Chapter 4
Cultural Inclusivity in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT
This chapter addresses the complexities of building an effective learning environment in light of a diverse, multicultural student group. Existing research focuses on how to foster learning in traditional classroom environments, comprised of students from varied cultures and backgrounds. Yet, little is known about what strategies towards cultural inclusion are effective in an online learning environment. This chapter discusses the influence of cultural difference in online learning and provides ways courses can be more inclusive. This chapter is beneficial for instructors, course designers, and administrators who want to learn more about how to foster a culturally inclusive learning environment in online course settings.

INTRODUCTION
There has been a good amount of literature focused on how to foster learning in a traditional classroom comprised of students from varied cultures and backgrounds; yet, little is known about how to do this in an online learning situation. Culturally inclusive education is a means of recognizing oppressed groups and underscores the need for everyone to develop certain skills and knowledge related to how to incorporate effective practices in curriculum (Elliott II et al., 2013). In essence, this means creating a classroom environment that is inclusive, supportive, and considerate of students’ cultural backgrounds and differences.

Working with a multicultural student group in a traditional classroom setting poses challenges in and of itself. In an online classroom, the dynamic between the students and instructor, as well as among students, is quite different. The absence of face-to-face contact makes it necessary to foster cultural inclusivity a bit differently in a virtual setting. Studies have shown that an instructor’s ability to work with a diverse student group is critical to the classroom experience; that is, instructors should not be ignorant of cultural difference in the classroom. Factors such as cultural sensitivity (Nieto & Zoller-Booth, 2010), course curricula (Leask, 2009), and course management (Ryan & Viete, 2009) must be addressed in order...
for students from various cultural backgrounds to feel accepted and acknowledged. Academic institutions typically support multiculturalism via various initiatives and programs that focus on areas such as campus climate, institutional policies, education, and research (Krishnamurthi, 2003). These initiatives include programs that educate administrators and faculty on cultural competence to prepare them to work with diverse student environments (Howard-Hamilton, Cuyjet, & Cooper, 2011). For faculty, this means knowing how to effectively use strategies such as creating effective discussion, using appropriate course materials, and promoting critical thinking.

Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) identify several challenges for teaching in a multicultural classroom, including:

- Understanding and appreciating the cultural differences of students in order to make the appropriate instructional decisions that will enhance their learning;
- Becoming aware of one’s own cultural preferences for what they are and not assuming they represent the right way to think;
- Determining which student behaviors represent cultural values and are therefore less prone to modification to accommodate the instructional situation;
- Accepting the dual responsibility of educators to acculturate and respect individual student cultural backgrounds; and
- Accepting that research-based instructional strategies are also culture-based and therefore may be at times inappropriate or in need of adaptation. (para.22)

This chapter addresses the complexities of promoting cultural inclusivity in light of a diverse, multicultural student group in an online course environment and how a student’s sense of social presence can support inclusion. Specifically, the chapter is focused on several guiding questions:

- How does a multicultural student group influence online learning?
- How can instructors in online settings facilitate a positive, productive learning community in light of student differences related to culture?
- In what ways can course design be inclusive of cultural difference to promote inclusivity?

BACKGROUND

An effective, multicultural classroom is an inclusive environment that recognizes and embraces diversity and differences among students. Yet, a lack of face-to-face interaction, either between a student and the instructor, or among students in a course, is often cited as a primary factor that influences a student’s feelings of isolation in online course settings (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; McElrath & McDowell, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Faculty must find ways to rectify this disconnect to help alleviate this isolation. To do this, research suggests community building within the classroom as a viable approach (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; McElrath & McDowell, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

At minimum, to begin to build a culturally-inclusive learning community, instructors must develop a connection with students, get students involved online, and swiftly handle disagreements or conflict (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). However, these tactics alone will not guarantee an environment that is culturally inclusive. This chapter explores three areas of online learning: communication