

# Online Course Settings and African–American Women Participation

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, distance education has changed the dynamics of the traditional learning environment. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the most commonly used technologies in distance education, besides print, are asynchronous computer-based instruction, two-way interactive video, and one-way prerecorded video. Although distance education meets the educational needs of some of its participants, frequently there are issues to be dealt with. For instance, although online courses offer a number of solutions to the inequality of the “digital divide,” a term used to describe the disparity in access to technology that exists across certain demographic groups. See Armstrong (2000) and Attewell (2001), as cited in Soker (2005) question whether online instruction contributes to the “inclusion” of nontraditional students or does it on the contrary cause “exclusion,” or create new barriers for these students. Of the growing number of nontraditional students that enroll in online courses, a severely overlooked but expanding population is comprised of African-American women. From this analysis, it is clearly shown that there are certain attitudes that African-American women have concerning online learning, that race and gender have an impact on the confidence of African-American women when compared to Caucasian students in online collaboration and discussions, and that there are certain group dynamics that African-American women prefer while participating in online discussions.

This article describes constraining factors that fifteen African American women in an advanced degree instructional technology program experience through participation in an online course setting. The constraining factors can be categorized into two areas of concentration included extrinsic and intrinsic barriers: They are social limitations (academic, financial,

and technical problems) and the intangible aspects of racism (sense of isolation and belonging, often harbor feelings of inferiority and unworthiness). Taking a relatively long-term perspective, changing online learning participation patterns during the last decade are also examined.

## BACKGROUND

The available racial-difference research in education often shares the general theories that are developed to address educational achievement and attainment (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997). Integrating socioeconomic status and social capital (shared values, beliefs, and information resources that enhance achievement), such theories have guided empirical studies of minorities’ education to examine family socioeconomic background, parental involvement, school environment, quality of instruction and curricula, and academic performance (e.g., Peng, Wright, & Hill, 1995). While these concepts account for achievement and attainment, they are not sufficient in explaining specific processes and outcomes such as online learning process and outcomes. Building upon the generic “attainment” research, this study seeks to understand specific phases or stages in online learning paths by linking them to individual psychological and behavioral patterns (motivation to learn, educational and occupational aspiration, and learning behavior) and institutional conditions—including those attainment predictors. This approach may enable us to reveal the mechanisms that affect online learning and that could be altered by policy or program changes.

There is strong evidence that controlling for educational attainment and income, Blacks and other race-ethnicity still lag behind the dominant majority in using computer and accessing the Internet (Hoffman, 1993).

In broad educational achievement measures, socioeconomic status (SES) does not explain *all* the differences between minorities and the others (e.g., NCES, 2000a). The persistent racial gaps imply differences in organizational environments and personal social interaction that go beyond the larger socioeconomic stratification. Obtuse in analyzing micro-level personal choices and intellectual inclinations, the stratification theory needs to integrate organizational and individual processes that modify the structural patterns in various ways.

In addition to SES, a wide array of concepts is possible explanation for minority groups' disadvantage in online learning. Personality, personal value and beliefs, motivation, intellectual orientation, family cultural capital, and personal social network are influential to the racial disparities in educational attainment.

It is overly simplistic to assume that online learning will uniformly benefit all students. Many believe that with powerful and cost-effective technologies, including WebCT ownership, Internet access, e-mail use, online instruction and interactive systems, minority and poor students will be able to receive education of the same quality as their more fortunate peers (Gladieux & Swail, 1999; Panel on Educational Technology, 1997). However, access to technology is not equitable across socio-demographic categories since it is determined by resources available to the schools, communities, and households. New technologies including online instruction and interactive systems seem to best accommodate those who already take advantage of available educational opportunities (Barley, 1997). The rate of the Internet access among individuals with high income and higher education are greater than that among those with low income and less education. Race/ethnicity was an important stratification factor in the rate of Internet access it is possible that use of these may widen the educational gap in such a way that "advantage magnifies advantage" (Gladieux & Swail, 1999) as the advantaged benefit most from cutting-edge technologies whereas the most needy benefit least.

Individual psychological and behavioral patterns (motivation to learn, educational and occupational aspiration, and learning behavior) are another potentially confounding factor related to the effect of online learning quality. A recent study (Warschauer, 2000) suggests that computer-based educational programs did not benefit female students as much as it benefited male students because females were likely to be disinterested in the learning settings presented by the

available computer products, typically with drastic movement and even violent images. Some researchers claim that women are disadvantaged in online courses (e.g., Blum, 1999) and that we need "women friendly cyber-classrooms". Relative to White students, African American women were less motivated to participate in computer-based programs because of a misperception of computers and mathematics as overwhelmingly complicated (National Science Foundation, 1997). African-American women enrolled in online courses typically have children, family burdens, or demanding jobs to consider, and their attitudes toward online courses are typically uneasy or stressful causing a lack of intellectual interest resulting in a great deal of time spent on a online course. In short, online learning per se potentially may either reduce or widen gaps between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

This article explored constraining factors that African American women in instructional technology programs for advanced degrees through participation in an online course setting. We propose that African-American women have certain barriers that discourage their participation in online classes. We analyzed these factors together with specific online learning process and outcomes. Specifically, we attempt to address the following issues:

- What extrinsic barriers constrain African-American women to participate in online courses and how do they affect their online course performance?
- What intrinsic barriers discourage African-American women to participate in online courses and how do they limit their successful completion of their online course?

### **Extrinsic Barriers Discouraging Participation in Online Course**

Extrinsic barriers that discouraged the participation of African-American women in this study included social limitations that hindered them. Academically, online courses require large amounts of writing and communication, while technically these courses require large amounts of computer use. African-American women in this study often lacked computer and language skills because of inadequate training. Also, the fear of using new technologies, browsers, hardware, and software was a hindrance. Financially, computers and technologies are expensive and require upgrading. Because of

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