Chapter 11
Pedagogy of Authenticity in the Online Learning Environment:
An Interdisciplinary Overview

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ABSTRACT

Genuineness, or authenticity, has long been established as the core attribute of excellent teachers. To reach their diverse learners, caring educators build genuine connections. Congruence has been described as the core condition for a meaningful learning and restorative growth, along with unconditional positive regard and empathetic understanding. While ample research has been generated on effectiveness in online education, few studies have focused on the notion and transferability of genuineness in the virtual classroom. This chapter presents a review of the interdisciplinary literature on authenticity, explores its link to diversity, and discusses the ways of cultivating authenticity online. It explores how faculty integrate the holistic self into course content, the virtual environment, and student interaction, and concludes with a review of best practices in course design and facilitation that convey authentic care for students online.

INTRODUCTION

In the survey responses of 562 online faculty and instructional designers, pedagogical mastery emerged as more important than technological skill for effective online teaching (Kim & Bonk, 2006). This chapter explores *one* aspect of pedagogical mastery – the capacity to foster an authentic caring environment in online education. *Specifically, faculty authenticity is discussed in relation to teaching and learning in the online classroom.*

Authenticity is *the* buzzword in today's cultural discourse. At the time of this writing, the search on the Barnes & Noble website returned 748 titles and the ever-growing Amazon offered over 3,714 books featuring the word "authenticity," with 286 titles under the search term "authentic care." Psychologists have operationalized the notion of authenticity as a dimension of personality, and established its link to a person's wellbeing and mental health (Yalom, 1980; Wood et al., 2008). Extensive studies of authenticity in individual faculty (Cranton, 2001; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004) and educational institutions (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006) highlighted the essentiality of genuine teachers, interactions, and culture to the learners' growth.

From this widely held assumption that faculty authenticity is critical to pedagogical excellence and transformational learning, this chapter seeks to explore how authenticity is expressed and experienced in the online learning environment. It presents a summary of the interdisciplinary research exploring authenticity, links authenticity to diversity, and further focuses on characteristics of an authentic caring environment in online education. While ample literature has emphasized the need for community and relationships in the virtual learning environment (Rovai, 2002; Shore, 2007), little has been done to explore if and how faculty authenticity is developed, understood, cultivated, and then shared with or experienced by students (Gikandi, 2013; McDougall, 2015). This element is vital to understanding the success of online education, as "it can be argued that when teachers lose their belief in the ability of education to transform and enhance lives they also lose the power to influence students" (Bauman, 2011, p. 7).

In writing this chapter, we sought to explore the following questions, through a review of the literature and reflection on our personal experiences as online educators and students.

1. What is understood by authenticity, today and in the past?
2. How do online faculty integrate the holistic self into course content, the virtual environment, and student interaction?
3. How do faculty in online learning environments convey an authentic connection to course content and to students - individually and as a population?
4. Are there best practices in course design and facilitation within the online environment that are pedagogically sound and convey authentic care for course content and for students?
5. How do cross-cultural differences in the online classroom influence expectations for and experiences with genuine presence and interaction?

AUTHENTICITY IN THE INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERATURE

While the value of being authentic has perhaps been emphasized throughout the history of humanity, it is the words of Shakespeare in *Hamlet* that captured the essence of much philosophical literature of the past and even the present:

*This above all: **to thine own self be true,***
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell, my blessing season this in thee! (Shakespeare, 1.3.78–82)

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