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It's the Experience Not the Format: Successful Techniques to Transition Social Justice Coursework To a Distance Delivery Format

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Abstract

“Research on multicultural learning has focused on formal and local settings, such as schools, but young people are interacting with, and therefore learning from, informal settings and nonlocal contexts, including online platforms.” (Kim, 2016, p. 1). The instructor must be vigilant in selecting online teaching pedagogy when offering sensitive topics of courses because face-to-face intimacy is usually a component of more traditional courses in diversity (Matloob Haghanikar, 2019). The purpose of this current paper is to align critical parts of an experiential race relations curriculum (Clarke, 2019; Kranz & Lund, 2004) in a face-to-face setting with digital technologies available for use in distance education, specifically synchronous and asynchronous online delivery. We outline the original course components and show how technology can be aligned.

Keywords: online teaching, race relations, course design

Successful Techniques to Transition Diversity Coursework to a Distance Delivery Format

The United States has a long history of disparate treatment of Blacks. From the first days of slavery to the most recent riots in Minnesota, Atlanta, and other places in the country rage has turned American against American. Riots occurred in New York City in 1906 (Hodes, 2011), 1917 (Bachelier, 2017), and 1921 (Teague, 2018). There continues to be a rage among many Black communities. The race riots peaked again in 1968 and 1969. Martin Luther King, a leader in the black activist community, was assassinated on April 4, 1968, and within five days, riots had erupted in 130 cities, caused 39 deaths, and 2,500 injuries (Juhnke, 1999). It is not within the scope of this

current paper to detail the history of all of the racial tensions in the United States. Instead, the earlier and current events give readers a sense of context and demonstrate the need for continued exploration of social justice and the relationships between Blacks (minority) and White, non-Hispanic (dominant) populations using educational technology.

With our country still struggling with race relations issues in 2020 (e.g., George Floyd murder), it is essential to examine both new and legacy interventions for developing positive race relations. We focus our paper on components designed in the early work of Peter L. Kranz, a first instructor of the race relations teaching curriculum. Already with a keen interest in race relations, Kranz fostered relationships with teens in the Brewster Douglas Housing Project in Detroit, Michigan, during his affiliation with the Merrill Palmer Institute. At the time of Dr. King's assassination, Kranz was a Ph.D. doctoral student at Utah State University contemporaneously with these events. Fortunately, he was able to attend race relations groups by Dr. Price Cobbs (Grier & Cobbs, 2000). He developed the experiential curriculum from 1972 to 1977 at the University of North Florida, where it received national media attention (Kranz & Lund, 2004; Thurbow, 1997). The result of the original experiential class is now available in book form *Arena of Truth: Conflict in Black and White* (Clarke, 2019).

While the face-to-face structure worked well in the 1970s and continues to work well when students can meet together, many courses today are taught *via* distance education in either an asynchronous (where students log in at any time) or synchronous fashion (interactions & instructions occur in real-time with all class members present on the distant delivery platform). We use the term older, more general “distance education” throughout the paper because many new technologies other than “online” are developing. Older techniques (e.g., email, phone conferences) can and are still being utilized to teach when students are not physically present with the instructor. Kim (2016, p. 1) writes, “Research on multicultural learning has focused on formal and local settings, such as schools, but young people are interacting with, and therefore learning from, informal settings and nonlocal contexts, including online platforms.” The term distance education is much more inclusive encompassing online, use of open social media platforms and materials.

Many new programs and courses are offered exclusively online to meet the needs of an increasingly geographically and economically diverse student body. While online education can serve to increase the diversity of any given course, the instructor must be vigilant in selecting distant teaching pedagogies. When offering sensitive topics, face-to-face intimacy is usually a component of more traditional teaching. Some have used technology while teaching diversity (Matloob Haghanikar, 2019). For example, Matloob Haghanika (2019) used avatars, videos, and gestural images through a program called Plotagon. In that qualitative report, he dealt with racial identity, dehumanization, and truth-seeking. He found that undergraduate students responded with higher-level questions and critical dialogue as they interacted with avatars in a controlled video interaction.

