

Chapter 57

Teaching for Diversity Online: A Teacher Educator's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Existing gaps in teacher education programs impact programs' ability to provide teachers with effective teaching practices for use in diverse classrooms. Higher education institutions attempting to address culturally relevant pedagogy through online courses struggle to create meaningful learning opportunities for students especially when they do not have opportunities to work with diverse populations outside of class. This chapter discusses the challenges a higher education faculty member and her doctoral assistant faced when teaching an accelerated 10-week online course titled Educating Diverse Populations. The asynchronous nature of the online course and the optionality of the online group chats disrupted the process of class dialogue and interactions normally found in traditional face-to-face courses. However, reflecting on a variety of autobiographical resources and participating in weekly discussion posts assisted students to better incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into their teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades it has become increasingly evident there exist gaps in teacher education programs' ability to properly prepare teachers able to effectively enact teaching practices that work with learners across all types of diversity, including race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, and abilities. This problem is not limited to the United States (e.g. Haworth, 2015; Leavy, 2005; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016; Santos Rego & Nieto, 2000; Severiens, Wolff, & van Herpen, 2014; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earler, 2006), although the chasm between the rapidly diversifying student population and current teacher demographics is especially pronounced in this country (Boser, 2014). For example, every fifth

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public school student in the United States is bilingual (Camarota & Zeigler, 2014), whereas the majority of teachers are monolingual English speakers. Furthermore, while an increasing portion of public school students are students of color, the current teacher cadre is 82% white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These demographics mean that students typically do not see themselves in the teachers who teach them, nor is this situation predicted to drastically change in the foreseeable future. This contrast in student and teacher demographics has, in part, contributed to the perpetuation and reproduction of the monolingual, monocultural ideologies in schools and in the larger society. These ideologies lead to the othering and even vilification of students who are perceived as different.

It is no surprise that against this backdrop diversity has become a buzzword frequently seen in the vision statements of teacher education programs across the United States. But what does it truly mean to prepare teachers for the diverse student populations they will encounter in their classrooms? In order to effectively teach diverse populations, teachers need to possess knowledge, skills, and beliefs that are at the same time supportive of their diverse students' academic achievement and cultural identities and critical of existing inequities in schools and other institutions (Banks et al., 2001; Sleeter, 2016). Ladson-Billings (1995) termed such an approach *culturally relevant pedagogy*, or CRP. Most teacher education programs in the United States intentionally address diversity in several ways with the goal of developing teacher candidates' capacity for CRP. Institutions have offered teacher candidates field experiences in schools and communities where they will have opportunities to work with diverse students; directed concerted efforts toward recruiting and attracting teacher candidates and faculty from non-majority backgrounds; and adopted standards, assessment, curricula, and courses that aim to develop positive attitudes towards and effective skills for working with diverse populations (Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, & Agarwal, 2010).

Unfortunately, the last of these three approaches often consists of offering one 'crash course' which attempts to cover all forms of diversity and the educational issues related to them (such as the course described in this chapter). Unsurprisingly, the effectiveness of this approach has been called into question, and scholars have pointed to the need to take a more systematic approach to diversity throughout the teacher education curriculum (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Weisman & Garza, 2002). Despite the push for reform, the one-course approach persists. It has been suggested that to maximize its effectiveness, a diversity course needs to bridge theory and practice by combining class assignments, readings, and discussions with field experiences in diverse communities (Milner, 2005). In teacher education classes that utilize the traditional face-to-face format, it is feasible to offer teacher candidates opportunities to interact with learners and families from diverse communities through experiences such as service learning. With more teacher education programs increasingly offering online courses, it is important to investigate whether diversity courses can be as effective when conducted in an online environment.

This chapter describes an online course that was used to fulfill the diversity requirement for a class of graduate students in education. Most students enrolled in this upper-level course titled Educating Diverse Populations (EDP) were already working, in some capacity, in the field of education, or aspired to work in schools as teachers or behavior analysts. The chapter describes the first author's successes and tribulations as she designed and taught the course from beginning to end with the help of the second author, a doctoral student. The chapter draws on these experiences to offer suggestions for teacher educators planning to teach a similar course by offering examples of course components that were more or less successful and introducing resources the authors discovered along the way to improve the course.

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