# Chapter 5
# Creating Community Through the Teaching of Multicultural Literature Online

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## ABSTRACT

*Teaching an online multicultural literature course during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021 created an opportunity to engage in reflection on instructional practices and student reactions to diverse literature selections. In an effort to understand how community was created and dialogue maintained between instructor and students, the author sought to reflect on strategies that encouraged critical thinking and ongoing sharing of individual student perspectives during the course. This chapter examines how an online multicultural literature course was created and facilitated for students during a time when college courses were delivered solely through online instruction. The chapter illustrates how the online multicultural literature course was developed with culturally responsive pedagogy in mind to generate online discussion, guide literary analysis, and develop student writing. In examining this process, the chapter highlights instructional strategies that can be utilized by faculty to create engaging online learning communities.*

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused college enrollment to shift from in person to online learning formats at higher percentages than seen in prior years. Higher education online student enrollment was at 72.8% by the Fall of 2020 (US Department of Education, 2020).

Online education provides a unique opportunity to create increased faculty to student communication due to its flexibility and accessibility in virtual space and time (Singh & Hurley, 2017). Teaching and revising the curriculum for a new online multicultural literature course during the pandemic, presented an opportunity and challenge to engage with students using technology and digital communications as a means to create community. The course was taught during Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, at a mid-size, suburban, private, 4-year university. According to Fleming (2021), courses focusing on multicultural literature in higher education emphasize the use of multiple perspectives to study an ethnic or cultural group. The course, while not focusing on one specific ethnic group, does seek to provide a survey of multicultural literature created by diverse literary voices, including a range of themes for analysis and discussion, particularly from authors students may not be familiar with.

The course, Multicultural Selections in American Literature is offered each semester to all undergraduate students, from freshmen to seniors. It is offered as an English and Humanities elective. Students can earn three undergraduate credits from the course. On average the course enrolls sixteen to eighteen per 8-week session in Fall, Spring, and Summer. But in the last year, the course has gained more popularity, as more students chose to enroll in online courses during the pandemic. Enrollment in the courses rose from an average of sixteen to eighteen students to up to twenty students per online section with a waitlist.

The course was created with culturally responsive instruction in mind, for a diverse cross section of undergraduate students focused on various majors of study. The course has appealed to students who need an additional humanities or English elective to graduate. Students from freshmen to senior level have enrolled in the course. Characteristics of the online multicultural literature course includes a survey of digital literature across the genres of poetry, speech, interviews with poets and prose writers, essays, memoir, and short fiction, written by Latinx, African American, Asian American, Middle Eastern American, and Native American authors. Topics and themes studied include: cultural duality, language and identity, memories, experiences of immigrants coming to America, jazz and blues in poetry, the *American Dream*, and social justice. Students are asked to share their openness to studying literature from diverse authors whose parents and cultural heritage are native to other countries yet who are American citizens. Tasks for the online multicultural

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