

Culturally Responsive Teaching in an Undergraduate Online General Education Course

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Abstract

While inclusive pedagogies such as culturally responsive teaching may be common in face-to-face learning, there is little published research regarding culturally responsive teaching and learning in higher education online settings. It is not known whether faculty members employ culturally responsive teaching strategies or what types of strategies they use in online courses. The purpose of this study was to determine whether online faculty members practice culturally responsive teaching and to explore the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that are reflected in the responses of 12 instructors in a fully online undergraduate general education course required in the first few terms of enrollment. Qualitative methodology was utilized, involving deductive and inductive coding methods of analysis. Data were coded deductively based on four major categories of cultural competence: sociopolitical/cultural consciousness, community of learners, and high academic expectations. Data were coded inductively for culturally nonresponsive interactions. Findings from deductive analysis revealed partial use of culturally responsive teaching strategies in online classrooms. Results for inductive analysis showed themes of nondifferentiated responses, missed opportunities for addressing linguistic or cultural differences, and lack of encouragement for collaboration or sense of community. These findings indicate a need for further research in culturally responsive teaching in online learning as well as faculty professional development that focuses on culturally responsive teaching.

Keywords: Culturally responsive teaching, online instruction, college teaching

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Online learning has been a disruptive innovation in higher education since personal computers became commonplace and enabled instruction to be delivered at the learner's fingertips (Christensen et al., 2017). Given concerns about the high rate of attrition in online courses and lack of persistence to graduation in online degree programs (Bawa, 2016; Bettinger & Loeb, 2017; Shaw et al., 2016), teaching practices in online instruction have been a topic of great interest to researchers seeking to identify approaches with evidence of effectiveness for improving learner achievement and satisfaction. The body of research on online instruction is broad but not deep, with few studies that follow a line of research inquiry or replicate previous findings on topics such as course design, pedagogical practices, student engagement, and student success factors (Lockman & Schirmer, 2020), and very few studies address culturally responsive teaching specifically in higher education courses.

Given past and potential shifts in the terminology used to identify modalities of course delivery since the early days of online instruction, we have chosen to specify the terminology we use in this study. We use the term *face-to-face* to refer to courses offered in person in a brick-and-mortar classroom, *online* to refer to courses offered fully online, and *blended* to refer to courses with online and face-to-face components. We use the terms *synchronous* to mean that all students participate online in real time but in different locations and *asynchronous* to mean that students participate in an online learning course at different times.

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Higher Education

Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, positing that effective pedagogical practice must both address student achievement and help students accept and affirm their cultural identity. Gay (2002) used the term "culturally responsive teaching" to refer to pedagogy that incorporates cultural referents to make learning more relevant and effective for diverse students. Most of the research on culturally responsive teaching has focused on K-12 education and within this body of literature, descriptions of teacher behaviors that reflect principles of culturally responsive teaching predominate (e.g., Malo-Juvera et al., 2018; Thomas & Berry, 2019).

The research on culturally responsive teaching in higher education is sparse (Kono & Taylor, 2021). Most studies have involved explorations of the perceived knowledge and ability of instructors to implement culturally responsive teaching practices, although two studies focused on course structure factors that promote culture and diversity. Adams et al. (2018) examined the incorporation of culturally relevant pedagogy into six literacy courses taken by undergraduate and graduate students in education. They found a lack of emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy that appeared to result from a lack of alignment between objectives, standards, and rubric assessments. Siwatu et al. (2016) examined the self-efficacy doubts of preservice teachers about their ability to implement culturally responsive teaching. Findings indicated teachers' overall confidence albeit with doubts about relating to their students' home lives and teaching about the historical relevance of diverse cultures. Heitner and Jennings (2016) investigated the knowledge and practices of online instructors toward culturally responsive teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners. Results showed that while instructors recognized the need for culturally responsive teaching, their knowledge fell short of addressing this need. Han et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore the perceptions of about their role as culturally responsive educators and found that participants struggled with defining culturally responsive pedagogy in higher education. Cook-Sather and Agu (2013) conducted a series of studies on the Students as Teachers and Learners program in which undergraduate students of

color and international students work in partnership with faculty members for one semester. The authors reported that shared authority and responsibility between the student and faculty member promoted culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Discussion Forums as Sites for Culturally Responsive Teaching

