



Designing Learning Environments That Support Diverse Students' Needs in a Teacher Education Program

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ABSTRACT

The need to design learning environments (virtual, hybrid, and face-to-face) that support racial and ethnic minority students' academic success has increased tremendously. The data presented here were collected via a cross-sectional survey of 59 students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) as part of a more extensive study that included closed- and open-ended questions. The data were collected mid-fall 2020 semester, and data were gathered until the end of spring 2021. During this period, all activities were conducted remotely because of the pandemic. Face-to-face instruction was non-existent compared to "normal situations." Summary statistics of the closed-ended questions highlighted the challenges students encountered in their learning environments and were further confirmed through the recurring themes identified in responses to the open-ended questions. Findings were used to recommend designing learning environments undergirded by culturally responsive teaching and a humanizing pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Emergency Remote Learning, Grounded Theory, Humanizing Pedagogy, Instructional Design

INTRODUCTION

Many instructors are eager to figure out how to accommodate diverse learners in their classrooms, especially with the nation's current social climate and the politically charged atmosphere. The emergency pivot to remote learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic added a layer of challenges and made previous discussions about disparities necessary for researchers who primarily focus on disproportionality, equity, and social justice. Teaching and learning during disasters presents

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challenges and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying social and economic strain altered almost every aspect of daily life prompting researchers to look back at best practices and relevant approaches that could benefit students.

The discussions in this article emerge from research that focused on the educational experiences of students of color in a historically black institution. The institution is the second oldest public institution of higher education in Texas, originated in the Texas Constitution of 1876. The university seeks to provide a high quality educational experience for students who, upon completion of their degrees, possess self-sufficiency and professional competence. The experience is imbued by the institution's values including, but not limited to, access and quality, accountability, diversity, leadership, relevance, and social responsibility.

The purpose of the research was two-fold. The primary goal was to investigate challenges students experienced in remote course formats to contribute and inspire increased dialogue related to *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (CRP) perspectives and humanizing pedagogy (HP). The secondary aim was to provide student-recommended support and provide spaces for instructors to discuss how to best implement the two frameworks in an remote instructional context.

In this article the authors describe key components and characteristics of CRP, highlighting instructor-designed learning environments responsive to students' needs, and further describe frameworks from HP to facilitate engagement among diverse students. Over two and a half decades ago, culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995a) and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2018) entered and, arguably, would come to dominate discourses in education and reform. In addition, we present two theoretical lenses that we used to explore recommended approaches that could be used to mitigate many of the challenges students face, including what they would look like in online/remote learning environments. Finally, the article focuses on the data collected from the teacher education majors at a rural historically black university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutions of higher education (IHE) located in rural America were particularly faced with unique challenges transitioning to the remote offering of courses this past Spring 2020. Faculty may ask themselves, what are our students learning? Most college and university instructors focus on student learning outcomes and less on students' experiences as they matriculate through the program (Sande et al., 2021). The abrupt presence of COVID-19 and the sudden requirement to change business as usual prompted faculty to consider not only the content and presentation of content to students but the context in which students ultimately acquire knowledge and skills. What is important is students' preparedness and experiences of actually navigating the higher education system without always relying on faculty intervention. The two things that were evident during the transition: the critical role of the student-faculty meeting in person and the lack of faculty and students' preparedness for the sudden shift to remote engagement (Sande et al., 2021). Overall, faculty need to be armed with tools to work with students irrespective of the conditions or situations that face them. That preparation will include a toolbox of best practices in teaching and learning for both remote and face-to-face instruction.

Best Practices in Teaching and Learning

Developing best practices in teaching can positively impact learning throughout the K-12 and higher education spectrum. It is crucial that these best practices be employed at all levels of education, and especially at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), to ensure the success of our underrepresented and racially minoritized (URM) students. For instance, using an engaging and empathetic teaching style can lead to positive outcomes for HBCU students (Gentry, 2013). More precisely, surveys indicate that students at HBCUs have an affinity for particular teaching styles (Gentry, 2013), i.e., undergraduate students prefer instructors who explain the information well and

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