Asynchronous Discussions in Online Multicultural Education

Introduction

With the proliferation of technological innovations, especially information and communication technologies, there is a rapidly increasing trend for universities to offer online courses (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006). Rationalized within the premises of cost and time efficiency, online education promises a new mode of teaching and learning by offering instant and unbound access and participation for students through expanded temporal and spatial opportunities.

Cost saving and time efficiency have been alluring notions, particularly at times when the nation faces enormous economic challenges. These include diminished middle-class incomes which impact students' abilities to attend traditional colleges, increased transportation costs, distance issues related to rural domiciles, and the potential loss of student enrollment to competing institutions.

Many proprietary online courseware or course management systems (e.g., *Blackboard*), social courseware (e.g., Moodle, Sakai, etc.), and web tools and applications (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, and wikis) are in extensive use in colleges and universities to capture this new mode of teaching and learning, and frankly, to maintain the competitive edge that better address the poor economic conditions and marketability of the colleges and universities.

In the meantime, while *Blackboard* Inc. covers roughly 80 percent the of online education market (Bradford, Porciello, Balkon, & Backus, 2007), there is also an increasing trend of using social software and applications—commonly referred to as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). For instance, edublogs.org alone hosts 642,000 educational blogs (as of November 9, 2010)[1]; Moodle, as of November 9, 2010, has 39 million users from 209 countries using about 3.9 million courses, a figure doubled since 2008[2]; and so forth.

The pervasive social media in everyday communication has recently generated substantial amounts of interest. It is widely argued that the sociability and scalability of such media can be capitalized on for teaching and learning, not merely as tools but as *learning spaces* (Oblinger, 2006) or learning environments (Barron, 2004), where knowledge constructing interactions can be possible through collaboration and sharing (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Gurung & Chavez, 2011).

These proprietary Internet tools and free web 2.0 tools are used for delivering online courses, including online multicultural education, in many ways and for a variety of purposes (Gurung & Chavez, 2011). One of the most prominent and pervasive uses of such proprietary tools is to facilitate asynchronous discussions in the online delivered courses. Generally, these online discussions are designed to be asynchronous and available at anytime anywhere. This is based on the notion that students have more time to think and reflect about their responses and therefore the depth and quality of the responses are maintained (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg, 2000).

The multi-linear dialogues between all participants (students and teachers) can provide opportunities to challenge each others' ideas and share creativity. The collaborative mode of engagement afforded by the online discussion environment (ODE) fosters inquiry, critical thinking, and innovation (Tutty & Klein, 2008; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008). Brookfield and Preskill (2005) argue that "The privacy, relative isolation, and reflective space associated with asynchronous online learning enhance the development of genuinely individualistic, critical thought" (p. 232). Further, in a review of research about teaching courses online, Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) assert that online environments "may offer a unique social advantage as compared to the traditional classroom" (p. 97) including anonymity in the networked environment (Sullivan, 2002).

Although an ODE overall can be as effective as face-to-face discussions, there is no guarantee that such ODE interactions always lead to more in-depth interaction (Sing & Khine, 2006) and effective collaborative efforts similar to a face-to-face setting (Tutty & Klein, 2008), and there is concern that an ODE may actually sedate the student performance to just seeking a passing grade (Davies & Graff, 2005).

Within this context, our purpose here is to explore and examine the potential of delivering multicultural education, in particular, online. In this analysis we deal with asynchronous discussions mediated by web-based technologies, including the proprietary *Blackboard* course management system and free Web 2.0, also known as social media.

Literature Review

Online Asynchronous Discussion

Online discussion can be synchronous or asynchronous. Online asynchronous discussion has been viewed as a viable source of critical thinking and reflection through group discussions (Duffy, Dueber, & Hawley, 1998; Wells, 1999; Yang, 2008). The asynchronous online discussion is used widely as a constructive means to collaborate and engage students not only because "higher order thinking can and does occur" (Meyer, 2003, p. 5), but because it also enables students "to take ownership of the discussion" (Chen, Wang, & Hung, 2009, p. 158).

