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Race, Class, Culture

The online teaching environment presents a different classroom dynamic than the face-to-face classroom. This essay provides an account of activities designed to promote an atmosphere of trust and openness in an online course that considered discrimination, culture, and racism throughout the semester.

Discussing Diversity and Discrimination in an Online Environment

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In the fall semester of 2007, I taught Human Services 31000 (Diversity, Self Awareness and Change), a 3-credit online course. The purpose of the course was to encourage students to become more aware of their own cultural identities and their attitudes towards those whose world views, expectations, and behaviors differ from their own, in order to increase their ability to function as culturally competent care providers. The eight students comprised a diverse group in many ways. Among us were Alaska Native, African American, and Northern European American peoples. The group also differed in terms of physical and mental abilities, religion, age, national heritage, sexual orientation, and marital and parental status.

One of the great luxuries afforded by college courses is the luxury of time. There are many subjects that are painful or frightening to talk about with strangers. In a class on diversity we can peel the onion in such a way that it is not necessary to dive immediately into what is most difficult. By structuring the course in such a way that the first discussion topics are intro-

spective and sharing occurs in a rather pleasant way, I am able to help my class build a sense of rapport early on. Students get to know one another, and most often, to like one another, as they are encouraged to disclose positive aspects of themselves. As the course progresses, we can move to considering oppression and discrimination in an atmosphere where people have gotten used to expressing themselves openly and not being rejected for their opinions.

Another luxury afforded by face-to-face courses—proximity—can also help encourage open discussion of controversial topics in an atmosphere of trust. However, because this was an online course, I wondered about the effectiveness of some of the techniques I learned during the week-long intensive for encouraging open discussion. What follows, then, is an account of my experience in an online course in which I adapted activities in order to foster productive difficult dialogues.

Understanding Cultural Identity

In the beginning of the course, we engaged in an activity intended to encourage students to become more aware of their individual cultural identities. First I distributed a handout to let students know what some of my own underlying assumptions would be in teaching the course. This is an excerpt from that handout:

If you ask a person, “What culture are you from?” someone might say, “I’m Athabaskan.” Someone else might say, “I’m Scotch-Irish.”

This is ethnicity.

These days, there are many who define “culture” more broadly. They say that a person’s culture can come from any group which shares a common self identification. For example, one person can belong to a nation or region, a gender, religion, race, interest group, and so on.

In this class, we will use the term “culture” in both the very general way just described and also to refer to ethnicity. Please help us to carefully state how we are using the term at any given time.

You may have had the experience of having someone else seem to define you by your ethnic or racial “culture.” However, different people identify more or less strongly with a different set of the groups (or roles) to which they ascribe. These can also change in different phases of our lives.

Each person made a list of all of the groups to which she or he felt a sense of belonging. The student then selected the three groups of greatest importance to her or his sense of personal identity. It was interesting, but not surprising, to learn that in most cases, the “culture” each person identified with most was not his or her racial or ethnic group. People identified with, for example: recovery culture, farm culture, disability culture, and Native dance group culture. Then, each student wrote a paper describing the culture she or he had chosen, as a way of educating all of the rest of us concerning what the student considered

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others should know about this culture.

These assignments asked students to consider how common it is for people to assume that the culture of a person we've just met (perhaps as a client) is the culture we assume by the outward appearance of that person. In reality, each person may identify more strongly with another aspect of themselves, one that is not immediately visible to us.

Circle of Voices

I have used the technique Brookfield and Preskill call the “circle of voices” for many years in face-to-face classes, though I refer to it as a “modified talking circle.” I was interested to find out whether this process would work in an online chat. I introduced it to this class this way:

A "talking circle" is a process developed and used by First Nations peoples of North America. It often has a spiritual or healing quality. I do not want to trivialize those aspects of a real talking circle. I have found, however, that there is great value in using a similar format for some discussions in class. By visualizing ourselves as forming a circle, and taking turns speaking around that circle, we make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak at his or her own pace. Since some people are more talkative than others, I like to make sure we can have the benefit of hearing from each person. Therefore, I will sometimes ask that we use this process in our chats. During our first chat, I will ask each person present to "check in" at the beginning. I will ask you to introduce yourself to the class and say, very briefly, how you are doing this evening. Later, as we brainstorm what each of us would like to suggest concerning guidelines for our weekly chats, I will ask again that each person take a turn giving input on this subject. We won't do this all the time, as there is also value to a give and take discussion.¹

The feedback from students has been that they really appreciate the use of this technique in text-based or audio chats for distance-delivered courses. In all classes, there are people who are more talkative than others. Almost all of the classes I've taught over the past 15 years have included both Alaska Native and non-Native students. I have found that there is sometimes a difference in “pause time” among the students. That is, some of the Alaska Native students have grown up with a normal cadence of speech which allows the person speaking first to finish what he or she is saying. The next speaker then takes a beat or two or three before starting to speak. Students who have grown up in mainstream Northern European American culture tend to have no pause time between speakers, or even to interrupt one another. In a “mixed” group, it can happen that the Native people in the room will speak little, not because they are shy or have nothing to say, but because they can't get a word in comfortably.

