Incorporating Multiculturalism and Social Justice into Synchronous Online Courses

Debra M. Perez[1] & Tricia M. Mikolon[2]

Abstract

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic students and teachers were thrust onto the online platform for classes. Students had to adjust to this transition, and understanding how to function in this new arena became of the utmost importance to promote student success. Recognizing that technology itself impacts our students is an important factor, both culturally and through a social justice lens. Understanding how to incorporate both multicultural and social justice considerations into an online classroom assists instructors in creating an open and welcoming experience which fosters autonomy. Therefore, understanding and appreciating the multicultural and social justice needs of students is necessary to ensure student success. With the rapid transition to online learning and the high number of students who choose to continue their education on this platform, these topics become even more important for educators to be able to accurately assess and address in the online classroom.

Keywords

multiculturalism; social justice synchronous courses

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous instructors and students transitioned to the synchronous online classrooms (Mikolon & Hatfield, 2022). With this alteration in classroom experience, some students were marginalized and struggled with the impact of this transition as well as the access to this learning platform (Mikolon & Hatfield, 2022). Understanding the significance of multicultural and social justice needs of students is imperative for student success (Liston & Rahimi, 2017; Nganga, & Kambutu, 2016). However, limitations presented by technology must be considered when addressing these needs for students (Chen et al., 2020). The incorporation of both multiculturalism and social justice considerations into the online classroom allows for the instructor to not only address the current needs of the students, but to enhance the appreciation and understanding of these topics as they apply to student success.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is defined as "the presence of, or the support for the presence of, several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society" (Dictionary, n. d.). As attention to multiculturalism expands, it is not only cultural or ethnic groups that must be considered, but also all the various identities that both teachers and students hold that make up the beautiful diversity within the classroom. Holding space for the many intersectionalities represented genuinely honors the unique perspectives and gives everyone a voice at the table to share in the learning experience.

With the expansive reach of the online platform, students from multiple locations across the world representing a variety of cultures and identities can access higher education. The increased availability of learning online means that virtual classrooms will be more diverse further showing the need for accessible and inclusive practices.

Multicultrual Considerations

In the classroom, multiculturalism focuses on the diversity of the students and teachers and the inclusion of

Corresponding Author: Debra M. Perez, Liberty University. Email: dperez68@liberty.edu

1   Liberty University
2   University of Cumberlands

and respect for everyone represented within that diversity. Multiculturalism in the online classroom includes the intersectionality of the multiple identities held by each person, including: race, ethnicity, culture, gender, orientation, religious beliefs, ableness, age, socioeconomic status, etc. (Freeman & Darby, 2022). Multiculturalism does not just recognize different cultural backgrounds but also distinguishes that all of those identity pieces intersect into that place that creates the individual students and faculty. Intersectionality recognizes that a person can hold multiple identities at one time, and the manner in which those identities connect within the person is their intersectionality. In order to develop a successful multicultural online classroom, the professor must move past diversity recognition and into full inclusionary practices. Additionally, multiculturalism must be viewed as important and addressed in all classes, not just the class specifically created to explore the topic.

Creating a Classroom with Multicultrualism
In order to create a successful multicultural online community within the classroom, the professor begins with the words they use. Words are incredibly powerful and can create inclusion or exclusion (Obiakor et al, 2007). Choosing words that promote acceptance and inclusivity begins in the syllabus and includes assignments, rubrics, books, and materials. It is vital to choose materials that promote diversity and to directly address when that is not possible. An example would be in a counseling theories class, where not all the theories are multiculturally appropriate. The professor would explain this limitation to their students and then explore the multicultural applications and limitations of each theory.

The way the professor speaks to the students is another manner in which words can be used inclusively (Obiakor et al, 2007). Language that demonstrates acceptance of minority students is imperative to ensure all students feel respected and included as well as to model appropriate interactions with those who hold identities different from our own. Additionally, it is important to speak in a manner that increases accessibility for those with different learning styles or varied abilities based on ableness, comfort with technology, or age.

Utilizing various modalities when teaching or when creating assignments also increases accessibility for students. Faculty can provide PowerPoints ahead of time for students to review and access during the lecture in addition to using discussion-based learning. Closed captioning should be turned on for any video created or utilized for the online course as well as turned on during live online class time. Additionally, some students may need greater support in navigating and utilizing the technology so professors should pro-vide support themselves or connect students with the proper support department. Regardless of the potential limitation a student faces, areas of struggle can be overcome by areas of strength with the proper support and encouragement.