An asynchronous online multicultural discussion increases both depth of content and equity of participation (Merryfield, 2001). Such discussions also provide multiple opportunities for critical emotional reflexivity by setting up conversations on the learners' own feelings and experiences about difficult issues such as cultural diversity and discrimination that may not be possible in face-to-face environments (Zembylas, 2008). In a study, Wassell and Crouch (2008) concluded that asynchronous discussion (v http://download2.dreamstime.com/dreamstimezoom_16035939.jpg?image id=16035939&forcepass=aa5f13063cef87b296da04d85b12b584 ia blogs) can be used in multicultural education to stimulate thinking and writing about important issues such as race, class, culture, sexuality, and gender.

However, there are mixed results about the effectiveness of both of these types of discussions (Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003; Chen et al., 2009). There are numerous issues, such as maintaining the quality of online discussions (Andersen, 2009); maintaining the perceived presence of the course instructor (Swan & Shih, 2007); domination of a few students in discussions (Oliver & Shaw, 2003); lacking quality design and structure of the ODEs (Chen et al., 2009); failure to recognize the importance of students' feelings, reactions, and responses, and students having difficulty understanding how to engage in meaningful discussions (Ellis & Kalvo, 2006).

All of these issues, if not addressed thoughtfully and meticulously, may potentially cause the online discussion to be problematic (Oliver & Shaw, 2003) and suffer from shallow participation (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

Asynchronous discussion can be structured and unstructured (Yang, 2008). Yang found that students in structured discussions "demonstrated very high levels of interaction, a social interaction that reduces students' reliance on the passive 'viewing' mode of learning" (p. 261). Structured discussions are thematic discussions—based on a theme, topic, or issue—often facilitated by the instructor or a graduate assistant (Andersen, 2009).

In the structured discussions students are divided in small groups and they have responsibilities to respond to each of the group members, taking turns facilitating discussion, and so forth. Multicultural discussions usually are based on themes or issues of race, class, sexuality, gender, culture, language, age, ability, and other sociopolitical issues (Merryfield, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Wasell & Crouch, 2008).

Multicultural discussions can also be set up as unstructured discussions. But it is widely believed that "in an unstructured discussion where no facilitators organize or guide students' discussion, students may talk for hours or post many messages without learning anything of substance" (Yang, 2008, p. 242). Little reflection and critical thinking occur in unstructured discussions because students tend to exchange personal experiences, acknowledging one another socially, and give advice (Angeli et al., 2003).

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Yet within the unstructured discussions there is an opportunity for engaging students in online multicultural education dialogue utilizing user anonymity (see Qian & Scott, 2007)—hidden names and identities—to explore socioculturally sensitive issues. Sullivan (2002) reported that 42% of females surveyed commented on the advantage of user anonymity in discussing their experiences. On the contrary, Levin's (1996, 1999) findings suggest that anonymity can be harmful in online case discussions on controversial issues. Also, there are interesting findings in anonymous situations where female students adopt male identities and male pseudonyms to avoid perceived disempowerment and gender issues (Jaffe, 1999; Pagnucci & Maureillo, 1999).

Although it is a widely conceived notion that freedom to post anything with anonymity may increase participation and inquiry, Freeman and Bamford (2004) report that anonymity may actually reduce the participation. In their study, they found that nine in 10 participants never posted anything while in anonymity. Therefore, to understand the impacts of anonymity, some further study will be necessary.

A number of considerations must be made in order to engage students in online asynchronous discussions that will achieve desired outcomes from the students. Simply forming discussion groups and providing a question or topic for the discussion does not ensure successful participation of students (Guldberg & Pilkington, 2007). Rather, carefully designing the discussion environment is crucial and this should take into considertion various socio-technological infrastructures/factors, including design, commitment, engagement, acknowledgement, reflection, and emergence within the reiterative process of integrating these factors as a whole (Chen et al., 2009). Additionally, discussion questions should be specific and aligned to learning objectives, with clarity of due dates, expectations, participation policies, student responsibilities, and possible grades to be earned (Freeman & Bamford, 2004; Guldberg & Pilkington, 2007; Majeski & Stover, 2007).

