Minorities and the Online University

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the literature on higher education, it has been shown that few minorities complete an undergraduate degree; even fewer complete master's, doctoral, and professional degrees (American Society for Higher Education, 2005; Jackson, & Moore, 2006; McClellan, Tippeconnic Fox, M. J., & Lowe, 2005; Sequist, 2005; Shabazz, A., 2004; Tierney, 1992; Ward, 2006). Many reasons for lack of participation exist, particularly in areas of acculturation (Ibarra, 2001). College and university environments often represent a homogenous environment that results in cultural gaps between the minority student and the institution. Campuses that follow in this tradition often create a conflict for students between their specific ethnic and cultural values and the dominant values of academe (Hall, 1993). The roots of the modern American university can be traced to the great German universities of the late 1800s (Rudolph, 1990). The online university provides a bridge between academe and students from diverse cultures.

BACKGROUND

In the new environment, of course, on-campus mores are absent. Students are not expected to leave their own communities to participate in higher education. Their initiation into higher learning is based on their ability and willingness to engage in a world of ideas through reading, writing, discussion, practice, and dialogue. The online learning environment is inclusive, and celebrates the diverse nature of its students. Limitations of a geographic and cultural nature do not pertain, because students participate from all areas of the world, without leaving home. For the most part, cultural adjustments are unnecessary. The distance between faculty, student, and the learning infrastructure is minimized:

The primary focus for distance education is based on technological frameworks to reduce the gap between student and teacher. For quality distance education in developing indigenous communities, the primary focus must begin with different frameworks: The "distance" between one culture and another, the distance between one language construct and another, and the distance between one conceptual framework and another within the same education system. (Valadian, 1999, p. 231)

Much of the literature on attrition in higher education is drawn from Tinto's (1987) theory, which recognizes that students who feel isolated are more likely to end their college careers than students who feel connected and comfortable in the college environment. Students who do not participate in college extracurricular activities or create meaningful relationships with faculty or peers during their college experience are more likely to leave college. In the online environment, students do not require extracurricular activities in order to connect to college culture. In the online environment, students interact in a one-on-one dialogue with faculty and peers through assignments, e-mail, and discussion boards. Indeed, one might say that advances in technology have brought us back to Western civilization's earliest educational models.

MAIN FOCUS: CURRENT THINKING

The primary adjustment for our learners may not be cultural at all, but rather, technological. Still, online learning is a social process that allows human beings to connect with each other despite barriers of culture and distance.

Cyberethnographers suggest that cyperspace is not replacing natural communities, but rather, extending them (Carter, 2005). Online relationships are being assimilated into everyday life. Cyberspace is becoming one more place for people to meet; it mirrors how people commit to and interact in relationships in other spaces. The relationships formed there often carry over into off-line life. Online learners assimilate their educational experience into their lives and professional

practice much in the same way that learners do in any situation or environment.

Sorensen and Murchu (2004) concluded that a learning architecture based on democratic values and participant ownership, "constitutes a valuable and fruitful approach to design in terms of assuring fundamental human values and democratic qualities in distributed online learning" (p. 197). In the online learning environment, learners are invited to participate openly and actively in the learning process, without consideration of societal barriers that may traditionally exist between professor and student. The concept of learning in the online environment is based on the pedagogy of "learner centeredness," in which both learners and mentors learn together. Mentors do not lecture, but instead nurture, guide, and interact with learners, who in turn assume responsibility for their own learning. This relationship allows for a space of learner-centered and democratically oriented learning. The environment is one in which the conversations between learner and mentor are used to determine what and how much learning is taking place, based on the guidelines set by the mentor through the course syllabus. In this sense, a constructivist approach is being employed, much like that developed by John Dewey.

Early in the last century, John Dewey saw education as a social process rooted in an understanding of community and democracy (Dewey, 1916). His innovations focused on active learning approaches that were student-centered. He stressed the dynamic nature of student development, utilizing collaborative learning that "fosters community and places the teacher as more of a facilitator within a group of learners than merely as an outside authority" (Dewey, 1933, p. 59). The particular job of the educational community, he believed, was to overcome competitive individualism and introduce interactive cooperation. Issues of competition and individualism are present in learning environments, and can be addressed, in part, through online learning exchanges, such as those that take place at in the online learning environment.

Littlefield and Roberson (2005) experimented with online learning in a social work course on oppression and diversity that was designed around an interactive Web page used to structure feminist learning experiences. In their evaluation of the course, they found that several processes key to the feminist classroom were achieved, including, "community building, collaboration, peer learning, empowerment, and the development

of a supportive, collaborative environment in which (students) were able to achieve their learning goals" (p. 186). Chapman, Ramondt, and Smiley (2005) learned that a constructivist understanding is naturally supported in collaborative online spaces and leads to "deeper learning." In developing an online Web-based database of over 5,000 references for faculty teaching family studies, the Sloan Work and Family Research Network discovered that virtual networks were supported and functioned as part of the invisible college (Pitt-Catsouphes, 2005). In a series designed for "learning in doing," Barab, Kling, and Gray (2004) discussed how virtual communities form to support learning in the online environment. In the online college or university environment, online communities are formed, utilizing a democratic approach in which learner's voices are heard and encouraged, regardless of gender or minority background.

Within the online learning environment, typical exchanges in communication change, giving the communicator freedom of expression, regardless of cultural differences. De Montes, Oran, and Willis (2002) note that in online education and asynchronous communication, the race factor is usually "turned off." Hanna and de Nooy (2004) describe the nature of the Internet as a culture-free zone, or as a culture in itself, a borderless world that removes cultural difference:

The cross-cultural aspect of communication is restricted to the content, as participants swap information about their respective cultures. From this point of view, the question of cultural difference inflecting communicative styles in electronic discussion does not even arise…The text-based nature of exchanges is understood to limit the aspects of behaviour that are culturally determined. With no non-verbal cues to worry about, there will be fewer ways for cultural difference to emerge. It's just face-to-face -- without the faces. From this point of view, on-line discussion is understood to be inflected by pervasive norms of cultural behaviour, whilst the reverse -- the impact of the mode of discussion on this behaviour -- is dismissed. (pp. 258-259)

At the same time, cultural aspects of a person's background may be encouraged and celebrated. Cultural distinctions are a strength of the university, not "differences" that need to be overcome. Participation in the online learning environment precludes differences that may exist before a learner participates in assign-

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