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Multicultural Education and Technology: Perfect Pair or Odd Couple? ERIC Digest.

In recent years multicultural education and technology have emerged as key issues in teaching and teacher education. But whether they represent pedagogy's perfect pair or its odd couple is still being determined as teachers at all levels seek ways to integrate the two. This digest looks at how technology can support multicultural education efforts.

AN OVERVIEW OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Scholars specializing in multicultural education agree that at its most fundamental level, multicultural education represents an orientation to schooling and the teaching-learning process that is grounded in the democratic ideals of justice and equality (Banks, 1995; Gay, 1994; Sleeter, 1995). Some would argue that justice and equality have always been the focus of schools in America, but there is a substantial body of historical and contemporary evidence which demonstrates that the schooling experiences of most students of color, as well as many white students from economically poor and politically disempowered backgrounds, are inferior to those provided to white students from middle class, politically dominant backgrounds. Due to this disparity, proponents of multicultural education call for a studied restructuring of many of the long-standing policies and conventions of public schooling. James A. Banks, professor of education and director of the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington in Seattle, is recognized as a leading scholar in the field of multicultural education. He has detailed five critical dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure.

TECHNOLOGY, TEACHING, AND CONTENT INTEGRATION

The goal of content integration is to expand the curriculum by incorporating contributions of diverse cultures into traditional disciplines of study. Arguably, this dimension is easily realized through technology. For instance, teachers at all levels have used the World Wide Web to extend the available learning resources. Electronic mail and multimedia technologies promote communication and interactions between diverse groups with the purpose of helping students learn more about content they study in subject areas as social studies, science, psychology, and even foreign language (Anderson, 1998; Baugh & Baugh, 1997; Cifuentes & Murphy, 2000; Cifuentes, Murphy, & Davis, 1998; Freedman & Liu, 1996; Roach, 1998; Sernak & Wolfe, 1998).

Many educators who acknowledge potential benefits of a merger between technology and multicultural education call for updating the physical infrastructures of schools. In schools where such updates (i.e., re-wiring) have occurred, teachers are making

widespread use of the internet and other computer-based technology. And the knowledge and skills students acquire in these schools typically are being reinforced by computer availability and internet access in their homes. This reality contrasts sharply with that of students from poor/working class backgrounds who attend schools where the notion of re-wiring for internet access may seem superfluous in light of the absence of basic resources. Nor are these students likely to have internet access at home. Citing a 1999 report of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Gorski (2001) reports that "African American and Latino households are only about one-third as likely to have access to the Internet from home as Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander households. The same group is only two-fifths as likely to have access as White households" (pp. 14-15). This situation is reflective of the "digital divide" phenomenon. Thus, while technology can facilitate the content integration in the teaching-learning process, educators must be aware that in some circumstances this dimension of multicultural education will need to be addressed by other means due to lack of access to technology.

KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The knowledge construction dimension promotes critical literacy by examining the manners in which scholars and scientists contribute to their respective fields of study. Knowledge construction builds upon content integration by making explicit the worldviews and perspectives that inform knowledge claims. Similarly, it expands the legitimate sources of knowledge by helping learners recognize that their own experiences both within and beyond school are viable foundations for acquiring knowledge and skills. Teacher educators are being called upon to use technology to promote and reinforce the knowledge construction process (Cummins & Sayers, 1996; Kellner, 1998). Part of acquiring facility in knowledge construction is understanding phenomenon from the perspectives of others. To this end, teacher educators are making use of Internet technology to promote more critical engagement with subject matter (DeGarcia & McGlynn,a 1999). For example, Merryfield (2000) discusses advantages of threaded discussions in an online graduate course. Student-generated threads facilitate a class learning community that allows those of diverse cultural and national origins to perspective-take while simultaneously examining their own ideas about cultural diversity.

TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL TO REDUCE PREJUDICE

Prejudice reduction is about eliminating all forms of bigotry. Also, it involves promoting healthy personal identity devoid of the tendency or need to denigrate those who differ from self. Multimedia presentations and distance learning technologies are being used to establish learning exchanges between students of diverse cultural backgrounds and

thereby reduce prejudice and stereotyping (Anderson, 1998; Baugh & Baugh, 1997; DeGarcia & McGlynn, 1999; Roach, 1998). Likewise, technology is being used to promote positive self-concept and foster positive relationships between students from diverse backgrounds in geographically diverse areas. Such efforts have included videoconferences, computer conferences, interactions on the Web, and e-pals (Cifuentes & Murphy, 2000; Cifuentes et al., 1998). Technologies used with middle grade students have included interactive compressed video and use of two-way televised communication systems via telephone lines (Sembor, 1997). Teacher education students are using distance learning technology, multimedia, and e-mail to engage in cross-cultural and diverse regional interactions with other prospective teachers (Anderson, 1998; Sernak & Wolfe, 1998).

MAKING INSTRUCTION EQUITABLE WITH TECHNOLOGY

Equity pedagogy is about equalizing opportunities to learn. It involves incorporating various strategies and techniques that attend to learning styles and intelligence types. Writers interested in the nascent relationship between technology and multicultural education are discussing the urgency of using technology to address the various ways in which learners from diverse backgrounds best acquire school knowledge and skills (Cummins & Sayers, 1996; Damarin, 1998; DeVoogd, 1998). Nevertheless, it is difficult to discern whether current efforts to merge technology and multicultural education are addressing this fourth dimension directly. Indeed, some writers are concerned that technology may inadvertently privilege certain ways of processing information while it devalues others (Damarin, 1998; Roblyer, Dozier-Henry, & Burnette, 1996). An important issue for many contemporary educators, particularly in the university setting, is whether internet technology is in any way superior to face-to-face instruction. It would appear that one advantage internet technology holds over face-to-face classroom format is in its ability to provide educators and students wide access to a cross-cultural professional and learning community. This can be accommodated through e-mail, bulletin boards, and chatroom sites (Gorski, 2001).

A ROLE FOR TECHNOLOGY IN EMPOWERING THE CULTURE OF SCHOOLS

Multicultural education proponents contend that in order to provide high quality experiences for all students, many traditional aspects of schools will need to be reconfigured. This is referred to as empowering school culture and social structures. Its ultimate purpose is to change the taken-for-granted policies and practices of schools that, while useful to some students, have greatly diminished the schooling experience for many others. For example, Arias (2000) describes how the new California State University, Monterey Bay, is making extensive use of technology to provide access to higher education to the burgeoning population of Latinos and other people of color who historically have been excluded from such opportunities. Throughout the U.S., access to university courses and degree programs are being made available to students by

expanded distance education opportunities that now routinely include courses offered online in part or in their entirety.

PERFECT PAIR OR ODD COUPLE?

Various efforts are underway to merge multicultural education and technology, yet it is too soon to crown the duo a perfect pair. Concerned observers cite the divergent ideological underpinnings of multicultural education versus technology as being perhaps predictive of a turbulent long-term relationship (Damarin, 1998; Roblyer, et al., 1996). For example, Roblyer et al. (1996) note that multicultural education emerged from the efforts of people of color and at its most fundamental level is concerned with justice and equity for all. This contrasts with internet technology, which they report emerged from the efforts of a white male elite and remains fraught with problems of access and equity. But this perplexing outlook notwithstanding, increasing cultural diversity in schools demands that teachers seek alternative ways to address learner needs effectively. Teachers at all levels accept that technology has become integral to the teaching-learning process, and many enthusiastically albeit cautiously hope to make the best use of it to provide high quality schooling for all students.

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