Discussion forums are a staple of online instruction designed to engage students in sharing their insights and ideas about a topic and to encourage student-student and student-faculty interaction. Ringler et al. (2015) found statistically significant relationships, both between the number of student posts and number of instructor posts, and the number of student posts and the presence of higher-level thinking in the posts. Other studies have focused on the influence of instructors' discussion posts. Liu and Yang (2014) investigated the influence of instructor presence during asynchronous discussion forums on student learning. They found that discussions were most effective when instructor presence encouraged discussion of the students' personal lives rather than only discussion of factual material and theory. Hoey (2017) examined the effect of instructor discussion posts on student learning outcomes and found that the frequency of instructors' interaction during forums had no significant influence on students' perception of their learning and actual achievement; however, the content of the instructors' discussion post was significantly related to student satisfaction and achievement of learning outcomes.

Discussion forums offer a glimpse into faculty-student and student-student interactions. Such interactions are data sources in research involving class observations in face-to-face courses, but observational data are unavailable in asynchronous courses. Online discussion forums are like face-to-face classroom discussions focused on a prompt or question, yet different in that they can take place over a period of days. As they reflect turn-taking among participants, the content of posts that flow from one to the next can provide information about variables of interest, such as the inclusion of culturally response teaching.

The Current Study

As there had been no prior research on the interactions between instructors and students in college coursework from the perspective of culturally responsive teaching, our study offered the potential to identify characteristics that reflect culturally responsive teaching in instructors' discussion forum posts, characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that are absent in their posts, and characteristics of posts that reflect culturally nonresponsive teaching. The purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions.

1. What are the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching reflected in the discussion forum responses of instructors in a fully online undergraduate general education course required within the first terms of enrollment?
2. What are the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that are absent in the discussion posts of instructors?
3. What are the characteristics of discussion forum responses of instruction that reflect culturally nonresponsive teaching?

Method

We used an exploratory qualitative design to examine the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching reflected in the responses of instructors in an undergraduate general

education course required in the first few terms of enrollment at a fully online university. We selected this course because multiple sections are offered each term, taught by a variety of instructors, and utilizing discussion forums as the primary venue for instructor-student interaction. We chose an early term course because establishing a sense of community and engagement in course content have been found to be important factors in student persistence during early college coursework (Vayre & Vonthron, 2017).

Context and Participants

The course had a duration of six weeks and required weekly asynchronous discussions. We selected the week 1 and week 4 discussion forums for analysis as these would offer data at the earliest and near-end points in the course. The final week was excluded since discussions tend to be a wrap-up of the course. Therefore, by selecting week 1 and week 4, our data included all discussion posts at two key points during the course. Discussion prompts were identical in all sections for both week 1 and week 4.

Twelve faculty members taught this course during the Spring 2019 term. These instructors were not explicitly trained in culturally responsive teaching at this university, and most were adjuncts. The course was in the general education department and included content related to technology, art, and literature. In a typical year, more than 100 sections of this course are taught, each with an enrollment of 20-30 students. Student enrollment at this university is highly diverse, with students from a variety of geographic, ethnic/racial, and age/experience backgrounds. The course tends to have a high success rate.

Data Collection

As the discussion forums are the intellectual property of the university, we requested and received de-identified discussion forums for the 12 sections taught by various instructors, amounting to 24 total discussion boards, of which there were typically 100-200 posts. We received the de-identified data from the Director of Educational Assessment after obtaining IRB approval.

We then prepared the discussion forum data for analysis. We created a table for each discussion forum with columns for discussion posts, open codes, and notes. We cut each discussion post into a row of the table in the same sequence as in the transcript with a notation that it was from a student (S) or the instructor (I).