To evaluate the effectiveness of addressing multiculturalism within the classroom, faculty can illicit input from students. In receiving the feedback, faculty must be receptive to what students have to say, creating an open forum for responses and modeling the openness students will need when working with clients. Additionally, self-assessment will allow the professor to measure their success in creating a multiculturally acceptable classroom. An initial evaluation should focus on the relationships built with the students and whether or not the students are approached with a respectful curiosity. Faculty can further assess if they foster a growth mindset in their students and assist students in building their own confidence. Additionally, evaluation can be done on the impact of inclusionary practices and if learning experiences celebrate the diversity within the classroom. Finally, faculty can assess their success in teaching from an andragogical perspective, rather than pedagogical one, and creating a cooperative learning experience.

Finally, when considering the application of multiculturalism in the classroom, it is important to acknowledge that multicultural issues cannot only be addressed in a multicultural class but rather is something that should be incorporated into all classes across the program in order to give students an appropriate perspective for their future work in the counseling profession. When addressing multiculturalism, avoid approaching minority students from a deficit model where those in power have an advantage and are helping those whom society sees as disadvantaged (Hess et al., 2007). This is a privileged approach where the power differential is strengthened, privileges are reinforced, and stereotypes are supported which can further marginalize minority students. Instead, approach minority students from an asset-based approach, respecting the strengths they offer the learning community. By holding an open and accepting space for all students, faculty can increase the strengths of all students, can empower students in the classroom as well as in their future counseling career, and can create a classroom community which is nonhierarchical and collaborative.

Social Justice
Social justice is a word often used, but one that can bring confusion with it. A good working definition may be that of Goodman et al. (2004) who stated social justice was, "…the scholarship and professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or mar-

ginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination" (p.795). Social justice takes into consideration the ideas of human dignity, freedom, and the conditions to flourish and live one's life according to their core values, beliefs, and traditions without judgement. Social justice strives to provide acceptance and celebration of differences and inclusion for all through the challenging of societal institutions and norms that may hinder the full realization of one's potential and autonomy. Understanding these institutional and society biases experienced by students is important in creating a classroom that appreciates both their experience and viewpoints (Mikolon et al, 2022).

Social Justice Considerations

Social justice is evident in our scholarship and professional actions designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices to support self-determination. It is important to reflect on how this is done and whether or not instructors are aware of the individual differences among students, addressing both personal and professional experiences. Accepting individual differences and views, encouraging inclusion of class members, and advocating for student success are all essential elements of the social justice focused classroom.

Social justice in the classroom includes the conscious act of being aware of individual differences in both background and experience. These considerations need to include differences "in developmental status, learning styles, and varying frames of reference for interpretation and application of concepts and skills being learned" (Ramsey et al., 2003, p. 153). More importantly, does the instructor, classroom, and course layout explore how to assist "disadvantaged or marginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination?" (Goodman et al., 2004, p. 795). Considerations include an assessment of the instructor, environment, and readings/assignments to evaluate if each explores values and supports the evaluation of societal structures, policies, and practices openly and freely. Finally, does the instructor, classroom environment, and course materials support autonomy and value the individual perceptions and experiences of each member? These are significant aspects to consider in the development of any course of study as they incorporate the very essence of social justice in the classroom.

Inclusion is defined as," The act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability)" (Merriam-Webster, n. d.). These differences in status occur individually as each member of a classroom bring both professional and personal experiences as well as in exploring values and societal structures, policies, and practices. This important element of the social justice classroom may be achieved by instructors asking themselves are students presented with a 'level-playing field' upon which to learn?

It is important to differentiate inclusion from assimilation. Inclusion maintains the autonomy of the individual with respect of differences, providing resources and opportunities to enhance their success verses absorbing them into the mainstream of a society. Inclusion aims to adjust societal expectations and practices to welcome everyone with dignity and support rather than modify the individual to fit the societal expectations or procedures. Inclusion aims to provide each individual with the opportunities, experiences, community support, and resources to flourish as the unique individual they are, enhancing their distinctive strengths while simultaneously reducing limitations and amplifying their sense of self and autonomy.

Advocacy is another important element of the social justice classroom. Advocating for students to have access to services, technology, and resources needs to be an important goal for all instructors in conjunction with the empowerment of students to advocate for themselves, thereby increasing their sense of belonging, self-determination, and autonomy (Bradley et al., 2008; Mikolon et al., 2022; Toporek et al., 2006). Instructors can evaluate if there are steps taken in each lesson and in each course to provide students with access to resources and technology to assist in their learning. Such steps may be including using positivity in the classroom, supporting critical thinking skill development, and creating assignments that encourage the application of these skills (Brown Rubenstien, n. d.).

Positivity in the classroom is reflected in the language used by both the instructor and students in reference to themselves, each other, and the material. The language used reflects the beliefs of the individual, and this may present opportunities to transform negative self-connotations or talk into healing words that reflect the strength and courage of being one's unique self. Paying attention to the language used by ourselves and others provides insight into the degree of value one holds for themselves, a topic, or an experience. Encouraging students to use positive self-language is one way of increasing a positive self-assessment and presentation.

