

# Minorities and Online Higher Education

*Online education offers a color-blind environment to engage students from all backgrounds in mentored learning*

By **K. Brock Enger**

Colleges and universities in the United States often have rather homogenous environments in which cultural gaps exist between minority students and the institution. Campuses may unwittingly create a conflict between students' ethnic and cultural values and the dominant values of academe.<sup>1</sup> After all, the American university models precepts from German universities of the early 1800s.

Much of what we know about student attrition in higher education is drawn from Tinto's theory, which claims that students who feel isolated are more likely to end their college careers than students who feel connected and comfortable in the college environment.<sup>2</sup> Students from minority cultures are particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated from the majority culture on many campuses. Online education has the potential for mitigating this problem, however. My experience teaching in the online college environment over the past four years has shown that the online college or university can build a bridge between academe and students from diverse cultures. By its nature, the Internet can create what feels like a culture in itself, yet students in the online environment represent a wide variety of cultures from a broad geographic spectrum. Each unique culture contributes to the online learning environment.

The students I teach online do not leave their communities to participate in higher education. For the most part, cultural adjustments are unnecessary.



They engage in a world of ideas through reading, writing, discussion, practice, and dialogue. In the online environment, students interact primarily with faculty but also with fellow students through assignments, e-mail, and discussion boards. Indeed, advances in technology have brought us back to

Western civilization's earliest educational models, used by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

In a traditional college environment, the dominant culture might keep minorities from applying or staying to complete a degree. Online learning, on the other hand, offers a social process that

allows students and faculty to connect with each other despite cultural barriers. In the online environment, each student comes to the learning experience individually, without the pressure of peer group norms.

While online education gains increasing acceptance, there remains a stigma to online degrees, comparing them to mail-order degrees. In fact, some of the best academic work comes from online institutions, particularly in the area of doctoral studies, in the form of dissertations.

### Student-Centered Learning

Early in the last century, John Dewey saw education as a social process rooted in an understanding of community and democracy. His innovations focused on student-centered active learning approaches. He stressed the dynamic nature of student development, utilizing collaborative learning that fostered community and placed the teacher within a group of learners as facilitator rather than as outside authority. The job of the educational community, he believed, was to overcome competitive individualism and introduce interactive cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Issues of competition and individualism affect traditional learning environments today, of course, but can be addressed in part through online learning exchanges.

Online learning is structured around democratic values and participant ownership. Learners participate without consideration of societal barriers that might traditionally have existed between professor and student. The pedagogy is rooted in learner-centeredness, in which learners and mentors learn together. Mentors do not lecture but instead nurture, guide, and interact with learners, who in turn assume responsibility for their own learning. The conversations between learner and mentor determine what and how much learning takes place, based on the guidelines set by the course syllabus. In this sense, collaborative online learning employs a constructivist approach much like that developed by Dewey, leading to deeper understanding.

### Support for Cultural Variety

Online colleges and universities support cultural variety by their nature, making online learning a viable option for anyone anywhere in the world. Those attending an online university expect to encounter a wide range of cultural backgrounds, since students come from a wide range of backgrounds. A learner I've worked with for the past year called the online environment "faceless" yet culturally integrated.

While the learning space in the online college or university may be largely free of cultural barriers, those that already exist in a student's experience should be recognized and carefully addressed. It is important to provide students with

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a space whose inhabitants are empathetic and sympathetic to those who experience prejudice regularly. Winning trust online requires correctly inferring another's feelings and providing supportive responses.<sup>4</sup> Through the communication mechanisms in place at an online university, mentors can provide a format to support learners who might not have found their voices in other public milieus.

Online learners have been found to be disciplined and independent, capable of internalizing their own learning and of communicating their learning needs to a mentor. This individualized method of teaching and learning allows for differences in learning abilities and preferences. If a learner is independent and works ahead of others, instructors generally won't object. If a student prefers more constant and direct feed-

back, the instructor can provide it. The online environment offers access to education that is potentially more flexible and more responsive to students than a more conventional teaching environment.

### An Enduring Community

The relationships formed in cyberspace often carry over into offline life. Cyberspace does not replace natural communities; it extends them.<sup>5</sup> Online relationships are assimilated into everyday life. Today I heard from one of my learners in an e-mail, saying, "I look forward to many years of true friendship ahead of us."

The potential impact for access to and participation of minorities in higher education through the online environment is great. Online education offers one way to begin to eliminate racial inequities in higher education. It could create a positive ripple effect throughout the academy for many years to come. *e*

### Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Juan Tito Vives, Jr., and Janice Williams-Boston for their guidance in writing this Viewpoint.

### Endnotes

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2. V. Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
3. J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1916).
4. J. Feng, J. Lazar, and J. Preece, "Empathy and Online Interpersonal Trust: A Fragile Relationship," *Behaviour & Information Technology*, Vol. 23, 2004, pp. 97-106.
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