Chapter 17
Best Pedagogical Practices for Acknowledging and Accommodating Diversity in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the best practices for acknowledging and accommodating diversity in online courses, focused at the K-12 level. It presents the challenges of a culturally biased Internet and offers possibilities for educators to address this bias, not only for themselves as pedagogical and instructional designers but also for their students in both online and blended learning environments. While understanding cultural learning biases is important in any online education setting, teachers at the K-12 level need to be especially vigilant as they are working with students who are still developing their own identities as both people and learners. 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 student 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 student’s cultural awareness through content and instruction.

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 (iNACOL, 2013). And as public schools reduce their own course offerings due to budget constraints, online courses in cooperation with other public schools or local colleges are another option to offer not only required and elective courses, but also Advanced Placement, other college credit bearing courses, and at the same time create enough enrollments to justify

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the cost of course development, facilitation, and support. Additionally, online courses can help K-12 students who are chronically ill and cannot attend school regularly, students with scheduling conflicts, as well as students who need access to credit recovery courses in order to graduate (Picciano, Seaman, & Allen, 2010). With the blurring of these traditional school boundaries, teachers from more homogenous educational settings who move into online teaching are more likely to have students from different ethnicities and cultures than their own. According to the Center for Public Education (2012) indicates that eventually no one racial or ethnic group will make up “more than 50% of the total population….almost one in ten U.S. counties has a population that is more than fifty percent minority” (The changing demographics of America’s schools). Learning to accommodate these learners is the first and foremost goal of online education.

First, what do I mean by culture? For the purposes of this chapter, I will use Gay’s (2000) definition of culture. Gay (2000) stated that culture is a “dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, world views, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others” (pp. 8-9). Culture is central to how people think, learn, and teach in their everyday lives. Students from one culture may not learn material best in the same ways as students from another culture, and may not prefer to communicate in similar ways. Yet, the idealistic promise of the internet—to allow interglobal communication with the simple click of a mouse—seems to belie these complexities of culture. These differences will become even more apparent in an online learning context as students try to collaborate with one another, communicate with peers as well as the teacher, and attempt to successfully anticipate teacher expectations.

BACKGROUND

Educational research in online learning has predominantly focused on two particular groups, students in higher education and pre-service teachers (Koyama, Plash, & Davis, 2012). While some limited research has investigated the effectiveness of online versus face-to-face learning at the elementary and secondary levels, little of this research has addressed the needs of diverse learners in asynchronous environments (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009).

Challenging Current Perceptions and Ideas of Diverse Students’ Backgrounds

First and foremost, teachers should acknowledge and understand that their own cultural learning preferences affect how they approach their content areas, design learning environments, implement instruction, and use assessments. The first step in creating online courses that address student diversity is for instructors to examine their own cultural understandings, their learning expectations for students, and their preferred learning styles. As is the case in traditional classrooms where teachers come in contact with students from diverse backgrounds and seek to find information about those cultures in order to better understand and help their diverse students learn, so is the case for an online classroom. Yet, unlike a traditional classroom, teachers note the absence of face-to-face interaction that sometimes makes racial, ethnic, and cultural differences apparent. This lack of face-to-face contact may lead to the “color blindness” that Hawley and Nieto (2010) warn educators to avoid. By refusing to acknowledge student differences in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, teachers are limiting
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