Chapter 15
Addressing Cultures in Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In online environments, identifying and addressing different cultures can be challenging, but differences exist as increasingly diverse student populations interact with resources and humans. Making cultural factors explicit can lead to deeper understanding; students can discover how culture informs knowledge. This chapter focuses on key elements of culture and online teaching: students, teachers, curriculum, and the learning environment. Each element interacts, and has cultural implications.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s digital world, awareness of different cultures and interaction among them have risen dramatically. This globalization has also impacted education. Online technology has become a commonplace form of curriculum delivery, and students are crossing political and cultural lines to participate in educational experiences. This cross-cultural phenomenon occurs especially in professional development because many economic sectors either deal with clientele representing different cultures or the employees themselves work and come from a variety of cultures. To that end, therefore, educational venues must also address cross-cultural issues, either in terms of their students or in terms of culturally-relevant content.

In an online environment, identifying and addressing different cultures is more challenging than in face-to-face learning environments. It can be easy to brush aside cultural differences, but they exist, nevertheless, as students interact with resources and humans. Making cultural factors explicit can lead to deeper understanding, and online learning environments, because they tend to minimize physical cues, can actually address...
these differences clearly and transparently. In the process, students can discover how culture informs knowledge.

This chapter focuses on key elements of culture and online teaching: students, teachers, curriculum, and the learning environment. Each element interacts, and has cultural implications.

**THE BIG PICTURE: THE CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Regardless of the scale, when people form together into stable groups with sustained shared value/belief systems and normative expectations/behaviors, they comprise a culture. UNESCO (2002) defines culture as: “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (p. 1). An individual may belong to several cultures: family, workplace, neighborhood, race, profession, social club, political party, country. Likewise, a group may belong to several cultures; chemists may be members of a site staff, a union, an industry, a state organization, a national organization, and an international organization. Some of these cultures may overlap or even contradict, in which case, the individual or group must either live with the disequilibrium or resolve the conflict (i.e., reject one or the other, reject both, or incorporate parts of each). A culture may also be measured in terms of how cohesive it is in terms of inside and outside pressures; if conflict arises from outside its borders, do members stay within the culture or switch allegiance to the other culture?

**REPRESENTATIVE CULTURES AND SUBCULTURES**

Cultures are well-defined, sustained groups of people with common norms, expectations and values, which can be distinguished from other culture groups. Subcultures are more specialized groups that still belong to the larger group and its norm, but have more specific characteristics. For example, Latinos can be considered a culture, but Puerto Ricans differ significantly from Peruvians, and homeland Puerto Ricans differ from New York born Puerto Ricans (subculture within a subculture). Such differentiations are important to note because too often generalizations are made about a culture (or even mega-culture such as Asians), which have little validity on a subcultural level or case-by-case basis. One might use the analogy of food, such as “All Asian food uses soy sauce,” to demonstrate the feebleness of such generalizations. Particularly when a course has just one student of a certain culture, that student might be called upon to represent that entire culture, which can be a very frustrating – and sometimes condescending – experience for that individual.

Nevertheless, race and ethnicity impact educational achievement and social status, even in the 21st century. The Educational Test Service asserted that “educational inequalities begin at birth” (Viadero, 2003, p.1) because of lower birth weight and other health factors. Blacks and Latinos are less likely to be read to by their parent(s), and are more apt to learn in overcrowded classrooms from inexperienced teachers. Additionally, they are more likely to move, and change schools, which means that they have to renegotiate social relationships. Native American teens are often separated from their families and tribes as they go to distant schools for high school education. As youth get older, disparities in academic success increase so that minority teens experience greater difficulty keeping up with their Anglo peers. Minority populations may be able to overcome their disadvantages with maturity, but they also realize that they have much catching up to do, and may feel frustrated as their own cultural advantages are not recognized or leveraged for society’s good as a whole.

It is also important to look beyond students themselves and examine conditions in the schools
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