

Multicultural Education Online For Graduate Teachers: Some Challenges

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Abstract

Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to share and discuss some pedagogical challenges experienced in an online multicultural education graduate course for teachers at a regional American university. **Methodology.** Multicultural education is multidimensional, and this presents instructional challenges and opportunities related to learning goals and outcomes. The procedures followed in designing this course addressed the following issues: The characteristics of the online or distance instructor and learner, a review of selected definitions on multicultural education, and brief discussion of theory. This was followed by a review of course content and activities, and multicultural education. Next are discussions of instructional design, and an efficient online delivery platform. **Result.** The result was a discussion of an appropriate and realistic online graduate course in multicultural education for experienced teachers. Such a course enabled these teachers to develop a transformative teaching disposition facilitating professional growth, and an attention to the individual and group diversity in their classrooms. The goals were directed to specific performance outcomes creating resources for multicultural teaching such as lesson plans, professional development plans, critical analyses of published research, group projects, and a class portfolio. **Conclusion.** Anecdotal reviews and reflections of pedagogical challenges related to online teaching and learning contribute to the research literature and broaden the intellectual dialog of instructors and students in relevant disciplines. **Recommendations.** Further analyses of the content of performance based outcomes such as lesson plans, critiques of research, professional development plans, and course portfolio content are recommended.

Keyword Descriptors

Instructional challenges in multicultural education

Online versus face-to -face teaching of multicultural education

Online course design in multicultural education

Online graduate multicultural education course.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share and discuss challenges in designing and teaching an online graduate multicultural education course for teachers in a regional American university. Teaching multicultural education online presents challenges and opportunities to the instructor and students alike. Instructors are challenged to navigate delivery systems that are new and sophisticated, and to be creative in using such technology. Students also have to learn how to access and use new technology, and could become stressed just at the prospect of not being in control of it. Today's teachers are becoming explorers, information gatherers, and facilitators who help students master skills and acquire knowledge. They have a responsibility to use technology to support their teaching goals but not to allow it to dictate how and what they teach.¹

Technology holds the promise of expanding the reach of higher education. Teachers and education professionals are required to become proficient in state, national, and international educational technology standards. Buchanan (1997) wrote that "technology and society exist in a dialogic relationship; our classrooms are encapsulated models of society. It is our ethical and professional responsibility to respond to the changes in both our larger cultural environments and our classrooms."²

The percentage of grade school students in 2003³ who used computers in school were ninety – seven percent in high school, ninety – five percent in middle school, ninety – one percent in grades 1 -5, eighty per – cent in Kindergarten. And sixty – seven per – cent in nursery school. This means that teachers should be proficient in the use of computers. States and school districts have established technology standards that include proficiency in the use of computers for certification. Teachers work long hours. They then have to attend classes, sometimes traveling long distances to a college or university campus to maintain their licenses or gain merit and promotion. Online courses help them to avert these hardships. According to Prensky (2006)⁴ educators should be cognizant of the digital age and start doing many things the new way. School pupils are now "digital natives" fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet. Teachers must also be proficient in working online, and an online course is one path toward meeting this challenge.⁵

Online courses can support teacher's professional development in multicultural education. However, these same courses have the potential to trivialize or exoticize cultural differences (Merryfield, 2001).⁶ New and evolving global democratic realities are generating professional responses to multiculturalism using electronic technology, and many experienced teachers are collaborating online with colleagues in different states (Benson, 1997).⁷ Technology integration is helping future teachers to augment their conceptual awareness and professional skills (Suleiman, 2001).⁸ There is a need to formally integrate the use of online resources to help pre-service teachers practice culturally inclusive pedagogy (McLoughlin, 2001).⁹ Pre-service teachers also need assistance to teach with a multicultural focus, and many of them would like to obtain skills through online learning (Kitsanis and Talleyrand, 2005).¹⁰

Methodology.

Multicultural education is multidimensional, and this presents instructional challenges and opportunities related to learning goals and outcomes. These broad issues were discussed in the following order: The characteristics the distance/online instructor; the characteristics of the distance/online learner; a need for theory; content and activities; selecting a relevant instructional model; selecting an efficient online delivery platform.