Equally important is the role of the instructor in facilitating online asynchronous discussions and knowing when to intervene or stay passive (Andresen, 2009; Zhu, 2006). It is argued that the role of the instructor—a sage, guide, or ghost—depends on what she wishes to accomplish (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003). However, there are some common roles of the instructor in online asynchronous discussions, including, for example, to design and implement the discussion structures (Chen et al., 2009); to motivate student participation and take a role of cheerleading (Dysthe, 2002); to maintain the perceived presence (Swan & Shih, 2005); to engage in Socratic dialogues to deepen the ongoing inquiry of the discussions (Yang, 2008); and to identify critical points of discussions for intervention (Andresen, 2009; Oikonomidoy, 2009).

Purpose

This study examined the use of *Blackboard* and emerging Web 2.0 Ning for facilitating asynchronous online multicultural education discussions. This study also intended to unravel potentially powerful aspects of online multicultural education. The following research questions were set forth for this study:

1. What is the nature and quality of asynchronous discussions in an online multicultural education course?

2. What is the nature and quality of asynchronous discussions in an online multicultural education course in terms of motivation, comfort, desire, and exploration of alternative views?

3. What is the impact of online multicultural discussions when student participate in two different discussion environments—(a) discussions mediated by *Blackboard*, and (b) the discussions mediated by free Web 2.0 tools?

4. How might students take risks with their *explicit* and *implicit* identities (we will explain them in the methods section) to engage in socio-culturally sensitive issues that require self-reflection leading to growth in awareness to educational praxis?

Theoretical Framework

We conceptualize student learning within the constructivist perspective (Brooks & Brooks, 2001; Fosnot, 1996) where meaningful learning occurs through the 3S interactions (subject, self, and social learning) (Henderson, 2001), collaboration, and autobiographical reflection (Pinar, 2004) in culturally and linguistically meaningful contexts (Cole, 1996; Heath, 1986).

Henderson clarifies the 3Ss as "teaching for democratic living [that] fosters a certain type of self-learning" (p. 11) as well as social learning which helps students think about equity, diversity, and issues of civility. From a constructivist perspective, students' lived experiences are fundamental in the development of new understandings as they engage content (Brooks & Brooks).

The autobiographical nature of curriculum and learning focuses on the reflective interactions of students (Henderson, 2001; Pinar, 2004) whereby they must first get to know themselves contextually before they can move toward praxis. Clarification of personal beliefs is an essential process embedded within meaningful subject interaction focused on impacting society. We have incorporated pedagogical strategies based on Pinar's notion of autobiography as a starting point for interrogation of one's beliefs, a sensitive but useful starting point as we immerse our students in critical discussions dealing with our sense of being and social justice.

Web 2.0, also known as social media, has become well suited for pursuing a collaborative scholarship that captures the constructivist framework of engagement and learning (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Gurung & Chavez, 2011; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). In the Web 2.0 learning environment, students as "prosumers"—consumer-as-producer (López, 2008, p.11)—can actively engage in co-constructing and sharing networked knowledge and artifacts by harnessing the *collective intelligence* (O'Reilly, 2005; Solomon & Schrum, 2007) while bringing in their socio-cultural perspectives and subjectivities (Gurung & Chavez, 2011).

Freeman and Bamford (2004) speak to the challenges academics encounter as online teaching evolves. Academics will need to understand the strengths and constraints of diverse media that can support or impede learning and communication. Understanding the nature of the learner can have beneficial impacts on learning motivation and participation. Online learning environments, where students exist as identities in cyberspace, have given rise to some important questions in relation to the role of learner identities in the learning process.

