Chapter 8
Cultural Sensitivity in the Distance Learning Sphere

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ABSTRACT

As the old adage states, "With great power comes great responsibility." Distance education is a double-edged sword – one with great power and also great responsibility. It can impact millions more than the average brick-and-mortar program, which increases the need for sensitivity to those receiving the learning. The need for competence related to multicultural factors in distance education is greater now with the sharp rise in popularity. In 2016, there were over 6 million students in the United States utilizing distance education, half of whom were fully remote. This begets the need for awareness and training at an institutional level to combat the lack of sensitivity and effectively equip students of all backgrounds to adjust to the virtual world. Students, instructors, and institutions will be best equipped to carry the load with careful attention to the three core components of professional training, professional development, and professional identity. This is an ethical and professional responsibility.

Distance learning has been an educational format for millions of students and has increased in popularity over time. In 2012, 25.9% of all students were enrolled in at least one distance course (Seaman et al., 2018). By 2016, this number had increased to 31.6%, representing 6,359,121 students enrolled in distance learning. The COVID-19 pandemic adjusted how education was delivered (UNESCO, 2020) and in 2020, approximately three-fourths of undergraduate and graduate students had at least one class that was completed online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Distance education has its roots in making education more accessible (Kentnor, 2015). Removing the requirement that a teacher and student must reside in the same space at the same time opened educational doors for those in rural areas. It reduced the financial barriers associated with attending a brick-and-mortar institution. Additionally, its flexibility supported students who needed to fit education around their schedules (Turan et al., 2022). These factors increased educational access to students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, cultures, races, and identities (Snow & Coker, 2020) and removed geographic barriers.

How do educators meet the needs of an ever-changing student population? It begins with providing education in a culturally responsive manner, meeting the needs of students with diverse backgrounds and identities. Each student has individualized needs and culturally responsive distance learning will allow instructors to cater to these unique needs. In a study of student success, Becker et al. (2009) found that "feelings of safety and security" (p. 147) were correlated with student performance. Understanding what helps to create that connection and sense of safety for students, particularly minoritized students, will benefit educators as they craft courses to meet students' needs.

In this chapter, we will discuss competencies for culturally responsive educators in the distance learning sphere. We will establish the need for training and professional development. We will explore the connection between cultural competency and an educator's professional identity. Finally, we will describe some practical tools educators can utilize in this ever-expanding space and present case studies to apply theory to practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural Competence

With the rapid growth of immigrants in the United States, it is easy to see the need for sensitivity to the diverse needs and expectations of the various cultures represented. Often, we are trapped in a Western worldview that blinds us to the needs of other populations that might look different than our own. Unlike the helping professions where multicultural competence training is provided and assessed, many other schools of thought may not emphasize this in the same way (Attilee, 2019). According to the Pew Research Center (Budman, 2020), the number of foreign-born individuals in the United States in 2018 was 44.8 million, or about 13.7% of the entire population. By 2065, 88% of the population is projected to be immigrants or descendants of immigrants in the United States (Budman, 2020). With the growing diversity comes the responsibility to appropriately honor the needs that arise.

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