Chapter I

Diversity Challenges in Online Learning

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Abstract

Delivering online quality education and equal access requires a commitment to diverse learner populations. This chapter outlines some of the reasons why online learning has become a popular vehicle for pursuing educational goals for minority learners. The author also indicates challenges that must be overcome in order to serve a diverse online student body. She also urges educational leadership to begin a dialogue on on-learning and communication styles, cultural competence in curriculum, academic preparedness, language barriers, and access to technology as they relate to success in the online learning environment.

Introduction

In July of 2004 this author entered the world of online learning after a career of more than 10 years in a traditional brick-and-mortar institution. This author has focused on diversity and ways to incorporate the value of difference throughout educational institutions. The perceptions that college students brought with them made this task difficult, that is, perceptions that their way was the only way and
that everyone else was an aberration from the norm. These classes were mostly made up of college seniors, young people ready to take on the world. Yet they were barely prepared to take on the challenge of working in a diverse environment. Each week classroom lessons focused on issues of difference, like class and poverty issues, race prejudice, and language barriers. It was surprising to see how little they knew and how much time it took to convince them of the social structures in place that prevented a true level playing field. One of the greatest difficulties was getting each student to recognize their own biases and pre-conditioned prejudices that allowed them to pass negative judgments on those who were not like them.

This author has always believed that most people are genuinely good hearted and want to treat others well; however, it is the differences that tend to get in the way we perceive one another. People’s values and beliefs often act as a filter that colors the way they see the world. Thus, when someone see a person behaving in a certain way, that someone’s filter helps to label that behavior as either good, bad, or indifferent. That labeling is called stereotyping.

In many cases stereotyping can be a good thing, because it helps people function efficiently in the world. For example, when someone sees an object with a round top and four legs, immediately he or she recognizes, it as a table. When a loud, high-pitched, whirring sound is heard, it is immediately recognized as a fire engine. When a scent of sweetness is smelled, it is recognized immediately as a freshly baked cake. In each of these cases, stereotyping is at work. With only a few simple cues, peoples’ mind can, in the blink of an eye, determine the name of an object, its use, and its value. While this wonderful brain capacity is invaluable for interpreting objects, it can be detrimental when the same power is turned against people. Just as quickly as someone can distinguish a chair or a table, he or she can just as quickly label someone’s race, gender, or socio-economic status along with the accompanying values and beliefs that may hold for each.

Renowned author William Gladwell (2005) states that when a person meets someone, within milliseconds he or she begins to pass judgment on that person, which is one reason why it is said that first impressions are the most long lasting. However, stereotyping continues even if that person knows someone for a time — someone may be known in one’s family as a slacker or that family may have a friend who everyone believes is an overachiever. Once a person is stereotyped in this way, he or she is expected to behave accordingly in every situation. Whenever that “slacker” brother says that he has a plan to become successful, everybody doubts his abilities to carry it through. If the “overachiever” friend says that she is nervous about her upcoming test, everybody brushes it off because after all, she always does well. The longer a person gets to know someone, the easier it is to reinforce the beliefs about him or her.

Teaching students about stereotyping does not necessarily change their personal beliefs, no one leaves unchanged. Each person exits the class with a little more
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