Several authors provide excellent discussions of how to be sensitive when designing courses that have students from many different cultures (Alalshaikh, 2015; Arbour et al., 2015; Kim, 2016; Sadykova & Meskill, 2019). Alalshaikh (2015) considered two factors concerning distance learning: globalization and its impact and types of distance learning. He argued that cultural learning styles and dimensions were

of paramount importance. World views significantly impacted the types of responses learners my present to different material. Perceptual learning styles, cognitive processing, social learning styles, and problem-based learning styles are different across cultures.

Kim (2016) used school-aged youth to analyze how they engaged with Korean produced media. Using ethnography, case study, and content analysis, Kim found that the use of distance technology was an effective medium. Student attitudes changed from uni-dimensional, self-identities to the ability to see themselves in a multi-dimensional capacity. Finally, in a case study describing the relationship between a Chinese graduate student and her US mentor, Sadykova and Meskill (2019) found that working together in a distant format could be made a positive experience through accommodations and language socialization.

Definitions and Overview

There can be many various definitions associated with teaching social justice and its fundamental premises in a University setting. We adopt the below descriptions, acknowledging that there are many alternative definitions described in the literature.

Face-to-face

This method usually entails the physical presence of an instructor at the same location as the students. For this paper, face-to-face will also denote the curriculum and the techniques used by Kranz in the 1970s. We realize that many techniques that he originated have been modified and expanded upon in face-to-face settings and that contemporary face-to-face instruction often uses a variety of technologies. Finally, face-to-face instruction is synchronous.

Hybrid/Blended

For this article, a course is considered to be hybrid/blended if some student-student and student-teacher interaction are based in a classroom and some take place in an online (asynchronous or synchronous) environment. Hybrid courses can use a variety of tools available on the web, including discussion boards, videos, and other passive or active learning tools (Helms, 2014). Asynchronous in this context means that students can use the web-based portion of the course according to their schedule, and the instructor is not present at the same time as the student. Asynchronous interactions between students are not guided contemporaneously by the instructor but rather reviewed later after interactions occur.

Online

We define online to mean the asynchronous presentation of content with no face-to-face interaction required to complete the course. Online instruction can be instructor paced or designed so that student's self-pace throughout the course. Online is one form of distance education.

Diversity

When we use the term “diversity,” we mean racial diversity. Racial, used here, is the biological phenotype, self-identified by a given student. In this paper, focus on those who identify as Black and those who identify as white, non-Hispanic. Throughout the course, experiences related to current social justice movement are included. Cultural identity, sexual identity, and other identities are recognized as different social constructs that could easily be incorporated into our proposed structure but are not the focus of our work.

Techniques and Strategies

In this section, we describe the original experiential method used by Kranz, followed by a current use hybrid and/or online analog. The analogs will be useful in either asynchronous or synchronous courses (with all students online at the same time). It is important to note that although the growth in asynchronous online education has outpaced synchronous delivery, some of the techniques described will be useful only in online courses that are delivered synchronously. The authors will also reflect upon techniques in the context of current social justice precepts and cultural norms on university campuses versus the norms in the 1970s.

Course Composition

Experiential education outcomes can be enhanced by selecting course members. Here, optimally, the class membership composition should be as even as possible between races and genders. The original course was designed with an enrollment of 12 students, three students each by gender and race. Course prerequisites or permissions did not constrain course composition. Distribution naturally enrolled students more or less evenly. When the optimum balance did not occur naturally due to enrollment, the distribution difference in the original courses was minor. For example, in the original classes, there may have been an additional white or black student or an additional female or male. These minor differences were inconsequential in the quality of the course and the experiences of the students.