Data Analysis

We used deductive and inductive coding as approaches for data analysis. For deductive coding, we created an a priori scheme, shown in Table 1. The scheme is based on frameworks and evaluation tools of elements of culturally responsive teaching, including Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay's (2018) framework of culturally responsive teaching, Rhodes's (2017) culturally responsive teaching survey, culturally responsive teaching strategies described by Chen and Yang (2017), Hsiao's (2015) culturally responsive teacher preparation scale, and Holgate's (2016) culturally responsive classroom climate scale.

Table 1
A Priori Culturally Responsive Teaching Scheme

Cultural Competence	Provides examples from different cultural backgrounds to explain concepts Shows interest in students’ cultural backgrounds Supports language acquisition by using language the students can understand to enhance comprehension of material and tasks Encourages student to share ideas related to their culture Uses culturally appropriate activities Encourages students to make cross-cultural comparisons
Sociopolitical/Critical Consciousness	Incorporates information about international past and current events Includes issues related to acculturation Reflects consciousness of personal culture Encourages students to develop cultural consciousness Encourages students to critique cultural norms, values, and institutions
Community of Learners	Maintains fluid student-teacher relationships Encourages students to engage in collaborative learning in groups reflecting different personal characteristics
High academic expectations	Fosters academic success through differentiated instruction

The deductive coding scheme included the four major categories of cultural competence, sociopolitical/cultural consciousness, community of learners, and high academic expectations, and the subcategories of each. This a priori scheme enabled us to identify characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that participants did and did not use in their discussion forums.

To identify characteristics that reflected culturally nonresponsive teaching, we then analyzed the same data inductively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). We categorized data that were similar and coded each chunk. We reviewed the data in several phases of iteration, combined codes, built descriptions of the themes that emerged, and inferred meaning.

To address potential issues of trustworthiness, we employed the following strategies to assure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Patton, 2015). We engaged in researcher reflexivity by considering our assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases that could influence our interpretation of the data. We kept an audit trail to track questions, insights, and decisions during data collection and analysis. Between the two researchers, we independently analyzed the corpus of data and then compared our findings, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus for each discussion post. During each phase of analysis, we searched for other explanations for the same evidence and evidence inconsistent with emerging codes.

Results

We discuss results that emerged from the deductive analysis for the first two research questions and the results that emerged from the inductive analysis for the third research question. As themes, we identified culturally responsive teacher behaviors exhibited by instructors, culturally responsive teacher behaviors not exhibited, and culturally nonresponsive teacher behaviors in instructor responses. Overall, every instructor engaged in at least one type of culturally responsive teaching, but no instructor engaged in them all. Moreover, almost every instructor engaged in at least one culturally nonresponsive practice.

Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching Reflected in Discussion Forums

Our first research question examined which characteristics of culturally responsive teaching are reflected in instructors' discussion forum responses. We found that most instructor practices fell within just one or two sub-categories within each of the categories of cultural competence, sociopolitical/critical consciousness, and community of learners.

Cultural Competence

While almost all instructors engaged in at least one subcategory of cultural competence, most engaged in only one or two subcategories. Instructors were most likely to provide examples from different cultural backgrounds to explain concepts; some also showed interest in students' cultural backgrounds or encouraged students to make cross-cultural comparisons.

Provides Examples from Different Cultural Backgrounds to Explain Concepts

Of the 12 instructors, 10 incorporated this subcategory in their discussion forum responses, as the following excerpts show.

When I talk to my social group of friends I use a lot more slang or shorthand then [sic] I do when I talk to students or work colleagues. When I talk to other people who are part of a distinct co-culture I may use argot, the specialized language of that co-culture. (Participant B)

I think it is mostly a cultural thing. I am amazed at how in the middle of the African desert, one will not have electricity, but can get a cell signal and internet on their smart phone and those living there use these devices a lot, but do not have and have never used a basic computer. (Participant K)

Class, when I drive to Missouri to visit my brother and family I drive through Amish country. Though it is true they are closer to our ancestor's way of life by denouncing modern technology, they still have evolved and began using the tools of this generation. They utilize modern technology in the design of their harnessing horses as a mean [sic] of transportation. If we go farther back in our time horses were not used for transportation and the wheel had yet to be invented. (Participant C)

Shows Interest in Students' Cultural Backgrounds. This category was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 4 of the 12 instructors.

