Authentic Dialogue in Online Classrooms

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Abstract
*Authentic dialogue about social and cultural issues is an imperative in the current educational zeitgeist of
national standards, high stakes testing, and neoliberal accountability reform. As social justice educators, it
is important to remember that it is our responsibility to create spaces in our online courses where students
can engage in authentic discourse. This article provides examples of ways faculty can create online
environments that encourage authentic discourse among students.*

Introduction
Authentic dialogue about social and cultural issues is an imperative in the current educational zeitgeist of
national standards high-stakes testing and neoliberal accountability reform. As social movements
continue to take center stage in the day-to-day lives of many of our students, it is crucial that we include
authentic dialogue about social change, within our classes (Adams & Bell, 2016; Sleeter & Carmona,
2016). This is especially important in an online environment, where trolling and cyberbullying can take
place. It is essential for teachers to use tools and strategies that encourage authentic discourse while
engaging with potentially divisive topics (Martins-Shannon & White, 2012; Sprow Forte & Blouin, 2016).

Through curriculum redesign and the use of online course tools, virtual classroom environments can be
constructed in ways that encourage students to participate in conversations about social issues more
authentically (Pacansky-Brock, 2013; Palloff & Pratt, 2013). While this type of dialogue is to be expected
in social sciences courses like Sociology, those opportunities rarely arise in learning design and
technology courses within a College of Education. This article looks at ways I, a learning design and
technology teacher, use culturally responsive theory as the basis for (re)designing online curriculum.
Specifically, I share course content and assignments used to authentically discuss issues of race, class,
and gender in my learning technology courses. By sharing my experiences, I hope to provide other
teachers with ideas and recommendations for designing online courses that engage students in open and
honest dialogue about social inequities, diversity and social justice.

Culturally Responsive Teaching
So, what is culturally responsive teaching online and what does that have to do with engaging students in
authentic discourse about race, gender, class, and social justice? A culturally responsive classroom
includes "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as
content conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, page. 106). Culturally responsive
teaching is about designing dynamic environments that honor the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity
that students bring to classrooms. Culturally responsive classrooms acknowledge and value student
diversity by encouraging academic success as well as cultural competence. According to Ladson-Billings
(1995), "not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help
students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities"(p. 476). Thus, culturally

responsive classrooms become an ideal environment for authentic discussions about social inequities as well as diversity issues and social justice.

Designing Culturally Responsive Online Classrooms

"Culturally responsive teaching and design practices flip the online classroom by creating an environment that acknowledges, celebrates, and builds upon the cultural capital that learners and teachers bring to the online classroom" (Woodley, Hernandez, Parra, & Negash, 2017, p. 43). As online course designers and teachers, it is essential that we begin by first acknowledging our positionality and the cultural capital we bring into the classroom. Authentic dialogues begin with the acknowledgment that even the way we choose to design our courses is rooted in our own culturally constructed ways of knowing, being, and doing.

I have been designing and teaching online courses for over 20 years. Initially, my theoretical groundings were in constructivism. My theoretical framework shifted to feminist and womanist leanings as I began designing women's studies and sociology courses. As I advanced in my degree studies, my theoretical framework expanded to include the work of critical race theorists. As my theory became more interdisciplinary, so did my online course design methods. "As the field of online education continues to expand and grow, especially with massively open online courses (MOOCs) that reach the world, it is of vital importance that teachers become leaders in developing curriculum and course offerings that act as counter-narratives to the dominant narratives of White supremacy and gender oppression" (Woodley, Mucundanyi, & Lockard, 2017). Culturally responsive teaching became the foundation of my course design as I became more and more committed to having my design theory match my fundamental teaching philosophy.

Examples of (Re)Designed Online Course Content

As a learning design and technology teacher, I teach masters- and doctoral-level courses in technology, pedagogy, and instructional design. The majority of students enrolling in my classes have little or no background in social justice education, critical theory, or feminist practices. Except for the one required multicultural education course they took as undergraduates, the majority of students entering my online courses have not engaged academically with issues like homophobia, racism, sexism, classism, or any of the other -isms that plague our society.

My theoretical groundings are in Black Womanism [1] (Cannon, 1995; Hudson-Weems & Sofala, 1995; Walker, 1983), and Critical Race Theory [2] (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and the curriculum in my courses are designed to engage students in an authentic discussion about those social issues that may divide us. Although the course is about the pedagogy underlying the use of technology in education, students are invited to engage in critical conversations about race, class, and gender all while seeking to understand social inequities, diversity, and social justice. For most of my students, this means they gain an understanding that social justice is about "struggling with the inherent biases that plague our society and, for many of my learning design and technology students, it requires them to think beyond the technology" (Woodley, 2016, p.4). This is uncomfortable for some students, but it is vital for them to understand and identify ways they can relate to the children they will someday teach.

The following are four (4) examples of things I have done to (re)designed my online courses in culturally responsive ways.

    1. *(Re)design curriculum to be validating.* The curriculum does not have to be static. It can be flexible with the ability to change quickly. One of the best ways to encourage authentic dialogue about social issues is to have the course content be comprehensive and speak to the whole learner. Culturally responsive teaching utilizes "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (Gay, 2010, p. 31).