Greater learning outcomes become possible in an online context because *asynchronicity* affords greater reflection in role responses and because anonymity can promote the richer development of self-created or given personas (Freeman & Capper, 1999). Academics need to consider if and how far they wish to take risks with new teaching and learning options (Freeman & Bamford, 2004).

Method

This research project was conducted during the spring of 2010. Twenty-two graduate students from an online multicultural education course participated in eight asynchronous online team discussions during the semester, the discussions lasting two weeks each. After the first five small group discussions (containing 4-5 students in each group), they were split into two diverse groups based on race, ethnicity, and gender. We then placed them in two distinct discussion platforms: *Blackboard* and the social networking site called Ning.

The *Blackboard* students had their *explicit* identities while the Ning group used *implicit* identities. The explicit identity revealed each student's personal, professional, and cultural identities whereas the implicit identity completely masked these identifying attributes. The instructor and teaching assistant maintained anonymity while facilitating the Ning discussions. Our study focused on the topics of class and language issues in one instance and student cultural identities in another.

We also gathered student responses from an exit survey which asked for them to reveal aspects of each discussion experience. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was employed to analyze the data in two ways: (a) using *a priori* themes—motivation, comfort, desire, and exploration of alternative views; and (b) finding the emergent themes.

We intended to get insight into the nature and quality of discussions while maintaining the rigor and engagement of face-to-face courses and move us toward praxis with the potentially beneficial aspects of Web 2.0. Overall, we intended to see how online discussions differed when identities were masked when sensitive multicultural issues were discussed.

Findings

The findings dealing with the *a priori* themes suggest that there is little impact from the use of explicit and implicit identities in terms of motivation, comfort, desire, and exploration of alternative views. Of course, a longer sustained study could be more revealing. Of the 22 respondents, about half of the survey respondents seemed to not have a preference while the remainder of them showed a slight preference for using Ning discussions with implicit identities. For example, when asked which environment they would recommend for future discussions, five students suggested Ning, one preferred *Blackboard*, and the remainder showed ambivalence.

On the other hand, we found some contradictions to this finding upon reviewing the actual student narratives. They did not support their survey responses in their actual asynchronous responses. We found no qualitative differences in either environment/identity when comparing their discussion narratives. The emergent issues that surfaced are presented in the following six categories.

Types of Questions, Time, and Persistence of Discussions

We found that the nature and structure of questions asked influenced the responses, making them more evocative, reflective, and emotional. Prior to invoking the treatment of anonymity, we used questions that were content-based. For this research we took time to craft questions around sensitive multicultural issues. We wanted the students to move beyond recall and cause them to respond meaningfully while questioning their deep-seated beliefs. Narrative analysis revealed prejudices, conformity to existing social norms, unexamined assumptions, and assertions.

We maintained a Socratic dialogue based on these questions during the two-week discussions. We had expected that the implicit identities would allow for more risk taking in the responses, but we failed to show that. Perhaps a more extended experience will give insight into this possibility and help us make pedagogical decisions that might eventually improve the online learning for transformation.

The following question is an example (from week 6) of the type of questions created to promote meaningful discussions:

> Since we have asked that you allow yourself to become vulnerable during the course reflective activities, what tensions have you found that either allowed or prevented you from digging deeper into your multicultural self? We want you to go beyond the obvious and become introspective to un/discover aspects of your multicultural identity that may have previously gone unexamined. What are the implications of *ablism* on student *success* in schools as they are presently constructed?

The instructor and graduate assistant (GA) created the questions collaboratively and both were involved in stimulating the discussions over the two-week period. Students had access to the discussions while instructors as well as students and team members engaged in developing the ongoing discussions. We call this process "persistence." Thus, time and persistence favored online discussion.

The amount of time spent to maintain the discussions is a drawback to online teaching. However, we were able to manage by adapting simple strategies such as division of labor between instructor, GA, and students as team moderators. Each student was responsible to facilitate one discussion as well as provide a discussion summary and self-evaluation to the instructors.