The virtual class that I am currently enrolled in has students from different states, culture, race and languages, so the chance of learning something new is reasonably higher than meeting the same people in everyday outdoor life. (Participant B)

The advantage of being in the virtual space is greater than any would think of because it allows us to meet with different people from a variety of places, for example, the virtual class that I am currently enrolled in has students from different states, culture, race, and languages, so the chance of learning something new is reasonably higher than meeting the same people in everyday outdoor life. (Participant B)

we should embrace the many aspects of our latest digital breakthroughs that enhance our humanness and allow us both to explore the world and to connect with so many people around the world and from different backgrounds, (Participant Z)

Encourages Students to Make Cross-Cultural Comparisons. This category was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 6 of the 12 instructors.

Just look at our class map! We can contact almost anyone on the planet at any time, which allows us as humans to be more connected than we would be without the aid of technology. (Participant C)

As far as your answer, I will agree that online communication can be a blessing for the shy person or those who fear the immediate judgment of others. (Participant Q)

So as you can read, I have some concern with some of the deception that is involved especially when some people hide their intentions behind a cloud of anonymity. (Participant K)

Sociopolitical/Cultural Consciousness

All instructors incorporated the five subcategories of sociopolitical/crucial consciousness in their responses. Of these, three were evident in the discussion forum posts of most instructors and one was used by just under than half: (a) incorporates information about international past and current events, (b) includes issues related to acculturation, (c) reflects consciousness of personal culture, and (d) encourages students to develop cultural consciousness.

Incorporates Information About International Past and Current Events

This subcategory was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 10 of the 12 instructors.

Twitter was instrumental in bringing forward social change in the Middle East but I can also say that from a dear friend and professor at the University at Alexandria few thought that the movement would have gone as far as it did. So can the social media be hijacked for political interests? (Participant F)

In other countries the Internet is censored and sites are quickly taken down. In the US we have encountered little to no censorship on the Internet. According to our reading in the Wilson Quarterly if such liberties were to be censored Zuckerman states “the government risk brewing a revolution” (Participant B)

In a sense, modern technology has shrunk the world. Today, people can get good information at the touch of the button. Of course, they must beware of misinformation, but if they are smart consumers, they have access to wonderful information that previous generation could only dream of, and this can help us at work and our personal lives. Yet, the same technology that can be used to help people can help swindlers and cyber thieves to steal and hurt. (Participant X)

Includes Issues Related to Acculturation

This subcategory was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 4 of the 12 instructors.

Many people say that our technologies are not going to rob us of our humanity because our technologies are part of what makes us human, [sic] and are the clear expression of our uniquely human minds. They both manifest and enable human culture; we co-evolve with them, [sic] and have done so for hundreds of thousands of years. (Participant C)

What is certain is that the reach of technology has accelerated how we share ideas and the social issues that have been brought to the global forum. (Participant K)

Reflects Consciousness of Personal Culture. This subcategory was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 7 of the 12 instructors.

For I think that we are not fully aware of all the ways we are communicating when we speak f2f. Just think of the messages we send just by the clothes we wear or how we present ourselves. (Participant F)

It is almost impossible to live within today's society like this, however there is value in "resting off the grid" in one or two ways when we feel "possessed" by technology. (Participant B)

Have you ever tried to tie down your hands and see if you would communicate the same way. For I think that we are not fully aware of all the ways we are communicating when we speak f2f. Just think of the messages we send just by the clothes we wear or how we present ourselves. (Participant F)

Encourages Students to Develop Cultural Consciousness. This subcategory was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 10 of the 12 instructors.

The author discusses differences between political and social activism using Internet tools with physical social activism. What insights have you gained about this reading? (Participant P)

speaking with culture sensitivity can help the speaker build trust and credibility. Another way is to avoid jargon with people who do not share the same knowledge. (Participant F)

What could be added to an email to ensure a positive outcome, especially for our friends who are English Language Learners? (Participant Q)

Community of Learners

For the community of learners category, all participants incorporated the first subcategory and half the second: subcategory: (a) maintains fluid student-teacher relationships and (b)

encourages students to engage in collaborative learning in groups reflecting different personal characteristics.