During the first week or two of each class, students are asked to submit an assignment that requires them to create a backup plan should their technology fail. I have purposefully written the backup plan example

to include references to family, friends, peers, community members, and even supervisors. There are also examples of locations that students can find free computers to use like libraries, community centers, and places of worship. By inviting students to talk with those people in their lives that support them and identifying places where they can go should they have technical problems, the assignment validates their existing frames of reference. It also normalizes the idea that support from others can be an acceptable part of academic success.

2. *Ensure the use of diverse images and readings.* An easy way to transform an online course is to be more inclusive in the images and readings used in the course shell. Choose to use images that are representative of our global diversity. Some institutions have images they have taken of students around campus that can be integrated into courses. Images are a great way to diversify the look and feel of online classes. Readings are also an excellent way to bring various conversations into your online course. They are also a way to include authors of color in the course. Students can get diverse theoretical frameworks, ideologies, and even diverse perspectives based on the images and the authors included on the reading list.

In my online classes, this change is most evident in the learning modules area of the course. The learning modules went from being a single-page of instruction with an assessment to extensive storyboards with video, audio files, and reading material. The learning modules include racial, age, and gender diversity as well as reading and videos that represent international diversity. There are different theoretical perspectives on a variety of subjects. As I make continuous quality improvements on my courses, I take the time to incorporate articles, videos, and even audio clips that cover social issues. In the end, the learning modules become an excellent way to invite inquiry into issues of diversity and social justice.

3. *Integrate assignments that allow students to participate in social justice movements not just talk about them.* Part of the nature of culturally responsive teaching is finding a way to educate the whole person. Taking a holistic approach to teaching means creating opportunities to engage students in ways that cause them to move beyond their comfort zone when it comes to some of the social issues they discuss in your online classroom. Culturally responsive teaching is about educating the whole learner by "helping students of color maintain identity and connections with their ethnic groups and communities; develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility; and acquire an ethic of success" (Gay, 2010, p.32).

The first time I taught the social justice and education course online, I struggled with offering a social justice course that did not include some social justice activity. I believe in giving students the opportunity to participate and demonstrate practice as well as learning theory. Inside of a commitment to educate the whole person, I designed a project that students could do in cooperation with the American Library Association (ALA) Readout Program. The ALA Readout Program gives people the opportunity to record themselves reading from banned books. The recorded readings are then placed online as active resistance to book banning around the world.

The ALA Readout activity in my courses gives students the opportunity to participate in a social justice movement online while learning to record a video and upload it to YouTube. That assignment is one of the best assignments, according to student comments on my performance evaluations. Some students include their children in their videos while others include friends and family members. Most students include a statement about the book they chose and the impact their reading has on social justice in education. The statements are powerful, moving, and most speak to the need for educational reform. In this case, technology is the conduit for them to actively participate in resistance even though they are in an online course.

4. *Utilize the tools available in the learning management system.* Whether your institution uses Canvas, Blackboard or any other learning management system, most systems include different tools you can use as you engage students in conversations about social issues. Discussion boards are the go-to for most of us. They provide a space for students to be able to interact with one another, as well as

with the instructor, as they critically reflect on social issues. So discussion boards are a great place in which to engage with your students about social issues.

In my courses, the discussion boards become a place for students to discuss issues like the digital divide, othering, and social inequities. The discussion boards are a place for students to deal with the weekly subject matter while partnering with their colleagues to engage in authentic dialogue about issues that may pull them out of their comfort zone. As the facilitator, it is crucial that I provide students the opportunity to engage with one another without feeling the need to interject myself into their dialogues continually. At times, because the political can be personal, I have had to intervene when one or two students forget to follow the netiquette guidelines that are in place to assist with those problematic discussions. However, even those times I must model civil behavior on discussion boards to allow students "to be more open and willing to share their ideas without fear of retribution" (Han & Brazeal, 2015, p. 26). This model of behavior supports the kind of authentic dialogues that are necessary for promoting civil discourse in online classrooms (Birnie, 2016).

Conclusion

By designing, or redesigning, the curriculum to affirm the cultural capital that students bring into the online classroom, it is possible for faculty to invite students to engage more authentically about social issues. As social movements continue to impact the lives of our students, it is essential that we continue to find ways to incorporate discussions about such events into our social justice classrooms. Through the use of culturally responsive design and teaching principles, online faculty can create validating and affirming learning environments which provide students with opportunities to discuss potentially divisive topics.

Endnotes

[1]Black women scholars developed the theoretical and research framework of *Black Womanist Theory* as a counter-narrative to the marginalization they experienced in both Afrocentrism and White feminist theory. While Walker (1983) is credited with the origination of the term, *womanist*, in her book, *In search of our mother's garden: Womanist prose*, the work of Black womanist scholars like Cannon (1995), Hudson-Weems & Sofala (1995), Banks-Wallace (2000), and Maparyan (2012) have contributed to growth in use of the term.

[2] Critical Race Theory (CRT) began as an outgrowth of the Critical Legal Studies movement. CRT provides a foundational theory which allows for examination of societal issues of race, class, and power from a critical race perspective. Since its inception, CRT has become a foundational theory for research and practice across many fields of study as evidenced by the work of scholars like Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas (1995), Ladson-Billings (1995), Lynn & Adams (2002), Bell (2008), and Delgado & Stefancic (2017).

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