



Making Visible the Invisible

By Denise Tolan

How do great teaching moments happen? For me, great ideas usually come from watching bad television. One night, I found a show on the Discovery Health channel called *I Lost It*. The basic premise of the show is that you hear the motivational tales of people who lost weight. In the episode I watched, a woman told the story of her move to a small town in Colorado when she was 16 years old. The town had a population of 1,500 and the woman and her family were the only African-Americans in the community. On top of that, this young woman, at 16, was six feet one inch tall. Her discomfort at being “different,” she recalled, was soothed by food. When she graduated from high school, she enrolled in online courses because she wanted “to disappear and be like everyone else.” She quit her online classes after a few weeks because she felt “disconnected.” Hmmm, I thought.

It just so happened that while I was thinking about this idea of “disappearing” into an online course, I also began teaching one. Each semester I use an icebreaker during

which students have to tell the class something about their past, their present, and their future. Over the years I have become accustomed to seeing the lists of three things appear on the discussion board, so I was surprised when checking the board one evening to see a short post from a student in the class: “Are there any (insert racial designation) in here?”

I read it.

I froze.

I wondered if the term had been offensive to anyone.

I wondered if anyone had read it yet.

I deleted the post and I wrote the student, asking why she had posted the comment. The next morning she wrote back: “Oh, I was just wondering if there was anyone else like me out there.” She wanted to “see” who was in the class. She wanted a cultural connection. She wanted to make visible the invisible.

Online teaching is in a double bind as to how to balance the freedom of relative anonymity with potential isolation or the loss of diversity. Much has been written about the online classroom being a level playing field, but I wonder if a level playing field necessitates the stripping away of gender, age, and racial and ethnic identities. How do we honor diversity when we can’t see it? Should we even try?

I thought about my own online classrooms. The semester after the war in Iraq began, the discussion board was lit up with students heatedly discussing (and I mean discussing) both sides of the issue. In spite of my vigilance in maintaining a safe environment for students to openly discuss hot-button issues, some students did make hostile remarks about Iraq and the people of that country. Toward the end of the semester, one of the students revealed that she was an Iraqi woman who had married an American man 11 years prior and had moved to Texas. In the following days I got a lot of email from students who said things like, “If I had only known we had a person from Iraq in class, I would have....” Would have what, I wondered? Been more thoughtful, sensitive, restrained, considerate?

I thought of all the students I had taught in previous online classes who hailed from Finland and Uruguay and Uganda, and how they sometimes had names like Bob and Shay and Ben—names that enabled the cloak of invisibility to remain in place. What if I had asked those students if they would share their diverse lives with the class? I would never pass up teaching opportunities like that in the face-to-face classroom, so why should it be any different in an online class?

Of course, that is my emotional response to issues of diversity. But even in a practical sense, honoring diversity in an online classroom is critical. Each semester, I know

there might be some form of cultural distance in my classroom, so I try to find a way to bridge those gaps. I believe some students are at a loss in the online classroom because of issues with language. Some don't comprehend written sarcasm while some fear the permanence of language and the power of the written word. My own mother, for whom English is not the native language, takes time to read every word of a document because, to her, the written word means power. But while there are studies on how to work with issues of cultural distance in regard to tangible academics, it is the essence of culture that is often ignored or overlooked in an online course.

So how can you incorporate cultural issues into the online classroom? The discussion board is the place to begin. Students can "reveal" themselves in a personal way on the board. Ask a question every week on the discussion board that extends the ideas from a major assignment and lends itself to exposing and honoring differences. For example, if you are asking your students, as I do, to come up with an argument of definition, ask them to also tell you how a person from another race, gender, age, or other ability might define the same issue. In another exercise, my students go to the Pulitzer.org website and pick an image from the photographic or editorial cartoon winners, and I ask them to tell us what visual argument the author has made. In another paragraph, they have to consider what a person "other" than themselves might say in response to that argument. It is astonishing how colorful those black-and-white text blocks can become when students are aware that who we are makes a difference in how we teach and learn.

Is posting a picture of each student enough to identify culture in your online class? For mine, probably not. I can see the differences in skin color and age and sex, but I won't see what it is that makes you who you are unless I have the opportunity to hear you and learn from you. I begin the semester with the *Where I'm From* poem. (It's easy to find—just Google it.) The poem is student-friendly and allows them to talk about their families, their neighborhoods, the foods they grew up with, and the languages they heard. I might have them do a culture collage—either a PowerPoint or a Word document or any program whereby they can introduce items and images that represent who they are. I also honor these cultural ideas by giving them a grade. Students see through empty gestures pretty well.

Okay—don't we have enough to do? Students have reading issues, learning issues, writing issues, issue issues—why should we care about culture in an online class? Isn't this the one place I can stop thinking about who sits before me? I can only answer these questions for myself: I want my students to be better global citizens. I

want a rich cultural environment in all of my classrooms. I want to learn and to grow and I want the joy of sharing new things with my students.

I recognize the irony inherent in sitting on the couch watching a television show about losing weight. I know I have to get up and move if I want to be on that show one day! But I also see irony in online teachers complaining about the lack of engagement in their classes and then rolling out the same class, semester after semester. Where is the point in not utilizing the diverse backgrounds of all students? Who knows—in the process, students might even see themselves in one another and connect in a meaningful way. After all, for some of us, the cultural education within the classroom is the one that has the most impact once students leave us. I hope so anyway. That is why I teach.

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