

Diversity, Technology, and the Teaching of Psychology (July 2001 Communique)

by Carlota Ocampo, PhD, Trinity College, Washington, DC

Teachers at ethnic-minority-serving institutions often confront unique instructional challenges related to the diverse life and cultural experiences and needs of their students. In the following article, Dr. Ocampo describes how technology and student work groups can be used to enhance teaching and multicultural learning in non-traditionally formatted courses.

It is no secret that the face of higher education is changing. Many psychology teachers welcome the teaching opportunities inherent in the increasing diversity in academia. They also recognize the unique challenges of maintaining academic rigor and enhancing learning in diverse environments. Diversity itself has become a multifaceted concept, defined as "encompass(ing) differences in age, color, ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical and mental ability, emotional ability, race, religion, language, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, or individual unique style (Iijima Hall, 1997)." It is simply impossible for any teacher to be highly fluent in all the different idioms of cohort and culture now present even in our traditional weekday classrooms. In addition, increasing socioeconomic diversity has spurred many colleges and universities to develop weekend and evening programs to draw nontraditional students. These programs are made up of older, socioeconomically and ethnically diverse commuter students, who are already employed or heading a family, and whose goals in returning to college are very different from those of traditional students. In these programs, college credits are often awarded for non-traditionally formatted courses in which contact hours between professors and students are greatly reduced. Rather than the traditional 40 contact hours, for example, an intensive class meeting 6 hours a day for a week provides 30 and a course meeting 8 times a semester for 3 hours provides 24. This diversification of the student body and of academic programming has profoundly affected how and what we teach. Fortunately, teachers now have access to a new teaching aid: technology.

Attending to diversity in teaching psychology is important for two reasons: First, we must ensure that all students feel that their psychological traditions are represented in the curriculum, and thus, that psychology has a place for them; secondly, we must ensure that ALL students receive appropriate training to be culturally sensitive mental health providers, educators, and researchers. The use of technology in teaching diversity, and in diverse environments, is important for two reasons as well: Technologies, particularly the Internet, can provide access to a world of diversity with which instructors may not be personally familiar, and, secondly, they can help close the looming "technology gap" between people of different ethnicities and socioeconomic status.

Multi-modal teaching strategies including the use of technology are invaluable when attempting to deliver 3 credit hours' worth of content over 24 contact hours. Many students come to class after a long day at work; they won't encode materials if they cannot pay attention. Attending to the same sensory modality (listening) for so long is psychologically tiring (even for professors, a difficult feat). Organizing contact time into content modules, then breaking those chunks into units using multi-modal delivery formats and teaching technologies, maximizes a

clear advantage of the intensive course: the immersion format. The key is capturing the students' focus — using active learning strategies and switching teaching modalities keeps students absorbed. They will learn if the same materials are reinforced, over and over, in different ways, each time at a deeper level.

In creating learning modules, teachers must consider carefully what is essential. Any materials students can analyze or explore in groups or using technology should be excluded from lecture. For example, consider the modules and delivery strategies used in the first day of a week-long, intensive psychopharmacology class taught in a Web-enabled classroom. The morning's module covers psychological concepts in addiction in a 2 time slot. A short lecture introduces students to new terms, definitions, and concepts in drug abuse. Students then divide into small groups to read and discuss the diagnostic criteria for substance use disorders, which they can access using the Internet. The session ends with a videotape in which addicts in treatment discuss their dependence. A full class discussion ensues, followed by a break.

The next 2 hours are spent on a Web-enabled learning activity in which the small work groups research topics related to the morning module and begin to connect them to the afternoon module, psycho-activity in the brain. Each work group is given a module-related article from the current psychological literature. Groups read the articles and complete a writing exercise in which they summarize (theoretical articles) or analyze/critique (research articles) the content. Then, they link to Web-sites related to their topic and assemble a short (10-minute) oral presentation on the topic, which they share with the class in the final half-hour of the session. In a traditional class, the teacher might spend 2 weeks lecturing on these materials.

After lunch, the psycho-activity module follows a similar format: Students view a short video on mechanisms of action of chemical substances in the central nervous system and review the physiological changes that lead to changes in emotion, arousal, perception, and dependence. A short lecture follows, emphasizing essential constructs and new terms. Students can then do written group activities or on-line interactive tutorials in which they test themselves on new concepts. Finally, a short oral or written quiz, or discussion, can end the day. The rest of the week is similarly constructed: Modules include the history and culture of drug use in America and cross-cultural perspectives on drug use and abuse (day 2); criminalization, enforcement, and society, and legal and over-the-counter drugs (day 3); psychopharmaceutical treatment of mental disorders and issues in gender, ethnicity, community health and behavioral medicine (day 4); and finally, family co-dependence and drug treatment paradigms (day 5).

