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eQuality: Race and Online Education

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I've been interested in the connection between culture and education for most of my adult life. My wife and I spent 8 years in pastoral work in Central Europe, and since 2005 my work with online education has brought me into intercultural spaces that include the intersection of multiple kinds of experiences, such as international, intercultural, and interracial. We in theological higher education must be aware of the ways multiple perspectives both enrich the learning experience as well as complicate the online learning culture.

In the last decade I started inquiring about how different cultures experience online education and learning systems. My article, "Global Contexts for Learning" (2014), was an earlier attempt to describe how cultural backgrounds bring different contextual expectations, a matter course designers and online teachers ought to consider for the sake of leveling the opportunities for intercultural learning spaces.

More recently my dissertation journey explored race and faith-based higher education and brought me into meaningful conversations with African American adult learners in non-traditional programs in predominantly white institutions (see Westbrook 2017, published by Routledge). These conversations exposed my own white blindness and helped me see with more focus the ways experiences of racialization affect one's perspective, including in online education courses.

I write this blog from a white perspective, and to be totally honest, this post probably is best suited for white readers. In other words, people who live with race consciousness day after day might not find this essay particularly unusual or insightful. However, those, like myself, who have lived most of life from the white position in predominantly white settings need to be informed of the extra layer of challenges racialization adds to online learning.

“The Wall” of Anonymity

Two broad themes surface when we consider online learning spaces and race. First, the nature of one’s working through a screen and often written-based exercises presents an *“impression of anonymity”* (Al-Harthi, 2005, p. 7). One of my interviewees described the online learning environment as “the wall” (Westbrook, 2017, p. 118) that protects students from racially motivated prejudices. Ibarra (2000, p. 7) cited an interviewee in which the person said, “No one can hear my accent on the keyboard.”

When a person is interacting in an online course from her or his own context, the student is approaching the learning activities from a comfortable and personally selected environment. Stereotype threat may be minimalized from one computer screen to another. For many, macro-aggressions are recent experiences and the effects of segregation laws from the Jim Crow South have lingered. Some students may welcome an added layer of protection from racial discrimination.

“The Wall” of Separation

The second major theme is that in spite of the “wall” effect of online learning, each person brings to the classroom previous experiences of racialization, including micro-aggressions in previous schooling, the work place, and in society at large. In addition, each student also has one’s own learning style, preferred communication style, and cultural filter through which one interprets the course. What might be “normal” for some could be intimidating for others, and if the course is based in writing, then social cues and non-verbal regulators are missing, which leaves room for the imagination to infer both positive and negative presumptions about others in the course. For example, one of my interviewees said the following about her online course activities, “But I could also tell when there was a Caucasian writing Because sometimes they can get too lengthy” (Westbrook, 2017, p. 118). According to this student, she felt like her classmates’ writing styles were obviously white and different from how she would have communicated. Another example was how one interviewee presumed white privilege of her classmates because of their personal introductions in the course (Westbrook, 2017, p. 119).

Now, imagine this race awareness by the students who have a background of being followed in department stores, who have had car doors locked while they were passing by, and purses held tighter when they enter elevators, all white responses to the color of the students’ skin. Such examples were given my interviewees. Then, enter back into the online discussion. What impact do these previous experiences of not being trusted have on students who feel

underrepresented in a predominantly white online course?

In addition, not all of my interviewees' experiences in the predominantly white institutions were online. Some described their experiences on the physical campuses. They were quite aware of the majority white demographics in student population, faculty, and staff; and one person reported feeling insecure when she started her program due to matters of race. The point here is that this student was thinking about racial differences as well as the macro- and micro-aggressions from before. It was unlikely her white classmates thought about race at all when they were answering personal introductions or doing their course work. Some of their white classmates might even deny such a difference would exist, adding further pain to the problems.

Move Toward eQuality in Online Education

Online education learning spaces are not neutral spaces. Each student brings personal memories, expectations, hurts, fears, and stereotypes to the online classroom. Although the computer screen may appear to filter "in the moment" forms of discrimination and provide a safe space for "colorblind" interaction, the online experience is still a form of human interaction. Whatever social challenges people have when face to face also extend into the online domain. Rather than presuming a colorblind or neutral space, online education brings together through digital technology communities that are diverse.

As theological educators, whether online or onground, we have a moral imperative to design and offer our students learning spaces that resemble the teachings of Jesus and have a spirit of peace and reconciliation. The image of the mosaic of believers before the throne of God in Revelation 7:9, 10 provides a wonderful depiction of the kingdom of God. Our theological institutions that are designed to prepare people to serve in the kingdom of God ought to hold high this image in Revelation as the standard for the reality and beauty of diversity within God's people.

As we envision the near and distant future of our distance learning, I offer the following thoughts to ponder:

1. Design courses in such a way that **maximizes access** for working adults and parents.
2. Consider **accessibility matters** in every possible way that digital technology may open new doors; watch out for the incidental new barriers.
3. Predominantly white schools must continue to make **diversification of faculty, staff, and students** a priority.
4. Design online courses in such a way that **recognizes diversity and encourages multiple perspectives** to be shared freely and safely.
5. Adult learning programs must provide academic support and ongoing encouragement for online students, recognizing that systemic barriers have created unequal starting points for many adult learners who are returning to school.
6. Faculty and staff must be trained for **race consciousness** and cultural diversity.

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