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-Ruennls, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Abern, 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 frequently, 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 of the online education market (Breadford, Poreciello, Balken, & 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 20082; 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 (Barrows, 2004), where knowledge constructing interactions can be possible through collaboration and sharing (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Gurung & Chavez, 2011). These proprietary Internet tools and 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-Shvers, Tanner, & Mullenberg, 2000).

The multi-linear dialogues between all participants (students and teachers) can provide opportunities to challenge each other’s ideas and share creativity. The collaborative mode of engagement afforded by the online discussion environment (ODE) fosters inquiry, critical thinking, and innovation (Tuttier & Klein, 2008; Wade, Fruske, & 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-Ruennls 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 (Tuttier & Klein, 2008); and there is concern that an ODE may actually sedate the student performance to just seeking a passing grade (Davisie & 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, Duerer, & Hawley, 1998; Wills, 1998; 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, 2005, p. 5), but because it also enables students “to take ownership of the discussion” (Chen, Wang, & Hung, 2009, p. 158).

An online asynchronous multicultural discussion increases both depth of content and equity of participation (Merryfield, 2001). Such discussions also provide multiple opportunities for critical emotional reflectivity 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 (2009) concluded that asynchronous discussion “is http://download2 dorsmattime.com/dreamtimuzonm_oemod_200509.png/image 1d0003598983&comp=aa597942f7782 96440184512584 in 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 (Andersenn, 2009); maintaining the perceived presence of the course instructor (Swan & Shih, 2007); and domination of a few students in discussions (Oliver & Shane, 2003); losing 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, not addressed thoughtful and meticulously, may potentially cause the online discussion to be problematic (Oliver & Shane, 2003) and suffer from shallow participation (Tallent-Ruennls 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. 201). Structured discussions are thematic discussions—based on a theme, topic, or issue—often facilitated by the instructor or a graduate assistant (Andersenn, 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; Wassell & 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 organizes 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).
Purpose

This study examined the use of Blackboard and emerging Web 2.0 Ning for facilitating asynchronous multicultural education discussions. This study aimed to identify what is needed to ensure successful participation of students and to engage in socio-culturally sensitive interactions in various media that can support meaningful learning. 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 online multicultural discussions in an online multicultural education course?
3. What is the impact of online multicultural discussions on students’ engagement?
4. How might students take risks with their identities to engage in multicultural discussions?
5. What role do the instructor in facilitating online asynchronous multicultural discussions and knowing when to deconstruct explicit identities play?

Findings

The findings dealing with the a priori themes suggest that there is little impact from the use of explicit and implicit identities. However, the findings regarding the following six categories.

Types of Questions, Time, and Persistence of Discussions

We found that the nature and structure of questions asked influenced the students’ ability to think reflectively, and emotionally. Prior to invoking the a priori categories, we found that questions that were content-based. For this research, we took time to craft questions and a priori categories. We wanted the students to move beyond recall and cause them to respond meaningfully while discussing real-world issues. Narrative analysis revealed prejudices, conformity to existing social norms, unexamined identities, and implicit self-disclosed tensions that were delivered in different online discussion platforms.

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

In both identified and anonymous discussion environments, students brought to surface self-identity and self-knowledge of diverse cultures, as they attempted to deepen the inquiry, to challenge others’ views, and to engage in critical thought. Below are some examples of reflection we believe are necessary for the self-transformation and learning as presented in the 3S model from Henderson (2001).
maintaining the legitimacy of knowing the subject matter at hand: I do believe it is due in part from your formative experiences and education in this area that you hold these biases. I have worked with people with disabilities for over 15 years and I was inclusive and have learned as you become more educated to this issue of able and views and feelings will, I hope, diminish.

Another student presented her historical being into the discussion in this way: Personally, I stand somewhere in the middle-class (unfortunately, one that is lower class, middle, or just middle). The majority of the times, I have learned about "getting about" 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 think that I got the drive and motivation to seek this information from my upbringing, which places a high value on a certain quality of life.

While engaging in the discussions, one student began to realize how socioeconomic background impacts my development as a person and how it has had on my development as a person in places where I am the minority and am worried about security looking at me like I am going to steal something. It’s very hard for me to see 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 discussion, but also brought personal strengths in her experiences of being and growing up.

As I discussed, I too feel uncomfortable talking with students on such issues as racism. I don’t want to offend anyone and often, I cannot find the words to express what I would like to say. I am growing in this area, but I am continuing to struggle with anger management, because I know me well enough to know what I am capable of. I am learning how to handle these situations. I struggle with anger management, but no one who knows me knows that I struggle with anger management. What you have heard from me is not the true me and not the me you need to express yourself.

Students’ Discourses were Opportunistic in Many Ways When They Dealt with Socio-Culturally Sensitive Issues: Reflections on Prejudices, Beliefs, and Contradictions

Two student comments are given below:

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I think that you brought up the fact that I have had on my development as a person and how it has had on my development as a person in places where I am the minority and am worried about security looking at me like I am going to steal something. It’s very hard for me to see 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.

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