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Teaching Presence: Co-Creating a Multi-National Online Learning Community in an Asynchronous Classroom

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Keywords: online teaching presence, multi-national learning community, community of inquiry

Abstract: Effective teaching presence in a multi-national online class involves building student confidence, affirming student voice, and the strategic use of groups. Effective instructor techniques include setting up the class, having ongoing public and private interaction with students, giving effective feedback, and valuing cultural differences.

In my first semester at the university, I taught an introductory research course in a graduate program. The course was completely online and the participants came from five states, six countries, and represented multiple ethnicities. Their ages ranged from 20s to 60s. In sum, they were an extremely diverse group of students, and I was responsible to create an effective online learning environment with them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine my own efforts to co-create a social context in an online classroom that was effective for a diverse student population enrolled in a graduate course.

Theoretical Framework & Literature

As the facilitator of an online class, I co-create a learning community with my students by the instructions I give them and by the expectations I explain and model through appropriate interaction (Cannon, 1990; Chick & Hassel, 2009; Tollman, 2003). As a feminist educator, I desire to create a safe space composed of a respectful and inclusive learning environment (Chick & Hassel, 2009). Each student is encouraged to have a voice, personal experience is valued, and privileged voices do not dominate (Cannon, 1990). The online learning environment appears to support feminist pedagogy's value of voice (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005) when it is structured so that all students are expected to post regularly in the discussion threads.

Further, the world of online teaching and learning has its own idea of space. The concept of "teaching presence" (Anderson, et al., 2003) is used to describe three functions of the online instructor: designing the educational content, facilitating the social environment, and serving as subject-matter expert. The second role, co-creating a social environment where learning can take place, is vital to the success of an online class because the interaction is entirely text-based (Anderson, et al., 2003; Archer & Garrison, 2010). The connection between feminist pedagogy's inclusive environment and online learning's social environment for learning is clear.

However, the role that culture and ethnicity play in creating that social environment is not well known (Morse, 2003). Online classes may be designed by instructors who know little about the cultures and ethnicities of their students (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007). Western approaches and assumptions may not prove useful in teaching across cultures (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007; Tollman, 2003). Therefore, a diverse online class is an ideal space to explore the intersection of "teaching presence" in social interaction and feminist concepts of respect and inclusion in the classroom as they relate to creating a virtual learning community.

Research Design

Because the focus of this study was to evaluate the intersection of my attempts to create a social context, and the students' evaluation of their own ability to co-create and participate in that context, qualitative research methods were chosen. They respect the constructivist understanding that knowledge is being co-created between myself and the students in our interactions (Bierema, 2002; Merriam, 2002) both in the classroom and in the research process. Further, qualitative methods are suited to feminist inquiry because they take seriously the participants' own meaning-making, treating it as central data for the study (Merriam, 2009).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

- What constitutes a social environment of safety in an online learning community composed of multinational, multiethnic, and multigenerational students?
- What techniques used by the instructor are effective in creating a social environment of safety in an online learning community composed of multinational, multiethnic and multigenerational students?
- What is the role of culture in the online learning environment?

Data Collection and Analysis

The first source of data was my researcher's log, used for validity (Merriam, 2002) as well as a primary data source (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). By comparing my journal with student's perceptions of the class, I hoped to gain an understanding of my efforts to create a social context for learning with a diverse group of students. The second source of data was 30-40 minute interviews conducted over a period of four weeks with nine class members after the course was finished; one student chose to send written feedback. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the meaning the students made of the class experience (Merriam, 2009). I recorded and transcribed all of the interviews. After the initial coding using constant comparative analysis (Butler-Kisber, 2010), I continued with focused coding, seeking themes in the data.

Findings

In answer to the first question, what constitutes a social environment of safety in a multinational online course, the findings suggest that an online class can offer a safe space to interact. Building confidence, creating space for each voice, and working with smaller groups were the primary methods of creating a safe classroom space. The students used words like "affirmation" and "encouragement" to describe how they knew the space was safe. Second, several students recognized that the online environment supported development of voice, because the class format required an initial answer to the weekly questions and then at least three responses to other students. A third aspect of safety described by the students was groups. After the first week's introductions, I divided the class into two groups for the discussion threads. They valued the interaction in smaller groups and receiving group feedback.

Instructor Techniques

In answer to the second question regarding techniques an instructor can use to create a safe social environment, the findings suggested that setting up the course and interacting with students throughout the semester were effective. The first readings I gave the class were on Netiquette and the first thing we did online was introductions. In the interviews five students mentioned the readings and six named the introductions as helpful in starting the class. I also created a space called the water cooler for social interactions and launched it with some humor. Six students named the water cooler as something that helped them feel socially connected to the class.

The second aspect of class that every participant mentioned was interaction with me. They mentioned my interactions on the discussion boards, my feedback on their work, and my personal interactions with them by phone and email outside of class. Personal communication was also important when a difficulty arose in the class and I intervened privately. Both students involved found that my careful use of personal communication helped resolve the issue.

The Role of Culture

In answer to the third question, what role does culture play in creating an online learning community, the findings show that acknowledging and discussing the different cultural perspectives contributes to the learning climate but does not completely overcome the challenges. Most of the participants in the study discussed the role that culture had played in our online interactions. They saw both benefits and drawbacks. This particular class was basically an Asian and Western group. So a significant amount of reflection involved contrasting those two ways of thinking and approaching class. Many students wished for an opportunity to meet face-to-face, and those who did know each other mentioned this as supporting their learning. And two participants thought the combination of an online format and cultural differences was a hindrance to learning.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine my efforts to co-create a social context in an online classroom that was supportive to an extremely diverse graduate student population. I wanted to discover what a safe space looked like in that context, and what instructor techniques were effective in building an online social community. Early literature suggested that teaching presence included setting up the course, facilitating the social environment, and serving as subject matter expert (Anderson, et al., 2001). Later reviews added a fourth aspect, assessment. The findings from this study support the four categories, and suggest a few specific factors that may be of particular importance in a multicultural online class (Akyol & Garrison, 2008).

- First, the findings show that the social context is inseparable from the broader construct of teaching presence.
- Second, the findings suggest that the online environment may be useful for students who are reluctant to speak up, initially lack confidence, or are working in a second language.
- Third, the findings from this group suggest that building in an initial face to face contact might enhance the learning in a multicultural online course.
- Finally, the findings suggest that the online class can work well with a multicultural student population, but it may require extra care and attention on the part of the instructor.

Implications for Adult Education

Online learning appears to be with us to stay, meaning that adult educators need to be competent cross-culturally in our teaching and research (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). However, our reach may currently extend beyond our theory, as western educators can now “teach” people from around the globe (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007; Tollman, 2003) without having any clear sense of how multicultural, multiethnic, and multigenerational challenges impact our classrooms. This study offers a small insight into my attempts to be deliberate about co-creating a social context where students feel safe, accepted, and willing to learn together.

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