The team moderators rotated after each discussion until each had facilitated two times during the semester. Through the summary, they divulged peer- and self-analysis of their progress while stimulating their power and agency to co-construct new meanings. The following team moderator summary written by a student team moderator demonstrates the real possibility of engaging and reflecting students not only as participants, but leaders in the discussions as well.

Sample TM Summary for Week 6
Tensions/ Prejudices

> When discussing which tensions we felt that either impeded or encouraged us to dig deeper into who we are as multicultural selves, there were many different self-disclosed tensions that were delivered with brutal honesty. There were some people that disclosed prejudices that they personally had, while others seemed to make light of prejudices they had because they were the victims of prejudice themselves; such as Amalia, who felt a sense of tension against the mainstream for difficulties and bigotry that they have placed upon her and her loved ones. There were prejudices Beverly held about homosexuality, and how that individual would feel if their family members "came out," there were prejudices between ethnic groups such as Hispanics/Mexicans having prejudices against Navajo Native Americans despite sharing race and ethnicity, according to Rita. Maribel felt pride for the acknowledgment of the trials and tribulations people of her ethnic heritage have had to face. Mary admitted to having some deep-seated prejudices that she was taught about African Americans and "White" people, and how that prejudice has been admonished in her family as generations pass. John admittedly has tensions he is facing with people with disabilities and feeling unprepared to differentiate adequately for the disparity in his classroom. Jenna mentioned that she feels uncomfortable when discussing her multicultural self and those of her students. Tiala reflected on the negative connotations of several Swahili-an names for "White" people. Most participants mentioned that the prejudices they held were generally taught, or were born out of ignorance.

Reflection on Self, Subject, and Social Interaction (3S)

In both identified and anonymous discussion environments, students brought in self-identity and self-knowledge discourses, as they attempted to deepen the inquiry, to challenge others' views, and to legitimate their arguments. Below are some examples of reflection we believe are necessary for the self-transformation toward socially just praxis of teaching and learning as presented in the 3S model from Henderson (2001).

One student critiqued a fellow discussant by bringing in her experience while

maintaining the legitimacy of knowing the subject matter at hand:

> I do believe it is due in part from your lack of education in this area that you hold these biases. I have been working with people with disabilities for over 15 years I was intolerant until the fact, but as you become more educated to this issue of ablism the views and feelings you hold will diminish.

Another student presented her historical being into the discussion in this way:

> Personally, I stand somewhere in the middle-class (although I am not sure if that is lower middle, or just middle). The majority of the information that I have learned about "getting ahead" in life, came from books and magazines that I often do not understand and are difficult for me to read. While part of me thinks that any literate individual could go and access this information and struggle through the same readings that I have, I understand that I got the drive and motivation to seek this information from my up-bringing, which places a high value on a certain quality of life…

While engaging in the discussions, one student began to realize how socioeconomic status, including race and culture, influenced her day to day life in complex ways.

> The only things that I have started to see is that since my mother is White, I am able to walk into the store and I don't have to worry about security looking at me like I am going to steal something…it's very hard for me to see it from that perspective, especially since I have always grown up in places where I am the minority and am not surrounded by other people that fall under the same racial category.

Another student not only brought her self-identity and self-knowledge to the discussions, but also saw pedagogical strengths in her experiences of her being and growing self.

> I am fully aware of the impact that [class] has had on my development as a person and a teacher. Often I find myself at odds with students who were given a different upbringing. I want students to see education as I did as a child-a duty as a member of the family. From a young age, I was taught that it was my duty to work. Work was not an option in my home and that included school. It is hard for me to see other students who come from different upbringings that don't necessary place the same importance on work ethic and view of school as duty.