The Distance - Instructor

Issues of pedagogical efficacy and integrity are important in distance education. Questions of how to teach and how to teach online are significant. Instructors worry about the demographics of their classes as well as relevant pedagogical approaches. How can faculty actively facilitate an online course in a caring and stimulating manner? Some suggestions include the use of small group discussions, role playing, student presentations, brainstorming, and simulations (Eastmond, 1989)¹¹. This writer will add that the distance educator must be patient, flexible, and have a sense of humor. Online or distance learning instructors are expected to be knowledgeable facilitators and mentors (Raths, 1999).¹² The United States Congress indicated that the online instructor must be knowledgeable of subject matter, and be willing to change teaching methods, and devote more time to advanced preparations. Furthermore, the online teacher should facilitate

student interaction; provide visual materials, and opportunities for independent study, and follow-up activities (United States Congress, 1989.)¹³ Ko and Rossen (2004)¹⁴ indicate that a lot of technological competence will not alone make someone the best online instructor. They added that an interest in pedagogy should come first, and technology second.

The Distance - Learner

Typical qualities of a distance learner include maturity, self-discipline, organizational and management skills, commitment, and assertiveness. However, instructors should acknowledge that all students may not possess all of these characteristics. The instructor must be prepared to play the role of a technology teacher and trouble shooter if there are no institutional support services to play these roles. Many of the students taking this online teacher education course are teachers taking part-time graduate courses. Consideration should be given to the disparate spaces of students and instructors which often contribute to student distress. Because of these disparities, some face-to-face computer laboratory sessions were scheduled for students who needed them.

The first provided an orientation to the online system, Blackboard, and familiarized students with the syllabus. The second session was conducted by a Librarian to introduce students to online resources for research and reference. The third session enabled both the instructor and students to clear up course related issues and allocate time for one-on-one sessions between the instructor and individual students. The fourth and last session was for students to share their final projects, or research with each other and the instructor. In addition, there are institutional support services such as an online education help desk providing technical advice.

Students in this course are teachers in ages ranging from 30 – 50 who are seeking a higher certification and, or promotion. They teach all day, and take university classes in the evening. Knowles (1984)¹⁵ coined the term “andragogy” as a method of teaching adult learners. He stipulated five characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about younger learners. First, the adult learner has a high self concept and is self-directed. Second, this type of learner has plenty of life experiences on which to anchor their learning. Third, adult learners are ready to learn. Fourth, their orientation

to learning expects immediacy of application or relevance. Teaching should move them away from subject-centeredness to problem – centeredness. Fifth, adult learners are highly motivated to learn. Critics say that these assumptions tend to focus on age and stage development.

Does Andragogy seek to build a comprehensive theory or model of adult learning that is anchored in the characteristics of adult learners (Merriam and Caffarella,1991)¹⁶. Cross (1981)¹⁷ perceives Andragogy as a “framework of thinking about what and how adults learn.” Tennant (1988)¹⁸ questioned the veracity that readiness to learn is an aspect the relationships to developmental tasks of adult social roles, because he argues, “children also have to perform social roles.” Brookfield (1986)¹⁹ believed that children are also natural and spontaneous and independent learners and are therefore not different from adult learners. Regardless of the critics of Knowles, teachers in institutions of higher education who teach both undergraduate and graduate students have found general differences among these two groups with regard to motivation, learning preferences, and method of assessment. Teachers are involved in continuous professional development and prefer “experiential learning” (Kolb, 1975; 1981; 1995; and 2001).²⁰

Multicultural Education

There are different paradigms open to the instructor and there are different definitions of multicultural education. Dodd, (1987) believes that the main ingredient of multicultural education is “respect for diversity and individual difference.”²¹ Tiedt and Tiedt, (2002) proposed that multicultural education should be about “developing a strong sense of self – esteem in students, discovering empathy for persons of diverse cultural backgrounds, and enabling many to experience equitable opportunities to achieve to their fullest potential.”²²

Banks (2007)²³ stated that the world “demands leaders, educators, and classroom teachers who can bridge impermeable cultural, ethnic, and religious borders, envision new possibilities, invent novel paradigms and engage in personal transformation and visionary action. Effective teachers in a diverse and flat world need an education that enables them to attain new knowledge, paradigms, and perspectives on the United States and the world and to deal effectively with both the challenges and opportunities of

diversity...” “Multicultural education is an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic language and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school.”²⁴ “Multicultural education is at least three things: an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process. It incorporates the idea that that all students – regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial, and cultural characteristics – should have an equal opportunity to learn in school. ..”²⁵

Banks (2007) views multicultural education as “a broad concept with several different and important dimensions. He suggested that these dimensions could be used by educators as a guide to school reform when trying to implement multicultural education. The dimensions are (1) Content integration, (2) knowledge construction process, (3) prejudice reduction, (4) an equity pedagogy, and (5) an empowering school culture and social structure. Content integration explores the extent to which teachers use examples from a variety of cultures in their teaching. Knowledge construction deals with the extent to which implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed. Equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, gender, and social-class groups. An empowering school culture relates to grouping and labeling practices, sports participation, disproportionality in achievement, and the interaction of the staff and students across ethnic and racial lines. School culture must accommodate and facilitate students from diverse racial, ethnic, and gender groups.”²⁶

Theory and Multicultural Education

Multicultural education has some theoretical basis. Allport (1954)²⁷ articulated a theory of positive inter-group contact, stating that prejudice between majority and minority groups may be reduced by equal status contact in pursuit of common goals, particularly when such processes are sanctioned by institutional supports. He specified institutional support to include law, custom, or local atmosphere. Such support may

complement the perception that there are common interests and a common humanity between members of the groups involved.

