Chapter 7
Building Capacity Through Multiculturalism and Diversity in the Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The second decade of the 21st century highlighted the complexity of teaching remotely while in the midst of not only a global pandemic, but also an enduring racism crisis. Influenced by the socio-cultural milieu, online classrooms can be seen as microcosms of the broader society. Consequently, educators have felt the burden of grappling with multiculturalism and diversity within their classrooms and institutions; this can be especially difficult when teaching online. Since online classrooms do not operate within a vacuum, it is important to understand how the societal context can impact students' perspectives on multiculturalism and diversity. Examining multiculturalism and diversity through the lens of the student can help educators better serve their online learners.

INTRODUCTION

The societal context of the early part of the 21st century has been characterized as a time of social and political unrest, with polarizing viewpoints often bereft of considerations of difference or contrasting experiences. Tensions have risen in the wake of increasing protests against inequities, discrimination, and marginalization. At the same time, a generational pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19 has created physical isolation and disconnection, inhibiting meaningful interaction and inclusion. The online educational environment can further exacerbate these conditions if issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are not directly addressed. Research has firmly established that student engagement, motivation, retention, and success is predicated on cultivating an environment where students have a sense of belonging, where they feel heard, respected, and secure (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2018; Wilson & Gore, 2013). The online educator is in the unique position to be able to foster such an environment. However, this can be a difficult task as educators and students alike "have to navigate potential landmines that highlight issues of power, privilege, and access" (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018, p.14). It is therefore incumbent that careful thought and consideration be put into developing instructional techniques that effectively promote a safe and inclusive learning environment for students.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reports that the population of students enrolled in American public elementary and secondary schools has grown increasingly diverse between 2000 and 2017, with projections for even greater diversity in the next decade. The majority of students now represent ethic and racial minorities, with the percentage of white students projected to decrease to 44% by 2029 (NCES, 2020). Higher education has likewise grown increasingly diverse, with 45% of students identifying as a race other than white (Taylor et al., 2020, p. xv). Diversity can play a powerful role in improving cultural understanding, cognitive thinking, creativity, empathy, and citizenship. Students who are exposed to different and divergent perspectives, have the opportunity to reflect on their own views and experiences in new, productive ways (American University, 2019). Diversity promotes the recognition of differences in perspective, which in turn requires people to work harder to interact effectively. As Columbia University professor Katherine Phillips (2014) notes: "Diversity jolts us into cognitive action in ways that homogeneity simply does not'' (p. 36).

The inherent lack of social presence and often a one-size-fits all approach to online learning can inhibit the creation of a culturally-responsive learning environment (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2019, p. 2). Students and instructors alike may be largely unaware of multicultural differences in the classroom. A recent study of minority students' perceptions of cultural diversity in online learning bears this out, with students identifying four core challenges including the need for greater:

1. Multicultural resources for building knowledge,
2. Diversity inclusion in the online classroom,
3. Collaborative learning activities to promote cultural diversity, and
4. Multicultural course content, communication, and culturally-relevant activities (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2019, p. 1).

To address these challenges, schools and educators must carefully evaluate current instructional modalities. Do they perpetuate inequities by favoring Western methods of knowing and learning (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2019) and create a cultural disconnect for students with differing cultural values? As

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