Maintains Fluid Student-Teacher Relationships

This category was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 12 of the 12 instructors.

I like your use of the term “facade.” For many, that is exactly how they interact online, whether they are trying to phish or steal identities or just make themselves look better. (Participant H)

We can be flexible and make it work in our schedule, and by "we," I mean students as well as professors! (Participant A)

Encouraging Students to Engage in Collaborative Learning in Groups Reflecting Different Personal Characteristics

This category was incorporated in the discussion forum posts of 6 of the 12 instructors.

Think of this as a conversation between you and your colleagues. (Participant C)

Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching Absent from Discussion Forums

Our second research question examined which characteristics of culturally responsive teaching were absent in the discussion posts of instructors. We found that one category (high academic expectations) was used by just one instructor, three of the six subcategories of cultural competence were used by one or no participants, and one of the five subcategories of sociopolitical/critical consciousness was used by just three participants. Community of learners was the only category for which all subcategories were included in the responses of most participants.

High Academic Expectations

As just one participant addressed high academic expectations by fostering academic success through differentiated instruction, this category was not sufficiently present in the repertoires of the participants, so we coded it as a discrepant case. The following is an excerpt for high academic expectations.

These are all ways to say that you’ve touched the surface of a topic- which is an important first step. But, you need to, well, dig deeper. One of the best things about learning is the opportunity to really explore and take things in. (Participant C)

Cultural Competence

Three subcategories of cultural competence were incorporated by one or no participants. We found no examples of: (a) encouraging students to share ideas related to their culture or (b) using culturally appropriate activities. The subcategory of (c) supporting language acquisition by using language the students can understand to enhance comprehension of materials and tasks, used by just one instructor, was identified as a discrepant case.

When we speak using contractions, many times our diverse audience may need to stop and think. I know that I do!!! And, English is my first-language! Consequently, our Audience may miss the entire message. (Participant Q)

Sociopolitical/Critical Consciousness

One subcategory of sociopolitical/critical consciousness was used by three participants: encouraging students to critique cultural norms, values, and institutions. Given this finding, we did not consider the strength of evidence to be sufficient and coded it as a discrepant case.

People are now "brands" that try to enhance image on Instagram/Twitter/Facebook and they are comparing themselves to other idealized representation. If you accept that all the other people you know have these wonderful lives, but we do know that social media doesn't reveal the totality of a person's life. (Participant C)

The same technology that can be used to inform the world and connect us to love ones all over the world can distract us from meaningful relationships. It is up to each of us individually and collectively to use technology in a way that adds to humanity rather than detract from it and to use it to strengthen not weaken our personal relationships. (Participant X)

Characteristics of Culturally Nonresponsive Teaching Reflected in Discussion Forums

Our third research question examined the characteristics of discussion forum responses of instruction that reflected culturally nonresponsive teaching. Based on inductive data analysis, we found culturally nonresponsive posts among most participants. We categorized these as: (a) nondifferentiated responses (4-7 instructors), (b) missed opportunity for linguistic differences or cultural differences in communication (11 of 12 instructors), (c) stereotyped comments (3 of 12 instructors), (d) use of language not accessible to all (2 of 12 instructors), (e) pushes personal agenda (1 of 12 instructors), and (f) does not encourage collaboration or sense of community (9 of 12 instructors). Of these, only nondifferentiated responses, misses opportunity for linguistic differences or cultural differences for communication, and does not encourage collaboration or sense of community were included in the responses of more than half of the instructors. We identified these as themes of culturally nonresponsive instruction.

Nondifferentiated Responses

We identified responses from instructors that seemed disconnected from both content and student responses. These comments were extremely general rather than focused on individual student needs, and so did not reflect culturally responsive teaching.

Nonspecific Responses. Included in the responses of 7 of 12 instructors.

Superlative feedback to my Secondary Q to you! Good sharing! Smashing effort!
(Participant Q)

Many instances of "thanks for sharing..." (Participant P)

General Praise Versus Precise Feedback. Included in the responses of 7 of 12 instructors.

