

Chapter 6

Cultivating Cultural Competence and Meaningful Bonds in the Virtual Classroom Using a Narrative Approach

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ABSTRACT

The narrative theoretical approach to content delivery is a powerful tool for educators and students to cultivate their cultural competencies and meaningful connections in the virtual classroom. By utilizing this approach, students can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for their peers' diverse perspectives and experiences while nurturing community and belonging among themselves. Drawing upon current research, the chapter focuses on exploring the significance of cultural competence and fluency in establishing meaningful connections in online education. It introduces a novel approach to cultivating cultural competence and meaningful connections in the virtual classroom by providing practical examples of narratives and cultural content. It also includes a range of assignments and a case study that highlight different cultural perspectives and experiences, further reinforcing the importance of cultural understanding and empathy in virtual educational settings.

“Welcome to the online classroom!” has become the mantra of modern-day academia. The traditional face-to-face teaching method has given way to the integration of virtual or online teaching and learning. Online education differs greatly from typical in-person classroom instruction. We have seen how the internet has changed educational delivery methods by enabling universal access to education regardless of one’s location. Educators and students now have new ways to communicate due to the use of

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technology in the classroom. However, in this virtual realm, where physical proximity is not required, intentional efforts to establish and cultivate meaningful connections are essential for an effective educational experience. In the absence of committed efforts to establish instructor-student and student-student relationships, decreased student retention and a decline in the overall quality of online education loom large. Due to the impersonal nature of online interactions, strengthening a sense of community, belonging, and involvement among students and instructors is necessary. As educators, we cannot underestimate the significance of collaboration and the pedagogical approach of collective learning in online education.

STORYTELLING TO CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Vygotsky (1962) asserts that interaction is fundamental to shaping meaningful learning experiences. This applies to both traditional face-to-face and virtual learning environments. According to constructivist theory, engaging in social learning within a group setting holds considerable significance as it enables students to actively collaborate and acquire the essential skills of co-constructing knowledge (Brindley et al., 2009). This approach rises above cultural differences and promotes an inclusive learning environment. *Storytelling* is a constructivist pedagogical technique that is culturally inclusive and has a powerful influence on creating meaningful connections (Gunawardena, 2021). The impact of stories on humans is significant, affecting them at intellectual, emotional, and relational levels. In education, stories are essential for aiding in the transfer and retention of knowledge and fostering deep bonds between students and teachers. Why do stories hold such power? The answer points to their ability to align seamlessly with the human thought process, information processing and absorption, self-perception, and the ability to influence others. Scholars have reported that when information is presented in a narrative form, it is stored in memory as fragments that can be easily retrieved as a whole (Baldwin & Ching, 2017; Black & Bower, 1979). By weaving new information into the fabric of a story, students can connect it with their existing knowledge, and it helps with comprehension and retention (Baldwin & Ching, 2017; Liston, 1994).

Storytelling has a remarkable capability to help students navigate and make sense of unfamiliar concepts by relating them to their past experiences and understanding. Through the reflective process of engaging with a story, students actively construct meaning by synthesizing the information presented (Baldwin & Ching, 2017). The story's narrative structure serves a cognitive function, and it allows students to store and comprehend the information effectively while also developing a coherent understanding of the world around them (Baldwin & Ching, 2017; Bers & Cassell, 1998).

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHAPTER

Stories remain a dynamic force even in this digital age, as human brains have not evolved as rapidly as technology. As a result, storytelling continues to be one of the most successful ways to engage students, and the key is to identify the narratives that resonate deeply with each individual student. The narrative theoretical approach to content delivery is a powerful tool for educators and students to cultivate their cultural competencies and explore how stories align with the natural processes of human thinking, information processing, self-perception, and social influence. Narrative theory is a valuable framework for understanding cultural competence in online education. According to narrative theory, people con-

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