¹ HS 3100 online instructions

Circle of Objects

I was interested in trying the circle of objects activity because during our Difficult Dialogues workshop this particular activity seemed to have a profound affect on the relationships among the participants. As each person described his or her object, self-disclosure took on a unique quality. People shared things they might not have discussed with a group of new acquaintances under other circumstances. It seemed that many people felt much closer to one another, the result of the kind of intimacy that comes from understanding one another on a deeper level.

I wanted to find out if this activity would be effective in an online class, where participants could not see one another or the objects. In our “virtual” classroom, the participants had to describe their cultural objects so that the rest of us could visualize them as clearly as possible. This presented an extra challenge to people. It is possible that in a certain sense it also provided a kind of enhancement to the exercise, as the person describing his or her object had to really engage with it in order to convey both appearance and meaning to others. The exercise had the desired effect in the online course of bringing the participants into greater relationship with one another as each person gained deeper understanding and trust.

Discussing White Privilege

I assigned Peggy McIntosh’s *White Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack* about halfway through the semester. Students were asked to read the article, and then had opportunities to respond to it in the online discussion forum, through their weekly reflective journals, and in the audio chat session. Because in this course I had three separate kinds of responses from each participant, I was interested to find that some individuals seemed to change their thinking over a short span of time.

- **Journals.** In journals to be read only by the instructor, several students complained of the “victim mentality” of certain (nonwhite) groups, and said their lives weren’t easy either, and that they really didn’t see these sorts of things happening any more. Some of the students who are in appearance not members of the dominant group tentatively expressed the feeling that there are “privileges” that white people don’t realize they have.
- **Asynchronous Discussion.** In the text-based discussion forum, which can be read by all class members, people began to respond to one another. For the first time all semester, students openly disagreed with one another. There was no hostility or disrespect, but people clearly had different points of view.
- **Audio Chat.** That week we had a busy agenda for the audio chat, and I almost did not include a discussion of the McIntosh article. However, at least two students had expressed a wish for more discussion on this issue. When we did discuss the article, I felt that this was probably the most open and honest conversation of the course. Having already reflected in writing through their individual journals, and then beginning an exchange of views

in the discussion forum, the “modified talking circle” moved very quickly to a deeper level. People with quite different backgrounds told personal stories of painful experiences. It seemed to me that students who initially reacted defensively to what McIntosh suggested in the article, in the end became more aware of certain aspects of the dynamics of U.S. society they had previously not understood.

I believe that this is the edge of the forward movement towards the elimination of prejudice and discrimination in our society. It is easy for members of the liberal mainstream dominant group to view the tremendous visible progress that has been made since the “bad old days” of slavery, “whites only” movie theaters and legal school segregation, and honestly believe that discrimination no longer exists. It is not terribly effective to confront such well-meaning people with antagonism and tell them that they are racists. If, however, we can create environments in which people feel safe to let their true selves become known, the opportunity can emerge for new awareness and then action.

The Need for Difficult Dialogues

A student recently sent me an e mail message in response to my request for informed consent to write about some of what she’d shared in one of my courses. She let me know that she feels very strongly that we must provide forums for “difficult dialogues.” “If not in college classes, where will we discuss these things,” she said. She would be happy to have the last word, so with her permission, here is part of her message:

If we can create environments in which people feel safe to let their true selves become known, the opportunity can emerge for new awareness and then action.

My 5 cents? It is OK to say something that someone may have a difference of opinion, How else would they know they don't [think the same way]? . I also agree that one has to learn a way to deliver the information to keep the channels of communication open, be respectful and all that. I know that I can come across like a "Cannon ball killing butterflies." Your class was very helpful teaching me different ways to beat my drum more harmoniously. :)

References

- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2005) *Discussion as a way of teaching*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McIntosh, P. (1988) White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Excerpted from *Working Paper 189. White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies*.