Hybrid courses can use the same enrollment strategies as initially proposed. However, given the overall push for higher enrollment in classes due to financial reasons, courses in the 2020 decade are likely more than 12. After registering for the course and beginning their participation, in the 1970’s class, they could drop the course without any penalty or difficulty. The option to drop the class without penalty is also available to students after some period of participation. The one caveat we note is that institutions sometimes limit the time frame to which a drop may occur without penalty. Also, institutions may limit the total number of withdrawals over the student’s academic career.

Most often, online courses with larger enrollments than face-to-face courses (Lowenthal et al., 2019). The distribution of students is likely to mirror the general student body population, and such an even cell size can be challenging to obtain. The

increased enrollment and uncontrolled racial/gender mix can be offset through the use of teaching assistants and/or the creation of small groups that are balanced by gender and race. If teaching assistants are used, they should represent the diversity of the course enrollments.

Language and Vernacular Awareness

In the original course, understanding the meaning of words in the context of race relations was a critical first step in communicating among class members. Students were instructed to speak in their own vernacular without hesitation or worry about how to say what they were feeling without fear of offending the other group. Political correctness was not required as this prevented honesty of expression of feelings and dialogue. Finally, students were asked to talk using the first person “I” instead of “we.” Students and instructors were required to take personal responsibility for their oral disclosure. The instructor of the race relations course made themselves available to students if they need to meet with over any particular personal issues from the class that caused any distress.

Like the face-to-face classes, the instructor of an asynchronous online course must also make themselves authentically transparent and establish each student’s responsibility for their written words. However, in the asynchronous class, responses to misspoken or offensive words cannot be queried immediately. Therefore, the delay may cause resentment and hostility towards the student who made a comment. While this also may occur in the face-to-face or synchronous online classes, immediate rectification of misspoken words can be clarified by the student who spoke. The delay of asynchronous responses to a written discussion board or posting can cause students to jump to conclusions without clarification and therefore escalate the tensions in the class.

Instructors must be vigilant, checking publicly disseminated work daily or more often. If needed, instructors and students have ready access face-to-face real-time interaction tools through most learning management systems. Additionally, third-party applications such as Skype™ or Zoom™ are readily available at no cost to the students. These technologies make “meeting” with the instructor easier than traveling to a physical location by one or both parties.

The use of a blended or hybrid delivery model brings both the best and worst of face-to-face and asynchronous classes. That is, during the face-to-face portion of the hybrid course, the discussion can be clarified and guided. This can help form the basis of mutual trust and understanding that facilitates the asynchronous part of the course. However, misunderstandings during the asynchronous portion can still arise.

Grouping and Discussion Techniques

Dyads

The use of dyads in early in the group process was an excellent way to have the students began opening up to each other on their racial feelings. One on one interaction

seems to enhance the student's initial level of comfort in the growth process in the original course. One on one communication was often more comfortable as an icebreaker than large group activities.

This technique is easily replicated in a fully online or hybrid class. Letters of introduction can be tailored either through emails, synchronous audio-only or video chats, or discussion boards. Synchronous audio or video chats are the preferred methods to execute this initial dialogue in non-face-to-face classes. Since only two people are involved, scheduling difficulties are minimized. Many students are already comfortable with this through Facetime™, WhatsApp™, and other video chat mechanisms.

Circle technique

In the original course, this technique used an inner and outer circle with the inner circle having one demographic characteristic and the outer circle having another. As the outer circle rotated, the inner circle expressed their feelings about race and the effects of their identity on their daily life. The outer circle only listened and then responded as to what they heard, their feelings, their perceptions, and behaviors that they had not heard before. The use of the circle technique enhanced listening to the other group. Often the two groups did not effectively listen to the other groups' concerns. By using the circle technique, those sitting in the outer circle have the opportunity to just listen to the other group without responding. The outer circle listening students had time to reflect and process what had been heard.