Stellar discussion post (Participant A)

Fantastic thoughts and ideas (Participant B)

Nonresponse to Student Comment. Included in the responses of 7 of 12 instructors.

Thanks for sharing your insights [no insights were shared by the student]. Please also consult the COURSE HOME thread for announcements. (Participant P)

S: I played violin and viola from 5th grade to 10th grade; it was an elective at school. One of us called it a fiddle. Our instructor said no, we cannot call it a fiddle. She said we must learn to play it fully, do everything that can be done with it, and then we can call it a fiddle. I think that is a good way to look at life.

Children should first learn all about being human, interacting with others, and then they can use technology to interact. Also, learn how to do everything to survive, every way to do a job, then use technology to make it easier.

T: thank you for your answer and insight. You make some great points. In the end, electricity is the fuel of modern technology (Participant X)'

Redundant Posts. Identical responses were frequently repeated verbatim by the same instructor. Redundant posts were included in the posts of 4 of 12 instructors.

Missed Opportunity for Linguistic Differences or Cultural Differences in Communication

We identified responses from instructors that overlooked points that could have been addressed related to culture or language. These represented missed opportunities for culturally responsive teaching.

I was right with you until you got to the very end. I have one question for you. Can I hug my grandchildren through the computer in virtual space? If not, then I can't be fully human in virtual space. (Participant M)

Thanks for sharing the media story about Jesse Smollet [Jussie Smollett]. I remember reading that story online. (Participant P)

I would love to live in Norman Rockwell's world again. I did as a child, but the world changes so fast these days. (Participant M)

Does Not Encourage Collaboration or Sense of Community

We identified responses from instructors in which opportunities to collaborate and build community were overlooked. As collaboration and sense of community are key aspects of culturally responsive teaching, we saw this as another missed opportunity.

University “discussions” are NOT casual chats with your classmates, but rather an academic thinking and writing exercise worth significant points toward your final grade. (Participant C)

I never really learned how to post a tweet, nor did I really care. I just did not find it interesting. Why would I want to waste my time reading all of that? (Participant M)

In the future, please answer the discussion in essay format and not in question and answer format. This is covered in the announcement page. As far as your answer In [sic] the future, please do not repost the question. It is redundant. As far as your answer, you [sic] have some weird indentations. Please fix this in your future posts. As far as your answer, In [sic] the future, please always capitalize I when referring to yourself.? (Participant X)

Discrepant Cases for Culturally Nonresponsive Teaching

We identified the following categories as discrepant cases given that they appeared in the responses of three or fewer instructors. Each of these represented comments that contradicted the philosophy of culturally responsive teaching, including stereotyped comments, inaccessible language, and teacher-centered comments.

Stereotyped Comments.

Thus, evil people will use technology for evil while good people will use technology for good. The problem comes because technology allows evil people to do great damage. (Participant X)

Look at our world years and years ago. It wasn't a “disaster.” People talked more; kids played outside, and families ate meals together. Not so “disastrous” in my book. (Participant A)

Use of Language Not Accessible to All.

Marinating relationship is critical to our existence (Participant B)

could ever replace the warmth and compassion inherent in face-to-face communication let alone in human touch and care and that we also need to be mindful of how much we rely on all these remote technologies before they turn into crutches, avatars, or shields whereby to hide behind and/or escape reality as indicated in your posting as well, and please continue to share (Participant Z)

You not only have the err of caution. (Participant C)

Pushes Personal Opinion.

She could not do this in virtual reality. She could do this person. Now that she lives next door to me, we can hug every day in person. I do not think you can experience all the senses in virtual reality. (Participant M)

Discussion

The research in online teaching and learning has largely involved the search for a wide net of factors important to student success, satisfaction, and persistence to course completion and degree attainment. This study addresses a gap in research concerning culturally responsive teaching practices in higher education online courses (Kono & Taylor, 2021). As culturally responsive teaching is intended to nurture and support cultural competence while fostering students' academic achievement, the incorporation of characteristics of culturally responsive teaching has the potential to promote success among students who are least likely to succeed or persist in college coursework.

