Chapter XIII

Higher Learning in the Pacific: Reflections on Diversity and Technology in a Capstone Course

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of particular issues of diversity and technology within an island university. The chapter’s central focus rests on the complexity of both concepts within the context of higher education in the Pacific. In particular, the chapter highlights both the challenges and opportunities that the university faces as it attempts to address the unique multicultural landscape of the Western Pacific region and its technological realities. It focuses on a capstone senior-level course as a case study, and explores the possibilities inherent in directly addressing issues of diversity and technology while at the same time accomplishing the course’s prescribed academic goals. The chapter concludes by outlining 10 important lessons learned from the experience that others can benefit from, and establishes the importance of such a capstone experience for both students and faculty alike.
Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the topics of diversity and technology within higher education from an interdisciplinary perspective. We explore the complexity of each and, in the process, show the linkage of one to another. Much has been written on diversity and technology independently, within this volume and elsewhere. Thus, we feel it is important to illustrate in this chapter how both are not only intimately linked within the context of higher education but are especially salient features of today’s increasingly globalized world. To illustrate this, a case study approach serves to explore the strengths and challenges of each within the context of a Pacific Island University. In doing so, we share lessons learned from an interdisciplinary capstone course designed for senior-level students at the University of Guam (UOG). The central thesis of this chapter is both descriptive and analytical. It is descriptive in the sense that it outlines and highlights the use of technology both by students and professors within the classroom setting and some challenges for each. Further, it seeks to describe the diverse landscape at UOG as well as within the particular capstone course under study. The chapter is analytical in that it seeks to explore ways in which diversity impacts the learning environment and learning outcomes within higher education. The chapter explores how technology has shaped these outcomes and, in turn, has engaged an extensive process of social change.

Scope of the Present Study

At the outset, let us define the boundaries of the concepts being used in this chapter. The concept of diversity is a commonly used term in academia and carries with it a great amount of baggage. Other terms often used synonymously (and sometimes incorrectly) with diversity include multiculturalism, pluralism, biculturalism and/or universalism. These concepts are complex, owing to their interpretation and policy implications both in terms of curricula development and classroom dynamics. For example, on the surface, one might think that proponents of diversity, multiculturalism and feminism may position themselves on the same side of the political and academic fence. However, it is multiculturalism that is taken to task by one of the leading feminist scholars of our time. In her essay titled “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?,” Susan Okin (1999) takes the position that oppression of women is not adequately countered by formal provisions of equal opportunity and that there is often a serious tension that exists between feminism and multiculturalism in higher education that scholars have failed to adequately address. Some scholars argue that our focus on diversity and multiculturalism within the academy in recent decades has resulted in a decrease in standards of excellence (Griffin, 2000). Yet, its proponents feel that students must be prepared to enter a diverse world and the educator’s role is to assist them in affirming their own unique cultural backgrounds while at the same time respecting others (Reissman, 1994). These are just a few illustrations that point to the complex nature of this field of inquiry. Technology is another area of inquiry within education that has garnered a great deal of attention in recent years. With the popularization of distance as well as other types of educational technologies, scholars have attempted to explore questions that relate
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