This technique is easily replicated in online courses. Students are directed to begin a conversation about race on one discussion board that aligns most closely with their self-identified demographic. For example, one discussion board may be for individuals of color, and the other discussion board may be for non-Hispanic whites. The “closed” groups engage in a discussion about the other race going back and forth for an allotted time, such as two days or up to a week. Their conversation is initially only available to participants on that particular board, and comments are not shared outside of the “closed” groups. At the end of the initial discussion period, all comments are made available to the whole class, and the individuals who did not initially participate in the “closed” discussion are allowed to comment on what they have observed in the other demographic group’s dialogue. Again, these discussion boards need to be monitored closely by the instructor.

Role reversal

Another beneficial technique in the original course was having students participate in role reversal. This was a valuable technique for the majority group to understand the minority group perspective better. Most white students had never been in a minority situation. In the original course, students were instructed to sit on the floor and close their eyes and listen to the instructor providing visual imagery. Then the students opened their eyes and imagined that the only difference in their lives was now the color of their skin. Black students became white, and white students became black. Even with just a change in skin color, many emotions came forth and how their lives

would now be. For example, would they still have the same girl or boyfriend, or could they go home without facing a possible lack of acceptance?

This technique is can also be accomplished in online settings. Students initially listen to a guided imagery audio recording and then respond through a reflection paper to the prompts in that recording. For example, they would reflect upon the questions asked above. After each student has reflected on how their life would be changed with only a change of color of skin, a round-robin dialogue using a discussion board is conducted.

Experiential Learning

A second, and critical, role reversal technique in the original course was spending the weekend at a college/university within which the student represents a minority presence. This role reversal gives each group the opportunity and experience of being placed in a minority situation and is very helpful in sensitizing them to being a minority. Likewise, a technique that was very meaningful for the students' race relations growth was the requirement that they live for a week with the family of the other race. This requirement gave the students an intensive experience in examining their race-related feelings, perceptions, and beliefs toward the other group. Students were encouraged to spend time with other students from the class in developing relationships and discuss the race issue. The most common result was the awareness that we have more in common than different, and many of the preconceived assumptions were challenged and discarded. It appeared that the time spent together was very instrumental in the student's growth related to diversity.

Students in a hybrid or online setting can also be required to engage in the experiential activities listed above. As they complete those experiences, they write a reflection paper on their feelings and emotions related to being a minority in a setting. In essence, the personal growth-related to this experience is described in their reflection papers. Optionally, students from different demographic groups may review the original reflection papers and make their comments to their classmates. It should be noted that in the 1970s, safety in visiting relative stranger's homes and campuses was not as much of a concern as it is today. Unfortunately, there continue to be press reports of black students being stopped on predominately white campuses. In the authors' opinion, the converse is not as probable. In any case, how far race relations have advanced is a topic for additional dialogue.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to discuss how specific historical, face to face techniques used in a sensitive topic area, race relations, could be accomplished in contemporary distance education settings. We have directed our comments more toward neophytes in distance technology rather than those who are technically experienced. We hoped to present practical examples of a conversion process to lessen fear and skepticism regarding the online presentation of this sensitive topic. Readers

are also encouraged to review articles listed in the introduction for information on the technical design of courses for intercultural audiences.

Respected psychologist Albert Bandura wrote in 2002, “Technology influences, and is influenced by, the sociostructural nature of societies. The codetermining socio-structural [*sic*]factors affect whether electronic technologies and globalization serve as positive forces that benefit all or divisive ones in human lives” (Bandura, 2002, p. 1). We believe the forces to be mostly positive after almost two decades of experience. Second, many universities advocate “trigger warnings,” politically correct discourse, and other requirements that students feel emotionally “safe.” The experience of learning, we must remember, is ‘enmeshed with ethical relations’ and fundamentally rooted in the nature of human relationships that come to define any particular learning environment (Vakil & Ayers, 2019). Instructors should be aware that some of the techniques advocated above create unsettling emotions in students for the purpose of learning more about themselves and others. Don’t be afraid, but do be careful based on your campus norms, expectations, and policies. An excellent corollary article entitled *Professors, Are You Hiding Your Politics? Bad Idea* speaks to creating unsettled emotions (Journell, 2019).

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