

Chapter 4

Enhancing and Humanizing Virtual Courses Through Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Lauren Rebekkah Contreras

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0187-1509>

Northern Arizona University, USA

Lynda Duran

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7685-3016>

University of Colorado, Boulder, USA

ABSTRACT

Higher education is experiencing two intersecting shifts, including growth in virtual learning and an increased number of students of color accessing higher education. COVID-19 introduced a sudden pedagogical shift to online learning that forced both students and faculty to adapt. To better support students engaging in virtual learning, faculty, including the authors, turned to culturally responsive curriculum, such as culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race curriculum, to ensure they were humanizing their students and not further marginalizing them. This chapter identifies culturally responsive practices that faculty, those that teach virtually, in-person and in a hybrid format, can draw upon to enhance and humanize the virtual learning experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a sudden pedagogical shift to online learning that faculty and students were unprepared for (Marinoni et al., 2020). While the shift had detrimental impacts on college student learning, there were deeper implications for students who were already experiencing marginalization on their campuses (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al, 2021; Hagedorn et al., 2022). Still, emerging research is guiding us in how the application of *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995/2014) and *Critical Race Curriculum* (Yosso, 2002) can aid faculty from further marginalizing students in a virtual learning format. To benefit the most marginalized students, there is a need to adopt a culturally responsive curriculum that enhances and humanizes virtual learning experiences.

Due to the access and flexibility that online learning provides, there has been an increased interest in online learning. In Fall of 2020, 75% of undergraduate students enrolled in at least one online course, which was a 97% increase from Fall 2019 prior to the pandemic. While the percentage of students taking online courses slightly decreased in Fall 2021, 60% of undergraduates still enrolled in at least one online course (NCES, 2022) and the number of bachelor's degree programs being offered online increased from 2019 to 2021 (Capranos et al., 2023). As online learning has only continued to grow, the future of higher education is likely to include students taking a combination of online and in-person courses. To ensure virtual learning is equitable, higher education faculty must consider adopting culturally responsive frameworks to enhance and humanize virtual learning spaces.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To enhance and humanize virtual classrooms for marginalized students, faculty must draw from pedagogical frameworks that strive for cultural understanding, developing a critical consciousness and push back on dominant notions of teaching and learning. Our approach to humanizing virtual college classrooms for marginalized students is informed by Ladson-Billings' (1995/2014) *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (CRP) and Yosso's (2002) *Critical Race Curriculum* (CRC). Though traditionally utilized in in-person classrooms, we believe these frameworks are important to incorporate in virtual learning.

Ladson-Billings (1995/2014) identified three components of CRP, "(a) a focus on student learning, (b) developing students' cultural competence, and (c) supporting their critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995/2014). A focus on student learning refers to designing pedagogy in a way that fosters learning through application versus rote memorization. Ladson-Billings asserted that educators who

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