

# Racial Issues in the Virtual Classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

Distance education has burgeoned over the past decade and it continues to rapidly expand. The *National Center for Educational Statistics* reports that U.S. enrollments in postsecondary distance education courses nearly doubled between 1995 and 2000, with 56% of the nation's two- and four-year institutions of higher education offering courses at a distance during the 2000-2001 academic year (Walts & Lewis, 2003). The Internet is the favorite medium of colleges and universities for presenting such courses.

The anytime, anywhere delivery of courses by the Internet, known as ALNs (i.e., asynchronous learning networks) has become a viable alternative for students who either cannot or choose not to travel to campuses to attend traditional class meetings at predetermined times. Additionally, synchronous networks, such as chat rooms and MUDs (i.e., multiuser dungeons/dimensions/domains), are frequently used for educational purposes. Unlike ALNs, MUDs are real-time, text-based virtual realities that allow as many as 20 (and sometimes more) individuals from around the Internet to be simultaneously connected to a simulated physical space, such as a classroom or laboratory, populated with virtual objects that can be examined and manipulated.

As a result of using the Internet for coursework, students will not usually meet one another face-to-face as they exchange ideas and construct knowledge through computer-mediated communication (CMC). The end result is the formation of a virtual community in which students and instructors engage in text-based conversations along with other diverse pedagogical tasks. They can do almost everything students do in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment, but they do it separated by space and/or time. This personal separation can contribute to weak feelings of community.

## VIRTUAL CLASSROOM COMMUNITIES

Rheingold (1993) defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough

people carry on...public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling, to form personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. 5). Fernback (1999) emphasizes that not all virtual gatherings are communities. He points out that personal investment, intimacy, and commitment that characterize the ideal community are required; otherwise, the virtual gathering is nothing more than a means of communication among individuals.

Virtual communities are based on interpersonal and social relationships and the ability of the community to satisfy member needs. One such community is the virtual classroom for students enrolled in Internet-based educational programs. The strength of the classroom community is largely based on social interactions among community members. However, students enroll in such programs to satisfy educational requirements and not to engage in social interactions. Moreover, as May (1993) points out, "increased learner interaction is not an inherently or self-evidently positive educational goal" (p. 47). We must foster strong community through the quality, not the quantity, of interactions. Consequently, a sense of community must be carefully and skillfully nurtured by the online instructor for students to achieve the full benefits of community membership in meeting their educational goals.

Strong feelings of classroom community can increase the flow of information, the availability of support, commitment to group goals, sense of well-being, cooperation among members, and satisfaction with group efforts (Dede, 1996; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Brookfield (1990) observes that students often point to the sense of community that existed within their classes when asked to name the most critical factor in surviving a challenging educational experience.

On the other hand, research evidence suggests that a weak sense of community is related to two student characteristics associated with student attrition: (a) student *burnout* (McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990) and (b) feelings of isolation (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000). Moreover, Tinto (1993) argues that insufficient interactions of students with peers and faculty and differences with the prevailing value patterns of other students are likely to result in student anxiety and adversely affect educational outcomes. In other words,

students who feel they do not *fit in* are likely to have a low sense of community, feel isolated and less satisfied with school, and are at risk of becoming dropouts.

Instructors can nurture strong feelings of community by designing courses and facilitating CMC discussions drawing from a set of behaviors referred to as *instructor immediacy*, which Canary, Cody, and Manusov (2000) defined as signs that show heightened sensory stimulation, attentiveness, liking, psychological closeness, and demonstrate active engagement in interactions. Furthermore, instructors should encourage students to conduct themselves appropriately in online professional relationships by manifesting such qualities as self-control, sociability, sensitivity, discernment, concern, gentleness, support, trust, and respect for the views of others. However, these efforts can become more difficult to implement effectively in multicultural classroom communities as outlined below.

## **RACIAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION**

Olson (1996), writing about K-12 education, reports that there were advances made between 1970 and 1988 in achieving educational equity between African American and Caucasian students; however, this progress has ceased. The primary reason offered is that we have constructed a system of education so full of inequities that it exacerbates the challenges of race and poverty (Kozol, 1991). Willie, Grady, and Hope (1991) report that Black women, in particular, are often not satisfied with their graduate university experience, citing lack of mentorship, feelings of tokenism, alienation, absence of minority faculty, and most importantly, a problematic social environment resulting in a weak sense of community. McGary (1992) offers a partial explanation for this situation by writing, “[a]lienation exists when the self is deeply divided because the hostility of the dominant groups in society forces the self to see itself as defective, insignificant, and lacking the possibility of ever seeing itself in positive terms” (p. 36).

Bennett and Okinada (1990) found that even Black undergraduate students who persisted to graduation in predominately White colleges and universities (PWCUs) often feel progressively more alienated and dissatisfied based on their perceptions of what they feel is the patronizing behavior of peers and faculty toward them. Harvard (1986), as cited in Ford (2003), suggests that these feelings are the result of the majority group viewing members of any minority group as tokens to be treated as representatives of their group rather than as individuals.

Willie, Grady, and Hope (1991) summarize research evidence that suggests a link between the academic

success of minority students in a university setting and the emotional, social, and academic supports that encourage and challenge students to be successful. In particular, several researchers, for example, Fleming (1984), reports that African American students attending PWCUs have poorer psychosocial adjustment and psychological development and Black men experience greater academic demotivation and lower self-concept than their counterparts attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Such findings suggest that the sociopsychological context within which African American students are educated affects their educational outcomes.

Flannery (1995) observes that some racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, place higher emphasis on “communal values...which include: knowledge which is valued, how learning occurs, and communication patterns of working together for the good of community” (pp. 153–154, as cited in Rowland, 2000, p. 2). The major implication for professors of African American students is to use a pedagogy that encourages Black students to explain their understanding of subject matter within a collaborative and cohesive group context.

## **RACIAL ISSUES IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM**

The racial issues that influence community in the traditional classroom environment can also affect the virtual classroom, despite the often heard assertion that the Internet erases racial differences and that people are more often judged on their ideas rather than their skin color. For example, Hiltz and Wellman (1997) suggest that online anonymity can create strong bonds among socially diverse groups. However, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that many scholars are now beginning to realize that the Internet can also perpetuate racial stereotypes by some users:

*Rather than encourage diversity, however, the absence of visual markers of race has led to a “default whiteness” in cyberspace, says Ms. Tal [a professor of humanities at the University of Arizona who studied representations of race in Internet-based discussions]. In other words, many Internet users assume that all other users they encounter are white, unless they are told otherwise. “The problem began to emerge when people who were particularly activist about [their race] realized that in order to really be seen on the Internet, they had to keep saying, I’m black,” according to Ms. Tal. “And then other people say, why are you always talking about race? The initial exhilaration is turning, for some people,*

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