Chapter 12
Cultural Diversity in Online Learning:
Perceptions of Minority Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explored the perceptions of minority graduate students about cultural diversity and the challenges they face in online learning environments. Thirty-five minority graduate students enrolled in online graduate programs in education in the Southeastern United States participated in the study. A qualitative research design using interviews and observations was used to collect and analyze the data. Findings revealed four themes: (1) the need to recognize and use multicultural resources for knowledge building in the online learning environment, (2) the need for more diversity inclusion in online learning, (3) collaborative learning activities as effective instructional strategy to promote cultural diversity in online environments, and (4) the lack of multicultural contents, communications, language barriers, and culturally relevant activities hinder online learning. The findings demonstrate the need for online instructors to recognize cultural differences of students and diverse cultural experiences they bring to the online learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Online education has seen a rapid increase in student population within the last two decades in most colleges and universities in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Increasing student population brings to the online learning environment students with different perspectives of cultural, educational, and social experiences. Instructors must become aware and recognize cultural experiences and resources that students bring into the online environment to enhance the learning experiences and academic success diverse students in the online environment. Gay (2000) states "culture counts" and "is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration or performance assessment" (2000, p. 8). Hills (2003) contend that cultural diversity is another source of difference to consider in an online learning environment; however, "it is a mistake to assume that cultural diversity is only based on ethnic or national differences. Within any one country, there will be regional differences, differences of upbringing and differences of age" (p. 64) and the hidden cultures in online learning become unknown and hidden to members of the cultures within online environment. Cultures play an important role in the social behavior, communication, cognitive processes, and pedagogical technologies (Yang, Olesova, & Richardson, 2010) and correspondingly, cultural differences in online learning incorporate different worldviews. The increasing multicultural nature within the online learning has made it a necessity for instructors to be aware of the role cultural factors play in students' interaction and academic performance in online environments (Gómez-Ray, Barbera, & Fernández-Navarro, 2016). Teaching and learning in the online environment can be an isolating experience, and students often report of lack of social presence and interaction as a challenge of online learning. Luyt (2013) argued that online learning in higher education reflects colonial ideology in its "epistemes" of knowledge which advantage Western ways of knowing and learning and still prevalent in universities with the aim to preserve the dominant practices. Several studies on cultures in online learning have focused on minority student's experiences and the impact of learners' cultural demographics on cognitive development and learning outcomes (Gunawardena, Layne, & Frechette, 2012), self-perceptions and learning experiences of cross-cultural learners (Wang, 2007), and cultural disconnection in the multicultural online learning setting (Ibarra, 2000). Mittelmeier, Héliot, Rienties, and Whitelock (2016) stated that sociocultural factors like cultural background and social network diversity influenced participation when students worked online with peers from other countries, and diverse academic content is an important component of a successful 'internationalized' curriculum. Accordingly, past studies on cultural diversity and dimensions in online education usually examined the phenomenon within a single online course or program. Few studies have conducted empirical studies from multiple online courses of different academic disciplines (Ke & Kwak, 2013). A study to explore minority graduate students' perceptions on cultural diversity in online learning environments is warranted to identify how minority student' ethnicity-related cultural backgrounds relate to their online learning processes and perceptions in an online environment (Ke & Kwak, 2013). We also investigated the instructional practices students perceive to promote cultural diversity in online environments. This study informs instructors about the best pedagogical practices on how to promote multicultural presence in the interest of promoting the educational needs of international students in online learning environments. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of minority graduate students on cultural diversity in online learning environment?

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