Critical thinking is a skill that not only enhances learning but also the development of listening and speaking skills. Striving to have all classroom conversations rooted in honest sharing of one's viewpoints while simultaneously valuing the individual and their perspective is important in the learning process. "Socratic dialogue encourages students to think like an advocate, like a problem solver and like an active member of his or her community" (Schellenberg, 2015, para. 7).

It is this honest exchange of ideas to foster connections and solutions that each educator strives for.

Promoting self-advocacy in the classroom is a skill transferable to all environments in a student's life. Encouraging students to ask questions, ask for assistance or clarification when needed, or simply share their views without fear of retaliation is a means instructors can easily incorporate into their classroom environment. The old saying "there are no dumb questions" can be a foundation upon which questions are viewed as a strength of the learner indicating advancement in their learning and movement toward the attainment of their goals. Asking for help or clarification is a skill of the strong and championing one's own cause is the greatest achievement of any instructor.

Creating a Classroom with Social Justice

Creating an online classroom that embodies social justice is not a difficult task. Guthrie and McCracken (2010a, 2010b) outline some simple steps instructors can incorporate to achieve this goal. First, aim to create an environment in which discussions and interactions take place that encourage a sense of community among students and with the instructor. Encourage both independent thinking and collaboration among students through class discussions or assignments that encourage sharing of ideas, opinions, and experiences is a second step. Third, create moments, either through live or posted discussions, that challenge students to explore their own perceptions and biases, further creating a sense of development in the online classroom while challenging students to use critical thinking skills and evaluate their own biases and worldviews. Finally, instructors can also use the technology platform available to enhance the learning environment by ensuring it is accessible to all students and encourages interactions.

Instructors can seize opportunities to use content and illustrations from various cultures as well as incorporating various approaches to teaching to consider individual differences. At the same time different points of view with these options can be explored through activities such as assessing the environment and how it encourages the value of individual perceptions or assessing how each member is seen as a unique individual while identifying the strengths of differences within a community. Instructors enhance learning through differences, while providing the same information, the same opportunity, and the same advantages to create a level playing field for all.

Unlimited perspectives from students is important in order to explore how disadvantaged or marginalized groups are assisted. Each unique individual that comes into the online classroom is an asset. Instructors need to explore how to make the most of each unique person

by addressing multicultural and social justice considerations in any course online whenever possible based on the topic. We want to create an environment where individual experiences are valued and the classroom is a space in which discussion, community, and collaboration occur.

Attempt to include topics such as culture, ethics, and social justice into all classes. This can really challenge students to think about things outside of just those courses which focus on these topics or that they might think might directly apply to these topics. Every time instructors do this, students are challenged to consider the complexity of their identity. This is an essential skill for counselors and counseling students, so that students will look at their clients the same way. We want to educate counselors to be accepting and understanding of each individual and work to create an open environment for sharing of ideas, emotions, and viewpoints.

Acceptance of others and challenging our own biases and values is the foundation of successful learning, as well as both teaching and counseling. We need to ask ourselves as educators, are we creating that professional community within each group of students? We accomplish this by helping students address their own personal biases and explore the views of others, learning to accept these differences and challenge unhealthy views. As our students get comfortable with one another in the classroom, they can then learn to be respectful in their exploration of things that differ from those experience in their own lives.

Importance of Addressing Multicultural and Social Justice Considerations in the Online Classroom

Multicultural and social justice considerations occur organically in our daily lives. As instructors, we want to incorporate these topics into our classes and encourage our students to explore their own biases, experiences, and perceptions while learning to value the differences others bring to the table (Pieterse, 2009). "Whenever applicable to a course topic, instructors need to attempt to include both multicultural and social justice considerations into the development of their course and presentation of the course material" (Mikolon & Hatfield, 2022, p. 117). By doing so, this allows the "complexity of identity" (Mikolon & Hatfield, 2022, p. 56) to be embraced and each student to feel both accepted and understood, thereby creating an open environment for the exchange of ideas, perceptions, and successful learning to occur.

Conclusion

Faculty and students are culturally diverse. Consider-

ation of the intersectionality of each person is important in creating a multicultural classroom. Materials, assignments, and words used need to reflect the diversity in the classroom and be respectful of each individual. Creating community allows students to address personal biases in hopes of preventing any negative impact on future clients. Approach minority students utilizing an asset-based approach.

Inclusion, advocacy, and collaboration are important considerations for the development of a healthy classroom. Actively creating a diverse and open classroom is imperative to inviting exploration of multicultural and social justice issues. The online classroom should be one that encourages autonomy and celebrates the cultural differences of its members while acknowledging the different experiences each member has had while advocating for access to achieve self-efficacy.

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