studying. An example of me being an “outsider” in distance education would be if I were to study the structure of language that women use in online environments.

I don't believe that most online instructors, or students, have an explicit desire to involve multiculturalism into their online curriculum. However, I do feel that instructors are concerned about participation. They would likely welcome this research if it could be demonstrated that it would improve students' retention and enthusiasm. In a previous project, *Teaching in Online Classrooms* (2003), I gathered some data about this topic. I interviewed Suzy Lepeintre who is an online instructional specialist at Bellevue Community College, and works at the college's Faculty Resource Center (FRC). The FRC has completed retention studies to understand what practices are necessary to incorporate into online course in order to increase student learning.

The FRC has several powerful examples of student's and faculty online learning experiences. A particularly important case study that took place during 2002 involved faculty who did not use any discussion tools in their online courses. The FRC showed that these instructor's courses had retention rates that were slightly below average for the online population at BCC. This meant that there was an approximately seventy percent retention rate of the course material. One instructor decided to add a discussion board to

his site because the teacher heard “what the students wanted”. “The students felt they needed some sort of connection and interaction with each other.” The subject of the class was the weather. When this class was taught on campus it apparently involved minimal class discussion. Therefore the instructor felt that an online discussion board was not necessary. After he decided to add the bulletin board the FRC found that his students’ retention rates increased to over ninety five percent during the quarter.

A discussion board can improve learning and can supply critical interactions for online students. How might an online discussion board influence an on campus course if it was used in a hybrid manner? It may reduce the gender division that exists with on campus discussions. In *Multicultural Education Issues & Perspectives* (Banks, J. 2001) Banks states “Girls are less likely than boys to participate in class discussions and to be encouraged by teachers to participate. Girls are more likely than boys to be silent in the classroom” (p. 3). This is further supported in *The Power of Language in the Classroom* (Salomone, R. 2003):

There is a rich body of research on how gender and language influence the dynamics of the classroom interaction. There is still evidence that boys tend to ask more questions and shout out more answers than girls do. Yet girls’ questions while less frequent, are typically more constructive.” (p. 12)

To further understand the issues of gender within online, and on campus discussions, I would need to observe several different courses. This would include a multicultural education course since it would be interesting to see how one would be taught online. I also think it would be important to study the student interactions that occur in an on campus course and compare them with the same class taught online.

I had previously stated that the approach taken by most online faculty towards education was probably best described by Grant & Sleeter's first method: "Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different" (p. 63). I would like to help move online instruction forward to the stage that Grant & Sleeter label "Education that is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionists". Even in an online course a student should be helped to become the "subject" rather than the "object". I believe that we can use online tools to help develop active students.

Resources:

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Erickson, F. (1997). *Culture in society and in educational practices*. In Banks, C.A.M. & Banks, J.A. *Multicultural education issues and perspectives* (pp. 32-60). Needham Heights, MA.

Grant, C.A. & Sleeter, C.E. (1997). *Race, class, gender, and disability in the classroom*. In Banks, C.A.M. & Banks, J.A. *Multicultural education issues and perspectives* (pp. 3-31). Needham Heights, MA.

Howard, G. (1999). We can't teach what we don't know. Teachers College, Columbia University.

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