Our findings demonstrate that certain aspects of culturally responsive teaching were implemented by most instructors. At least half of the instructors provided examples from different cultural backgrounds to explain concepts, showed interest in students' cultural backgrounds, encouraged students to make cross-cultural comparisons, incorporated information about international past and current events, encouraged students to develop cultural consciousness, reflected consciousness of personal culture, maintained fluid student-teacher relationships, and encouraged students to engage in collaborative learning. Yet, other aspects of culturally responsive teaching were either implemented sparsely or not implemented at all. These included fostering academic success, supporting language acquisition, using culturally appropriate activities, encouraging students to make cross-cultural comparisons, including issues related to acculturation, and encouraging students to critique cultural norms, values, and institutions.

Our findings also reflected culturally nonresponsive discussion forum posts by instructors. Some of these we characterized as nondifferentiated because they were nonspecific, not responsive to student posts, redundant with previous posts, and expressed general praise without offering feedback. Others in the theme of culturally nonresponsive included missed opportunities for addressing linguistic or cultural differences and provided no encouragement of collaboration or sense of community.

In terms of the practical implications of our findings, we suggest that discussion prompts could be written to incorporate culturally responsive referents that promote the themes of cultural competence, sociopolitical/cultural consciousness, community of learners, and high academic expectations. Findings also suggest that discussions among faculty members about the value of culturally responsive pedagogy and the benefits of culturally responsive teaching could bring the importance of incorporating cultural referents to the forefront during online discussions.

The implications for further research are broad, given how little research has been conducted on culturally responsive teaching in higher education face-to-face and online classes. One direction involves qualitative studies that explore the qualities of culturally responsive teaching in a range of courses at the same or different universities. Along this line of research inquiry, Kono and Taylor (2021) explored the equitable practices used by 19 university faculty members in the abrupt shift from in-person to remote instruction during the pandemic. Their findings showed that instructors who reported student well-being as their top priority experienced strong student engagement, which the authors characterized as a component of culturally sustaining practices. Another direction for further research involves experimental investigations of the effectiveness of professional development in implementing culturally responsive strategies within various disciplines and modes of instruction.

Limitations

This study was limited in scope given that we explored the practices of just 12 instructors in one course within a single online university. As undergraduate students enroll in this course within the first year of matriculation, the demographics of the students in the course would likely reflect the diversity among undergraduates at the university. However, asynchronous discussion forums serve to mask the individuality of students to their instructors except for what the students decide to share. And since the design of the study also masked information about student diversity, it was not possible to identify potential referents to cultural diversity within the discussion forums. The design also masked the identity of course instructors so it was not possible to connect patterns of responses to their diversities.

Conclusion

The study addressed a gap in research on the interactions between instructors and students in online college coursework from the perspective of culturally responsive teaching. We explored the characteristics that reflect culturally responsive teaching, characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that were absent, and characteristics that reflect culturally nonresponsive teaching in the discussion forums of an undergraduate general education course.

Results for answering the first and second research question showed themes of cultural competence, sociopolitical/cultural consciousness, and community of learners, with several subcategories of each, indicating that the participants incorporated some of the a priori categories and subcategories but did not include others. Results for answering the third research question showed themes of nondifferentiated responses, missed opportunities for addressing linguistic or cultural differences, and lack of encouragement for collaboration or sense of community. These findings show that many qualities of culturally responsive teaching that informed our a priori scheme were, indeed, reflected in the discussion forum posts of instructors. However, some qualities were absent, and characteristics of culturally nonresponsive teaching were present in the posts.

As the study involved exploration of culturally responsive teaching in the discussion posts of instructors who had not received training on strategies that reflect the qualities of cultural responsiveness in instruction, the results are both heartening and discouraging. They are heartening in the sense that instructors incorporated culturally responsive practices in the absence of training. Yet, they are discouraging because despite the importance of student engagement in instruction for persistence to college graduation, instructors did not incorporate several qualities of culturally responsive teaching and did use several culturally nonresponsive posts to students that could potentially be inhibiting for full class participation and dissuading to perseverance from course to course.

Declarations

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The authors assert that approval was obtained from an ethics review board (IRB) at Walden University, USA.

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