Chapter 5
Cyborg in the Village: Culturally Embedded Resistances to Blended Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores the tensions that exist between institutions’ surging reliance on mandated blended learning and the preference for face-to-face interaction expressed by many adult transcultural students who self-identify as members of marginalized groups. In the context of this analysis, the term “transcultural” refers to the lived experience of students who self-identify as members of marginalized groups within the context of pedagogies that are rooted in dominant cultural constructs. The chapter offers a theoretical argument outlining the existence of culturally-embedded resistances to blended education that are bound to transcultural students’ learned strategies for survival and situated ways of knowing. The chapter also highlights some current best practices and offers additional strategies for acknowledging, leveraging, and/or mitigating culturally embedded resistances to blended education. Participants’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity.

“I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN…”

Our bright little classroom was furnished as was necessary, with tables and chairs in a cozy circle and wall-mounted whiteboards haunted by the faint composite of other people’s lecture notes. I greeted them as they arrived and watched them choose their seats, close to each other, making eye contact, laughing and touching shoulders. Directly in front of me, her hair pulled back into a knot of peppered silver, Bedelia fixed her sights onto her copy of my syllabus, deepening the lines at the corners of her eyes in a way that spoke to the agelessness of her chocolate colored skin. As I detailed the syllabus aloud, like the others in her cohort Bedelia read silently, nodding intermittently to affirm her understanding and carefully jotting phrases in the right hand margin wherever she deemed it prudent to take notes.
As happens to be the norm on our Florida campus, this cohesive group of adult graduate students was predominantly female, over the age of 35, and predominantly non-White. As is also the norm among our campus population, most of them were aspiring or mid-career human services workers. Pursuing their master’s degrees in the field of human services, many had been estranged from formal schooling since earning their bachelor’s due to intervening exigencies related to funding, employment, health or extended family. “Questions?” I asked, pausing in my reading of the syllabus at the bottom of each page. “It’s a lot of work I know, but at this level of analysis –”

Bedelia’s gaze homed in on my own. A domestic abuse counselor with grandchildren aplenty, as an older woman of color, Bedelia was in her element amongst these outspoken, intelligent, motivated learners who had returned to pursue their Master’s degrees often despite jaw-dropping personal hardship. Faculty rumor had it that she was affable and quick, with a capacity for courageous vocal dissent and a penchant for self-reflexive critical thought.

“People who know me can tell you that I’ve never been afraid of hard work in all my life,” Bedelia said in a tone that was deliberate and even. “And at my age, calling it 50 and counting, it’d be a pretty sad thing to start now.”

“I can relate to that,” said a tall, spare Black man with an abundance of locked hair, seated just to Bedelia’s right. “My family came from Jamaica when I was only 9, and I’ve been hard at work in the trenches, so to speak, for most of my life.”

Bedelia moistened the tip of a sturdy brown thumb and flicked through the pages. “Here,” she said, penciling a wide arc around the heading atop the page that read, “Online Teaching and Learning for this Class.”

No one ventured comment as her eyes scanned the content; she exhaled audibly, her affect appearing subdued by what she read. “Just like every term, here’s where I have a problem.” Her look was unflinching. “Mind you,” she went on, her tone achieving a slightly sharper edge, “I’ve got all the respect in the world for web-based technology. And old saws about “old dogs” notwithstanding, I’ve learned to like it and use it in my job. But when it comes to how I want to earn my degree…” There was a break in her talk… “I think it’s just a frustrating waste of my money and my time.”

Three chairs to the left of Bedelia sat Marta Luna, a mixed-race Lesbian mother of a Transgendered teen. I recalled having Marta Luna as a student in a previous class. Her hair the inky color of a jet night sky, I remembered her fondly as a strong “A” student, a skilled and impassioned writer assiduously devoted to the rigors of lifelong learning.

“How so?” I asked, turning my copy of the syllabus face down on the desk beside me. Increasingly, the discourse at hand seemed far more urgent and compelling; since as a practical matter I’d heard similar assessments before, often from excellent scholars like Marta who self-identified as members of demographic groups whose history in the US included the isolating, often brutal, experience of cultural marginalization.

“For one thing,” Marta Luna continued, “there’s the questionable issue of mandate. Online teaching and learning are required here now. There wasn’t anything like that in place when I enrolled. Now you can’t escape it, no matter what courses you’re taking. If I’d wanted that, I would’ve gone elsewhere. Second, we were given zero choice in the matter and no opportunity for input before the fact. Third and worst of all, there’s more and more of it every term.”

Marta Luna’s stinging analysis evoked my follow-up response. “If memory serves from the last time I had you in my class, you seemed really very comfort-
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