These actual student responses show how they present themselves (knowledge, identity, and experience) to the discussion. Although, these students have a transformative intent to their self-presentation, their knowledge and experiences are not free from a reproductive cycle of socialization (Harro, 2010). These self presentations, along with the progression of the course engagement, underwent several constructions and reconstructions.

Students May Favor Blackboard over Ning

Socialization and student accountability were observed more prominently in the *Blackboard* environment, but we did not find any negative issues associated with anonymity such as unbalanced participation, abandonment of subject focus, or dishonesty as suggested by other studies (Freeman & Bamford, 2004). Since we conducted the comparison of discussions for only four weeks, it is probable that the *new* Ning environment was difficult to acclimate towards proficient use such as with the more familiar Blackboard structured discussions.

One student posted in the survey,

> I did enjoy using the Ning and either environment would be good to use. Some people have sensitivity issues and Ning would be perfect. I am open either way and I felt that I could respond with both environments equally. However, I would like to say that if Ning will be an option next year, maybe introducing it in the beginning would be better. I was not allowed ample time to learn it and missed out on a discussion because I was confusing on how to use it and it was not user friendly to me.

Students' Discourses were Opportunistic in Many Ways When They Dealt with Socio-culturally Sensitive Issues with Assumptions, Projection of Beliefs, and Contradictions

Two student comments are given below:

> As I discussed, I too feel uncomfortable talking with students on such issues as racism. I don't want to offend anyone and often times, I cannot find the right words to say. We are raised in a society that shapes us to have some sort of bias no matter who we are and I agree with you that often times we don't even realize we have these biases. Great thoughts! (Student 1)

> I like that you brought up the fact that you have students that qualify for free/reduced lunches but have smart phones and houses with flat screen tv's, with parents that drive in Escalades with rims. It's absolutely true and I'm glad that you had the platform to say it out loud. I am all about giving people help that need it, however I do not think it is right or ok to work the system just because you can. When things like this come to the forefront, it makes me cringe because people that truly need the help do not get it because all the funding and resources are used on people that take advantage. (Student 2)

The dangerous assumptions present in these passages project the deep-seated beliefs that can marginalize others. This type of comment can serve as an opportunity for the instructor to have an entry point for deeper discussion, aiding in the transformative process.

The Participants Were Cautious as There Was a Presence of Constant Tension—a Fear of Making "Politically" Incorrect Statements in Either Environment or Identity

One participant writes:

> I feel that in describing multicultural self I have been extremely cautious in the terms and phrases that I have used to describe myself. Part of being accepting and tolerant is using the correct terminology. When I describe myself in an informal situation, I don't really worry about using the wrong word or phrasing my thoughts in just the right way (so not to offend). In this course, however, I have made a conscious effort to use the correct terms and I am careful with my wording. I think that within my caution, I have limited the critical evaluation of self.

In Both Discussion Formats Students Demonstrated an Increased Intention to Transform

The students demonstrated that they were moving forward with the transformative intent from multicultural awareness to educational praxis. Below are two examples:

> My recent personal struggles have also contributed to my open-mindedness about others. You really have no idea what a person is going through just by knowing them. I struggle with anger management, but no one who knows me knows to what extent I struggle with this issue. In fact, most people would never even consider my having this problem. Once I began therapy to overcome this problem- this addiction- I learned a lot about how thoughts directly influence actions. I learned how my culture has engrained false beliefs (among the true ones) in my mind, and what I needed to do to change them. (Student 1)

> I am still discovering my entire self as we go along through this class. (Student 2)

Implications

We wish to support and develop positive contributions from multicultural education to teacher preparation and teacher development. It has been argued that the movement toward online landscapes could diminish the effectiveness and gains assumed from the face-to-face human approach. The *emergent instructional approach* was a major finding with significant pedagogical implications for creating and maintaining asynchronous online discussions. We refer to pedagogical practice that is informed by the immediacy of action and presence of instructor in the online learning space, thus fostering collaboration in numerous ways.

