

Chapter 20

Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the best practices for creating inclusive online courses, focused at the K–12 level. It presents a theoretical framework that is rooted in teacher reflectivity and social justice in the classroom. Teachers should not only present voices from a diverse population, but also ask students to evaluate the dominant voices still left in the curriculum and how those voices shape societal institutions. Strategies recommended include, but are not limited to, being aware of cultural differences through both information gathering and experience; providing opportunities for communication that honor both students cultural and learning preferences; providing explicit course guidelines, expectations, and extended descriptions of course assignments; addressing the implementation of collaborative work with students of diverse backgrounds; and promoting students' cultural awareness through the critique of content.

INTRODUCTION

As the use of online courses in K–12 learning environments has become more of a norm and less of an exception, students from all over the country have exponentially increasing access to these new learning opportunities. According to the 2015 report, *Keeping Pace With K–12 Digital Learning* (Evergreen Educational Group, 2015), 2.2 million students are taking online classes every year for a variety of reasons including credit recovery, access to accelerated or honors courses, access to courses not offered by their own institutions, for medical issues, scheduling flexibility, extra help, or because they are unsuccessful in a traditional learning environment. These online courses can be state-wide, district or regionally offered, offered by private vendors, or created in-house. This access offers not only new learning opportunities, but increased access to a more diverse student population.

Yet, as the racial make-up of the United States and its classrooms continues to diversify, the educator population remains largely homogenous. In the 2011–2012 school year, 82% of teachers were White, and

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while the number of teachers of color has increased from 13% to 18% from 1988 to 2012, the number of Black teachers has actually declined (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Further, in 2012, “only 20 percent of public school principals were individuals of color” (p. 3). Teachers will inevitably encounter not just students of color, but those from different religions, cultures, and those who identify beyond the traditional gender dichotomy. Educators must consider that a student’s “primary source of identity” may very well be “religions or political affiliation . . . or gender or social class” instead of race or ethnicity and therefore need to create culturally responsive classrooms through the use of inclusive pedagogical practices (Spring, 2007, p. 124). With such continued racial disparities between students and teachers, it is imperative that White educators become aware not only of their students’ backgrounds, but also their own beliefs, pedagogies, curricula, and the very institution of public education continues to uphold racial, religious, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter is framed around critical theory. Teachers need to consider not just who their students are, but what cultural ideologies are they, as educators, promoting through their pedagogy, their curriculum, and materials. In this case, culture “encompasses the institutions and practices, rites and rituals, beliefs and skills, attitudes and values, worldviews and localized modes of thinking and acting” (Martin, 2002, p. 12). This educational philosophy moves beyond asking “how are my students different?” to asking questions such as: Are my teaching practices equitable to all students? Does my curriculum not only acknowledge diversity, but does it act as a counterpoint to the dominant systems of inequality? Do my students and I evaluate the content of the course for prejudices and discriminations against those of a different race, religion, gender, or socioeconomic background? Are my students and I working toward building a more just and sustainable society? Am I and my students moving beyond tolerance of diversity to appreciation of diversity? Educators need to be “actively involved in the philosophical conversations that ultimately shape the educational system in which they work” (Franklin, 2014, p. 82).

The first point of critique is of the Internet itself, which is not culturally neutral. Sixty-eight percent of the content found on the Internet is written in English (Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder, & Roche, 2002; Wong, 2007). Furthermore, many of the most commonly used learning management systems (LMSs) were created by Westerners and therefore are more intuitively navigable for students from such cultures. Additionally, these LMSs are often dominated by use of texts, both read and written, that cater perfectly to students accustomed to this independent, text-driven method of learning. As Franklin (2014) stated our standards of what constitutes an education, academic expertise, and worthwhile knowledge are all socially constructed. And when the primary basis for learning is individualized, textual, and writing based, we are placing a higher value on this type of learning, which often privileges those from the dominant Western, White, and upper-middle class (Goodman, 2011). This creates anxiety for students from cultures who are less comfortable with the expectations of the individualistic, online environment being thrust upon them, which may result in less learning for those students (Chen & Bennett, 2016; Smith & Ayers, 2006). According to Chen and Bennett (2016) students develop “acculturative stress” which “results from the psychological conflicts between the desires to maintain one’s original culture and to participate in the host culture” (p. 679). Instead, teachers should be aiming for a mixed pedagogy that engages all learners and promotes care, concern, and connection in the classroom (Martin, 2002).

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