



Chapter 3

Beyond Instruction: Developing Online Culturally Relevant Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will focus on creating culturally relevant online learning environments through a critical investigation of the culturally relevant leadership learning model. Within this chapter, there will be a discussion and explanation of the model and its continued use from the perspectives of both course instructors and students who co-create the online learning environment. This chapter will highlight testimony from chapter authors and offer reflective questions for readers to gain insight into effective practices of creating online culturally relevant learning environments in their unique perspectives. While this chapter focuses heavily on higher education learning environments, connections and applications to all educational environments are made for applicability across various contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of instruction and formalized educational systems, one concept exists at the forefront of these entities: innovation. Innovation has evolved

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from centering the advancement of technology and concepts for those the educational system originally intended to serve, to those who have contributed to changing our original notions and applicability of theories and practices in today's times. Many theories and concepts have been created to allow educators and students to engage in this innovation process in myriad ways. One of those ways is through a critical investigation of the leadership process, which we all engage with daily. As we have come to learn, due to various world events, especially those related to public health, the safety of marginalized individuals, and the spread of misinformation, the online environment that has been socially constructed, and educational institutions often utilize this space to distribute knowledge. This practice of utilizing the online learning environment as a space for education has become increasingly accessible to all students. By using an online learning environment, instructors can engage with students and create a space for a culturally relevant learning process to occur. At times, however, this presents unique challenges that are different from those found in traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms. One of the challenges many online instructors and students wrestle with is the way in which these online educational environments can become spaces that emphasize culturally relevant and socially just practices. Students often seek additional information and develop a critical and multicultural lens as they progress through their education, and at times, the online learning environment does not produce these intended outcomes (Montelongo & Eaton, 2020). As a result, it is now more important than ever to critically integrate models and theories that promote culturally relevant education. Only then can we shift our perspectives to discover and offer best practices in education.

From the institutional lens, leadership development is often at the core of higher education instruction. As outlined in a study conducted by Devies and Guthrie (2022), there is an inherent priority placed on higher education institutions to develop leaders, as outlined in their institutional mission statements. As demographics and institutional priorities shift across the field of higher education, it is also critical to understand how we need to reframe our mindset as educators moving forward. This reframing must be geared towards embracing online educational environments, especially as we are tasked with creating and developing the societal leaders of tomorrow. With this in mind, and given the continuous shifts in course modality across all institution types, it has become a priority to ensure all individuals involved in the learning process gain the skills necessary to aid their development, both in their positional roles and as individuals. "Leadership development is holistic human development" (Pacheco, under contract – 2024), and with institutional mission statements signaling this need to create leaders, higher education institutions are inherently tasked with shaping the future of our shared society.

After all, "leadership processes generally enable groups of people to work together in meaningful ways" (Day, 2001, p. 582). Given the call on higher education

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