

Chapter 20

Online Equivalencies and the Potential to Inadvertently Offend or Cause Discomfort

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers how attempts to have online courses resemble face-to-face courses as closely as possible can backfire and cause discomfort or other concerns to some international students. A critical self-study approach was utilized to consider one instructor's experience of working with a greater number of international students in online and hybrid courses, and the changes to previously developed best practices to have as positive of a learning experience as possible for all students.

INTRODUCTION

As an educator who has been teaching online classes for a number of years at three different universities, the lead author has developed a number of best practices over time. The first university was a highest research institution in a Midwestern state, with a variety of international graduate students. The online teaching was as part of a technology licensure program that served both undergraduate and graduate students. The second university was a doctoral granting institution in a Southern state, but the program in which the online teaching took place only awarded masters degrees. The third university is a higher research institution in a Midwestern state, with a variety of international graduate students. The online teaching was for master level courses that are taken by both master and doctoral level students. Between the institutions the lead author's end of course evaluations were consistently high and no concerns had been raised by the international students he had taught. As such, his reflective practices focused predominantly on continuing to refine and improve the course content, resources, and general course delivery.

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Due to feelings of difference in the teaching and learning experience when teaching online, the lead author focused almost exclusively on trying to have each online class feel as much like a face-to-face course as possible. This was in part to help students have a better experience with the classes, but also to help the instructor feel more present in the classes as well. The most basic of steps included sharing a picture of himself at the start of class and the requirement that each student posted a picture of themselves. Later changes included the posting of podcasts and videocasts, both by students and the instructor. As student location and time zones would allow, synchronous online session would also be utilized.

In the last two years the lead author has had to reevaluate some of his approaches with a broader perspective. Teaching a larger international student population has led to a more frequent focus on cultural design consideration (these considerations are addressed later in this chapter). While always striving to be a reflective practitioner, these new experiences have resulted in some additional reflection on top of the lead author's usual practice. The idea of teachers being reflective in education and teaching is not a new one. Early in the 20th century, Dewey noted that:

Practical work should be pursued primarily with reference to its reaction on the professional pupil, making him a thoughtful and alert student of education, rather than help him get immediate proficiency. For immediate skills may be got at the cost of the power to keep on growing (Dewey, 1904).

Zeichner and Liston (1987) posit three levels of reflection: technical, situational/institutional, and moral/ethical. The technical level considers the effectiveness of one's teaching (i.e. Did the students meet set learning objectives?). The situational/institutional level considers the context of where the teaching takes place and its influence on how the teaching was carried out (i.e. What constraints or influences might the context bring into the equation in influencing instructional decisions?). The moral/ethical level considers factors of equity and justice (i.e. Has the teaching contributed to or diminished a just society?).

The timing of when a reflection is carried out can be a point of contention. While some models advise that reflection should take place after something has been attempted (e.g. Cruickshank, 1985) or over a longer period of time (e.g. Gore & Zeichner, 1991), it has been suggested that ideally a practitioner be able to reflect on their actions in the same time in which they are occurring (Schön, 1983, 1987). While some notes were kept by the lead author during the course of each semester, this reflection (in the form of a critical self-study) takes place both after the teaching took place and over a longer period of time. It has been suggested that there are only limited data available on self-reflection for online instructors in higher education (LaPrade, Gilpatrick, & Perkins, 2014). This chapter seeks to add to the knowledge base regarding online instructor practice(s).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online course enrollment has experienced a substantial and sustained growth for many years, though concerns emerged in recent years that such growth had plateaued (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The return to a steadier growth of 3.9% resumed shortly after the observed flat period (Allen & Seaman, 2017). While this continued growth provides educational opportunities for students who might otherwise not have access to education, there are still concerns that have been raised about these kinds of classes and their potential issues or shortcomings. Concerns have included higher levels of dropouts versus traditional courses (Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013) and negative impacts on pedagogies and their outcomes

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