Kallen, 1956²⁸ advocated a cultural pluralism which allowed coexistence between the recognition of cultural diversity and majority notions of cultural homogeneity. Banks (1993)²⁹ recognized cultural pluralists such as Kallen, but believed that Western traditionalists fear blight on their culture, history, and literature. Multiculturalists agitate for more recognition of the experiences and contributions of people of color and women in American society.³⁰ Matusek (1998).³¹ conceded that multiculturalism is a permanent phenomenon that will not go away. However, he did not believe in national monoculture, but a globally local multiculturalism. He believed that issues such as race, class, and ethnicity are divisive. He observed that issues of oppression, social, cultural, and political conflict offered opportunities to society to work for social transformation and change. Greene (1998)³² stated that multiculturalism is not unique to the United States, and that other countries are experiencing it as well. She postulated that the greatest transformation in multiculturalism will come from education. This, she added, means that there should be a deeper rethinking of the purposes and contents of education. Social interaction theory suggests that one makes meaning, and learns through social interaction modified through self and social interpretations of phenomena and experiences (Blumer, 1967).³³

Bennett (2003)³⁴ noted that multicultural education could provide a framework for analyzing and understanding the world-wide Multicultural ideals of social justice, cross-cultural understanding, and human dignity. Furthermore, she believed that multicultural education could “provide a foundation for the national unity, world unity, and worldwide collaboration needed to defeat the shared threat of terrorism, and to work toward greater equity and social justice on a local, national, and global scale.”

The world is experiencing a spate of violence which some people could interpret as senseless. Maslow (1970)³⁵ suggested that anyone who threatens, humiliates, unnecessarily hurts, dominates, or reject another human being, becomes a force for the creation of psychopathology. Whether these acts are random or calculated is beside the point. The fact is that any form of unkindness, hostility, or violence negatively impacts another person’s personal experience and may lead to a negative future reaction affecting

society as a whole. Kindness and consideration for the feelings of others could make a small contribution to intrapersonal harmony and world peace.

These theories provide contexts for, and impact multicultural teaching. The general goal of teachers is to “foster the intellectual, social, and personal development of all students to their full potential.”³⁶ Multicultural teaching goes beyond that to focus on “principles of social justice, compassion for humanity, and social responsibility, which also rooted in the deep cultural values of our democratic society, even though they are not yet a social reality.”³⁷ The philosophical framework for a multicultural education model consists of four core values, namely, acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity; respect for human dignity and universal human rights; responsibility to the world community; and reverence for the earth. One conceptual model of a Comprehensive multicultural curriculum in schools puts core values in the center of a circle, complemented by the following five overlapping goals:

1. Developing multiple historical perspectives e.g. recognizing historical perspectives other than dominant Anglo-Saxon biases.
2. Strengthening cultural consciousness e.g. the interpretation of intentional verbal and non-verbal communications e.g. awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices in different ethnicities, and other societies around the world.
3. Developing intercultural competencies e.g. the interpretation of intentional and unintentional verbal and non-verbal communications.
4. Combating racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination e.g. practicing anti-racist, anti-sexist behaviors based on historical and contemporary individual, institutional, national and international experiences.
5. Increasing awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics e.g. knowledge of the interrelationships of the ecosystem and the ramifications of actions in one country affecting the quality of life in others.
6. Building social action skills e.g. developing attitudes and actions that will help resolve major problems that threaten the future of the planet and the well being of humanity.

Teachers engaged in a multicultural curriculum should be adept at critical thinking and should encourage their students to become such.³⁸ Critical thinkers gather,

analyze, synthesize, and assess information. They should be able to be sympathetic to different or conflicting perspectives.”³⁹ Views on multicultural education could be idealistic and may need a certain degree of open-mindedness to participate in a dialog. People holding rigid opinions and beliefs are also guilty of the charge of idealism. Regardless of the controversies between multiculturalists and those who oppose them, it seems clear that teachers who focus on issues of empathy, self-esteem, and equitable treatment in their practice are addressing multiculturalism.