We found that the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the online multicultural education course may guide the nature of online multicultural discussions. To maintain the quality of the discussions, however, the instructor must be ready to address numerous forseen and unforeseen issues during the discussion engagement.

To maintain engagement persistence, we met twice a week and engaged in dialogues about the development of the ongoing discussions. We did not simply post a question and wait for the discussion to be over, we took time to collaboratively create evocative and reflective questions, used small teams with rotating team moderators, and we got involved to move the discussions along or asked for elaboration of posted responses.

Of major concern is the nature of the interaction in online teaching which includes class discussions and other forms of student participation. A primary intent in this course is for students to reflect on their multicultural identities and explore the corresponding intersections within problematized contexts.

Just as the web 1.0 has grown into 2.0, technology continues to evolve (O'Reilly, 2005). We must continually develop and accommodate to the ever-changing time and space continuum of technology that is available to the learner. Perhaps we are on the cusp of another paradigmatic shift. We also know that the direction is elusive and dynamic and is part of the nature of education as we travel along the information technology trajectory.

The nature of student interaction with multicultural content still hinges on strongly held beliefs about others, so self-interrogation within socio-cultural contexts remains paramount (Henderson, 2001). While we have offered some pedagogical possibilities and implications of teaching multicultural education with web 2.0, we are continuing our intellectual struggle while considering the following questions:

1. Are traditional multicultural practitioners willing and ready for this challenge (both in time commitment and new strategies for engagement)?

2. Can we maintain the effective and meaningful nature of past successful face-to-face teaching and learning interactions in our future online teacher preparation for a diverse and just society?

3. Do reflective online classes offer the same or more transformative potential as the face-to-face counterparts?

4. How are the economic contexts of U.S. schools impacting teaching and learning from a critical constructivist and multicultural perspective?

5. What is the impact of the nature of the leaner on social networking afforded by Web 2.0?

We observed that there is no meaningful loss to our mission in critical multicultural education when pursued through the online environment, but there could be some trade-offs with positive implications. In addition, perhaps there are added benefits related to anonymity and persistent dialogue.

New opportunities exist for course instructors to communicate with students on an individual as well as a collaborative setting over time. Face-to-face interactions are more ephemeral and do not persist over the course in the same way that they do during extended discussions in the online class. Even the leadership roles can be modified, such as when students are assigned discussion teams with each member becoming a team moderator during a discussion cycle.

All of this also gives insight into how to use *professors-in-the-making* (our doctoral graduate assistants). The added time needed to engage online students creates constraints and thus the need for shared responsibilities, may damper the effect unless handled well. It also may mean that the full time equivalent formula for this type of course may need modification due to the time-consuming nature of this emergent instructional approach, an approach which might well be used to teach effective multicultural education courses.

Significance of the Study

At the current time, when the economy plays a significant role in creating divergent views of how curriculum and pedagogy play out to serve teacher preparation programs across the nation, the duality of teaching face-to-face versus online has new and emergent meanings. As much as some academics resist the pedagogical uses of online classrooms, there is a real world need to further investigate the efficacy of their use.

We feel that there are benefits from online teaching and learning, but it also seems that there are some concerns that must be considered. Hopefully, we can address those concerns to assure that on-line instruction will not diminish the power and effectiveness of teaching multicultural education from a critical perspective. The emerging view that we have described here gives hope that we can *compete* for students as well as provide meaningful teacher preparation from a distance to students who might not otherwise attend our university.

Many prospective teachers have turned to our non-university-based competitors who may not have the research-based ideological foundations we value. We expect that the integrity and rigor of our on-line courses is maintained when compared to face-to-face courses, while some colleagues wonder if the lack of direct human contact restricts the course from reaching similar academic and philosophical goals. Future research may examine the efficacy of asynchronous discussion, but it seems prudent to extend the *application* period of student engagement, while keeping in mind the emergent instructional approach described in this study.

Notes

[1] http://edublogs.org/
[2] http://moodle.org/stats/

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