

Chapter 2

Supporting Faculty in Culturally Responsive Online Teaching: Transcending Challenges and Seizing Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Only recently have we begun to ask what it means for online educators to work at proactively establishing culturally responsive pedagogy and learning experiences in their online classrooms. This chapter contributes to this dialogue by focusing on upon the work of those charged with supporting faculty: faculty developers, including instructional designers. After examining the current state of faculty development in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy online and the challenges therein, the authors offer an institutional case study illustrating several mechanisms through which one substantial Hispanic-serving institution has supported faculty in this critical, challenging work. Although faculty development regarding cultural responsiveness is fraught with challenges, this chapter illustrates manners in which the intersection of online professional development and cultural responsiveness brings powerful opportunities to engage and empower both faculty and students, and shares recommendations for doing so.

INTRODUCTION

Growing interest in culturally responsive pedagogy and learning experiences in online classrooms stems from a variety of sources, perhaps most prominently from the convergence of two enrollment trends. Taking the United States as an example (yet recognizing these trends also hold true outside the U.S.), enrollments in distance education courses saw an 11% increase from 2012-2015, while the diversity of postsecondary students increased dramatically during the past several decades (NCES, 2017). As

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Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2009) synthesize the impact of the latter trend, “Colleges and universities have more learners than ever before whose perceptions and ways of making meaning vary from one another and from the instructor. Influenced by global forces and unprecedented patterns of migration and immigration, skillful postsecondary teaching has become a highly nuanced endeavor” (p. 1). In essence, then, the need for culturally responsive online teaching mirrors the growing, broader interest in and recognition of the need for inclusion and cultural responsiveness in postsecondary teaching, and reflects the fact that increasing numbers of diverse students are taking courses online.

Certainly, securing an understanding of students and their distinctive backgrounds and strengths is a critical step in learning-centered teaching (Doyle, 2011), increases in online enrollments provide an important impetus for additional work in cultural responsiveness. However, it is important to couple this somewhat pragmatic rationale with an equity-minded motivation for attending to cultural responsiveness in online teaching: Although online education has been hailed as a beacon of democracy, and has, in fact, broadened access to education across the globe, burgeoning research suggests that biases surface in online courses (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018; Conway & Bethune, 2015). Some institutions have also witnessed lower performance in online courses for students from underserved groups (Wilson & Allen, 2011). As Smith and Ayers (2006) describe this dichotomy, “Distance learning reflects both promise and predicament” (p. 402). Recognizing that it offers unprecedented access to education and unprecedented opportunities to showcase cultural values, varieties, and strengths; they warn that “the pro-Western bias inherent in the technological foundations of distance learning presents an obstacle both to access and to understanding” (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 402). The expansion of online course enrollment therefore has the potential to exacerbate completion gaps in colleges and universities—gaps that, in turn, threaten the future of democracy. The nation depends on an educated, informed citizenry, and a college degree is increasingly seen as “the minimum ticket to get in the door to any job” (Selingo, 2017). In this regard, culturally responsive teaching emerges not as a trend or innovation but rather, to quote one of its leading scholars, as “one of our most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the [achievement] gap” (Hammond, 2015, p. 15).

Given how much is at stake, it is imperative that faculty work at proactively establishing culturally responsive pedagogy and learning experiences in all courses they teach, including those facilitated online. Yet with so much already on their plates and the inherent difficulties of teaching across cultures and differences, institutional leaders cannot expect faculty to teach in culturally responsive ways without support. Thankfully, many institutions employ educational developers, individuals charged with “helping colleges and universities function effectively as teaching and learning communities” (Felten, Kalish, Pingree, & Plank, 2007, p. 93), often housed in Centers for Teaching & Learning (CTLs). This group includes faculty developers, whose focus is upon “the improvement of the individual instructor’s teaching skills” (Diamond, 2002), a category that can also encompass instructional designers (IDs). From a structural and/or logistical standpoint, many of these individuals already have established relationships with faculty and programming in place in which to integrate the theory and practice of cultural responsiveness. Faculty developers are also natural allies given that the educational development community has demonstrated a longstanding commitment to justice and inclusion (Roy, 2014).

At the same time, faculty developers play a central role in online learning. One indicator of the significance of faculty development to online education is its inclusion in the Online Learning Consortium (OLC)’s five pillars of quality. The organization recognizes that training in online instructional skills is central to instructors finding the online teaching experience to be personally rewarding and professionally beneficial. In an analysis of research on faculty development for online teaching, Meyer (2014)

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