Content and activities

Students enrolled in this class are predominantly public-school teachers. They enrolled in this course to fulfill professional development requirements. The content of the course is designed to empower and facilitate these teachers to meet the challenges of a diverse classroom and a diverse world. The required texts provided content relating to a variety of topics. The following are randomly selected:

1. *Educating Children in Our Unique Multiculture* included sub-sections on (diversity in the United States, a history of multicultural thinking, The bumpy road to human rights, the best education for all, and comparing models of multicultural education.)
2. *Organizing for Learning in Multicultural Education* covers sub-sections in (designing a multicultural curriculum, thematic approaches across the curriculum, assessing student progress, and thematic discussions on Latinos and immigrants.)
3. *Individualizing Instruction for Multicultural Education* is subdivided into discussions on (effective multicultural teaching, developing multicultural lesson plans, multicultural teaching strategies, and engaging students with computer-based learning.)
4. A *Multicultural Learning Activities* section provided suggestions for teaching the following subjects multiculturally (Language arts and reading, social studies, science and math, and the performing arts.)
5. *Teaching Multiculturally around the Year* provided suggestions for year-round activities.

Students were required to read and critique published articles from a reading list, and to access online resources on diversity and multicultural education to supplement the readings. Because the course is activities-based, the requirements included a group research paper, a multicultural lesson plan or workshop, critiques of several published articles on multicultural education or diversity, and a portfolio of class work. The major requirement is the group research paper in which group members collaborate in knowledge construction through computer supported collaborative learning (Koschman, 1994).⁴⁰ Brookfield and Preskill (2005)⁴¹ indicated that “given the opportunity of time, space and freedom (within limits) to post whenever one is ready, students are more likely to articulate a view that reflects their own individual thought-out position.” Theorists of various persuasions point out that cooperative ventures are important elements of scientific inquiry and adult working environments (Greeno, 1997; D.W.Johnson & Johnson, 1991).⁴² For an online group research paper it is assumed that collaboration will lead to more original material and ownership of knowledge than would be the case when students attend sessions in an open classroom. The lesson plan or workshop requirement is based on Kentucky Teacher Standard 3, *Designs/Plans Instruction* “The teacher designs/plans instruction that develops student abilities to use communication skills, apply core concepts, become self-sufficient individuals, become responsible team members, think and solve problems, and integrate knowledge.”⁴³ Writing critiques facilitate student’s examination and judgment of published articles, texts, or electronic resources on multicultural education. It helps students to think and to reflect on content, concepts, and positions provided by scholars in the field. “The portfolio is to teaching what lists of publications, grants, and honors are to research and scholarship. As such, it allows faculty members to display their teaching accomplishments for examination by others. And, in the process, it contributes both to sounder personnel decisions and to the professional development of individual faculty members (Seldin, 1992).⁴⁴ As a result, it provides a strong signal that teaching is an institutional priority.”

Instructional Design

Dee Fink (2003) identified four components of teaching. These are knowledge of subject matter, design of instruction, teacher-student interactions, and course management.⁴⁵ The first two occur before the beginning of the course, and the other two

take place after the beginning of the course. All teachers must have knowledge of the subject –matter. This writer has grounding in sociological and cultural foundations of education and has taught the course for several years in a formal classroom. Online course design was facilitated by attending training sessions in online teaching, particularly sessions on distance-teaching by television and by Blackboard. Tutorials and refresher workshops. Help desk assistance is provided by the university year-round. “Teacher-student interactions” is an all inclusive term that describes interactive methods used by the instructor over the period in which the course is taught. It ranges from how content is delivered to specific types of communication. Both synchronous and asynchronous communication are used in the Blackboard system.

The Addie Model

The ADDIE model is a systematic approach to the **A**nalysis, **D**esign, **D**evelopment, **I**mplementation, and **E**valuation of learning materials and activities. This means that a learner – centered approach is used rather than the traditional teacher-centered approach to instruction. Learning moves from the passive approach in which students receive information and ideas, to an active learning mode in which students learn by doing, observing, and reflecting alone or with others on what and how they are learning (Dee Fink,2003). The flexibility of this model is that the five phases sometimes overlap and can be interrelated, thereby providing a dynamic flexible structure for effective and efficient instruction.