Teachers can use the new technologies to facilitate continuous conversation with students. Readers may have recognized that some of the problems inherent in teaching the compressed format class can be found in the distance learning class: Psychological distance between instructors and students and class isolation, leading to difficulty in forming the learning community that a class should be. Compressed format instructors can turn to distance learning instructors for help with these problems. Using voice mail and e-mail distribution lists, or setting chat room times, can help the class work through problems that occur outside of class on an individual or group basis. Evening or weekend courses can be Web-assisted, utilizing some of

the techniques of on-line courses: A class home-page can be posted, including the course syllabus, homework assignments, links to useful Websites, and on-line tutorials or tests to be completed at certain times. These technologies make continuity viable, without consuming all the instructor's time in individual student meetings or phone conversations, although a great deal of start-up time is involved in assembling these components.

In these courses, take-home tests can be designed in such a way as to ensure academic honesty. Take-home tests requiring a range of response styles can be book-proof and can challenge students to go beyond recognition memory and do the kind of analysis that makes the test itself a learning tool. Take-home tests can require students to use library research or Internet scavenger hunts to find answers to test items. Assigning classic term papers to assess learning outcomes is undesirable for several reasons. Term papers are vulnerable to plagiarism and can be easily downloaded from the Internet for a small fee. In traditional courses, it is more likely that instructors will become familiar with student writing styles and personal academic habits, making it easier to intuit when transgressions have occurred. In compressed format courses, patterns are harder to spot.

A wonderful alternative is available, an outcome project that is big enough to count for a term paper or final exam and requires significant originality: the student poster session. Poster presentations at professional conferences increase intimacy of exchange and enhance a sense of academic community. Why not use a student version to do the same for a class? Students can be required to assemble either a poster or a Web-assisted demonstration on a major topic, using graphic presentation software such as Powerpoint. The session is a good way to acquaint undergraduates with techniques that will serve them well in graduate school and in their professional lives and can help them learn American Psychological Association style. During the poster session, students both present their own work and view the work of their peers, a really nice way to model the exchange that makes being part of an academic community rewarding. Students are generally excited about their posters and proud of what they have accomplished, not always a common reaction to a term paper assignment!

Finally, a word about diversity and heterogeneity in the classroom. Diversity in the new academy ranges the demographic spectrum: Students may be 18 to 70 years of age, work minimum wage-jobs or own their own businesses, lean to the left or the right politically, be American or foreign-born, speak one language or several, and represent any ethnicity, color, religion, or level of ability. Tensions may arise, yet it is essential in the compressed format class that a learning community be formed. The instructor cannot deliver all the material in lecture; students must become a resource for each other. Assigning small work groups is one classroom management strategy that can enhance the intimacy of the learning community. Work groups can also play to the strengths of students from cooperative cultures and can enhance team-building skills in students from more individualistic cultures.

But this new diversity should not be seen just as an obstacle to overcome. Having diversity in the classroom means having instant access to personal testimony from a range of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. This diversity is a learning resource: Students teach

each other, by sharing from their personal experiences, cultures, or backgrounds, about the range of possible meanings a topic can offer. Firm boundaries must be set and modeled by the instructor, so that even sensitive discussions don't degenerate into gripe sessions. One technique instructors can use is to continually link what is being shared back to the academic course content. It is also imperative that no student be expected to share a personal or cultural experience should she not wish to; students may not want to be seen as the official class representative of a particular group. However, by practicing in the small groups and then moving into full class discussion, and in an atmosphere of respect, students often find their voices. As an instructor, I have found my voice; one of the greatest learning experiences I can give my students is the opportunity to find theirs.

It may sound like designing an intensive course using technology requires intensive course preparation! This is true, but a good deal of the work is in adjusting how one thinks about teaching and in course reorganization. Once the course is designed, though, the teaching itself flows easily, and the course is over very quickly. In 1982, Swenson predicted that valuing diversity in the classroom, and using it as a learning tool, was the wave of the future. Prophetic words! For some, greater student diversity and the increased range of student needs has meant a decline in the once-high quality of academic life. But for others, these are welcome changes. They push the boundaries of higher education; they require adaptation — even growth. Valuing diversity — in cultures, ages, experience — and translating that diversity into new models for teaching, will ensure the continued vitality of the teaching enterprise.

References

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Carlota Ocampo, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Trinity College, Washington, DC. Dr. Ocampo can be contacted via e-mail at ocampoc@trinitydc.edu; by telephone at 202/884-9209; or by regular mail at Department of Psychology, Trinity College, 125 Michigan Ave, NE, Washington, DC 20017.