Chapter 9

# Exploring the Impact of an Online Diversity Course for the Professional Development of Faculty and Staff

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## ABSTRACT

*In the context of shifting demographics and broad social change efforts, it is critical that faculty and staff at all institutional levels have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work effectively with diverse coworkers, students, and other constituents. However, access to such educational opportunities may be hindered by the fact that faculty and staff tend to have limited availability for professional development during the regular work day and may not have the resources or incentive to pursue diversity training outside of their busy work schedules. Therefore, some universities are looking towards online platforms as a way to increase accessibility for a wider audience. In order to better understand the potential effectiveness and limitations of an online platform for diversity education, this chapter explores the impact of an online diversity course developed as a professional development program for faculty and staff at the University of the Midwest (UM).*

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of shifting demographics and broad social change efforts, it is critical that faculty and staff at all institutional levels have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work effectively with diverse coworkers, students, and other constituents. However, access to such educational opportunities may be hindered by the fact that faculty and staff tend to have limited availability for professional development during the regular work day and may not have the resources or incentive to pursue diversity training

outside of their busy work schedules. Therefore, some universities are looking towards online platforms as a way to increase accessibility for a wider audience. However, questions remain as to the effectiveness of online diversity training and education.

Current research on online diversity education with students suggests that an asynchronous online platform can be an effective method for engaging in sensitive discussions around diversity topics and increasing students' knowledge, awareness, and skills (Andresen, 2009; Lee, Brown, & Bertera, 2010; Merryfield, 2001; Meyer, 2010). However, scholars have yet to study whether online diversity education can be an effective platform to use in faculty and staff development. Therefore, this chapter explores the impact of an online diversity course developed as a professional development program for faculty and staff at the University of the Midwest (UM). This unique course, which integrates aspects of diversity training and diversity education (King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010), was developed within the framework of transformative learning theory. A curriculum based on transformative learning provides opportunities for learners to critically examine their own perspectives and beliefs as well as integrate new ways of thinking about themselves and the world around them (Cranton & King, 2003; Mezirow, 1991; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Thus, transformative learning provides a meaningful framework for a professional development program (Cranton & King, 2003), particularly one focused on diversity.

This chapter first provides the theoretical and conceptual background that informed the development of the online course presented in this chapter. Then, the authors discuss the concepts taught in the course. Finally, quantitative and qualitative data are presented in order to assess the impact of this diversity course on participants' awareness, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to the topics covered in the course. The chapter ends with a discussion of the benefits and limitations of this type of online diversity course, as well as several fruitful directions for future research.

## BACKGROUND

The purpose of this section is to provide the theoretical background that informed the rationale and development of the online diversity course discussed in this chapter. We first describe transformative learning as the overarching theoretical framework that informed the course design of the online course discussed in this chapter. We then discuss online diversity education as a platform to facilitate transformative learning related to diversity.

### Transformative Learning in Theory and Practice

The goal of transformative learning is "to understand why we see the world the way we do and to shake off the constraints of the limiting perspectives we have carried with us into the learning experience" (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 185). As participants develop critical self-awareness and learn to question the underlying assumptions, values, and perspectives that shape their worldview, they can begin to integrate new perspectives and thus transform the way they view themselves and others. A course designed with transformative learning in mind is intentional about fostering a learning community in which all participants are actively engaged in dialogic processes that facilitate critical reflection (Cranton & King, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). The peer-learning process occurs as participants share their own experiences and insights, which serve as evidence and ideas for new ways of looking at the world (Cranton & King, 2003). The role of the facilitator is to help participants explore and question their own assumptions,

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