In the analysis phase, the instructor defines the problem and suggests possible solutions. Learner profiles, constraints, needs, and problem statements are described. The design stage specifies how the material is to be learned. Specific objectives are listed, test items are identified, and a plan of instruction is constructed. During the development phase lesson plans and lesson materials are generated. All media that will be used in the course together with hardware and software are identified. The implementation phase involves the piloting or teaching of the material. The implementation phase affords the opportunity to determine the adequacy of the instruction. Student mastery of instruction is promoted to ensure that that they can transfer learning from the instructional setting to their job, or a real - world setting. The effectiveness or efficiency of instruction is measured in the evaluations stage. Evaluation is a continuous process. Formative

evaluation goes on during and between the phases to facilitate the improvement of instruction and learning. Summative evaluation involves an assessment of the overall process. It helps to identify weaknesses and strengths of instructional methods and the adequacy of software and resources used to complement student learning.

The Online Course Platform

The Blackboard platform used in this course affords several ways of communication between instructor and students. The platform facilitates the use of a “documents” section in which material and resources can be posted by the instructor. Blackboard also has the capacity to have general or group “discussion boards” which together with email and “messages” allow for asynchronous (not occurring at the same time) communication. Synchronous communication is facilitated by the use of a “virtual classroom” by which online lecture and discussion can take place. Blackboard also contains “Course management” functions by which students are guided to different assignments, samples of previous work, and the grading and returning of quizzes and examinations. There is a “links” section that provides websites of resources and electronic documents which can supplement the content.

“Good courses are those that challenge students to significant kinds of learning, use active forms of learning, have teachers who care – about the subject, their students, and about teaching and learning, have teachers who interact well with students, and have a good system of feedback, assessment, and grading.”⁴⁶ Planned learning requires planned design in which the teacher functions as a facilitator. Designing a new content also involves reviewing relevant texts and resources. Online or distance learning require more initial planning and a team approach. Instructors collaborate with instructional designers, educational technologists and other technical specialists. Tutorials, workshops, and technical help and support in the form of a help desk, are vital for both instructors and students.

Implications For Teacher Education

Teaching about multicultural education is significant in a world ridden with anger, turmoil, and conflict. Teachers are frontline advocates of social justice, peace, and

equality and colleges and universities have responsibilities to offer courses, and professional development workshops to assist them. Instructors who contemplate creating and teaching an online multicultural education course face many challenges. These include a resistance to multicultural education, institutional support and encouragement, technological competence, and pedagogical efficacy. A lack of technological competence should not hinder one's inclination to teach online, because support is available from instructional designers and related professionals.

A love of teaching and a motivation to accept new pedagogical challenges are probably more important than being a technophile. An instructor of multicultural education online should look for relevant course development models and a requisite platform of software program for course delivery. The content of multicultural education is multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary and the instructor must become an information manager and facilitator. He or she should select relevant themes, provide required and recommended readings and content matter, and facilitate discourse in such a way that students will benefit from the course and achieve learning that is relevant to real-life situations. The instructor must be organized, patient, and flexible. A multiplier effect makes it possible that one multicultural educator could influence attitudes towards multicultural education of hundreds of students.

There is a tendency in higher education for instructors to cover too many areas in the belief that more content is necessary. This writer believes that a broad overview of multicultural education is necessary. However, selecting specific relevant themes for the clientele such as empathy, esteem, and equity, and addressing specific content around them provides more meaning for students. Moreover, requirements for courses in multicultural education should be such that the outcomes are useable to teachers when they return to their classroom. In this instance activities-based learning should be a focus. Finally, there is a debate concerning the effectiveness of teaching multicultural education online as opposed to teaching it on campus. There are advantages and disadvantages of each approach. However, the pertinent question is whether students who take the course learn as much as those who take it on campus. This is a good question for further research.

The challenge of technology is ever present for both teachers and teacher educators. Many experienced teachers are still not competent to engage in self-learning with regard to technology. They enroll in an online class with unrealistic expectations that the instructor will teach them how to use online technology as well as content. Some instructors are ready and willing to do so. However, concentrating on teaching some students how to use the technology could entail some neglect of those who know how.

This could be very frustrating especially when the unprepared students made no effort to familiarize themselves with the available free online “introduction to online learning for students” which is freely available and accessible in the online website to all students. Many teachers taking graduate course also depend on using their school computers to take online courses rather than investing in a computer or laptop of their own. This creates problems of accessibility because software their schools computer sometimes interferes with connections to the university’s online delivery platform. However, once some of these hurdles are cleared, online courses proceed as seamlessly as campus classes. There is a need for more enquiry into the effectiveness of online versus campus classes on student learning.

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- ⁴⁴ Seldin, P. (1992). "The teaching portfolio and its purposes: A look at current practice." Paper presented at the AAHE National Conference on Higher Education, Chicago, IL.
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