

# Teaching and Learning Online: Contextualizing the Distance Education Classroom as a 'Safe Space' for Learning LIS Cultural Competency

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## Abstract

This paper conveys one LIS professor's experience with teaching eight students in a newly minted multicultural/diversity course for an ALA-accredited LIS program. The course was taught 100% online with a structure that aimed to incorporate as much reflection and interaction as possible due to the humanistic nature of the topic of the course. This open-forum approach to presenting the course was met with resistance by students in various ways. This research seeks to explore what it means to be an LIS educator while simultaneously learning ways in which challenging student discourse in an online context impacts learning and possibly, competent library service in the field.

**Keywords:** distance education, LIS professional development, cultural competency

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## 1 Introduction

It is important to consider the fact that in some LIS programs, courses about cultural diversity and cultural competency are just coming to fore in a world that is incredibly multicultural in many, many ways. This aspect of multiculturalism is not just socially based but also digitally based with the advent of social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter. Online social platforms have shortened the miles between people all over the world in terms of socialization and also with classroom learning environments in many higher education programs. In this nuanced, yet deeply contextual environment, working with librarians around cultural diversity and competency via an online context (Blackboard) proved to be dichotomous for both instructor and students. Taking an ethnographic lens to the teaching of such a course, my experience as both a teacher and a learner of ways in which culture, privilege, and various "isms" are discussed and talked and written about begs contemplation and consideration. As a woman, a person of color, and someone holding a doctorate, based in an urban setting, teaching cultural diversity and competency online to a diverse group of European American women was a professional learning experience and story, which must be told. Who will listen? Will this single story matter in our LIS/IS world? If so, how? Why? This research seeks to unpack these various questions or at least begin to unpack these complex issues of culture, gender, identity, power, teaching and learning, that are vitally important to the onward progression of LIS education and service in this diverse, 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

### 1.1 Methodology

This research was conducted as a natural auto-ethnographic exploration teaching a new course to LIS students on the topic of cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and cultural competency. The methodology included ethnographic notes, teasing out patterns of reflection and response from student work, considering student course evaluations, and inquiries into my own lens turned back upon myself to document and

modify my pedagogical styling and approach. The course was structured within a 10-week quarter term with an additional finals week. The course was set up to evoke reflection and deep considerations for student identity constructs and the ways in which those constructs influenced their perceptions of library materials (books, ebooks, audiobooks, databases, and web resources) and library patrons. Eight cultural groups were studied in the course: Native Americans/Pacific Islanders, Latino/Hispanic Americans, African Americans/African Diaspora, Rural/Urban, Asian American/Diaspora, the Underserved, Gender (as in male, female, boys, girls) and the LGBTQ community.

The course was primarily an immersive reading project to expose students to a variety of texts across reading levels of children's/juvenile literature, young adult literature, and adult literature. Part of the reading project included prescribed titles to be read by the entire class, plus a series of "open pick" choices chosen by the students. The purpose of the reading program was to immerse students into the literature of multiple cultures to learn more about the life experiences that may mirror the experiences of library patrons and professional colleagues. The immersive reading project was submitted in three stages during the term, as one-page book reviews in a prescribed format set forth by the instructor.

Students juxtaposed reading of other cultures with exploring their own diverse identity constructs by writing a self-reflective narrative essay in two parts: at the beginning of the term to identify their diverse identities, and at the end of the term to reflect on their journey through the course, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Weekly discussion forums included interactive tasks that encouraged student conversation about topics such as racism, white privilege, the digital divide, on-the-floor library service, selecting library resources for diverse communities, and immersing in international librarianship. Weekly tasks usually required a one-page response to lecture notes, scholarly readings, web treks, assigned videos (TedTalks, BBC, for example) and/or guest lecturers.

#### 1.1.1 The ethnographic observer

Ethnographically observing student work included reading and taking notes on patterns of emergent responses to assigned tasks. This meant that instructor participation in the discussion forums were minimal for the purpose of learning how the course structure and requirements were working (or not) for student learning outcomes.

#### 1.1.2 Practitioner Inquiry

I engaged in my own practitioner inquiry to reflectively examine my teaching of the course for the purpose of learning what readings, tasks, and assignments worked for students and what did not work. The methodology of practitioner Inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) also allowed me to carry a heightened sensitivity towards students' needs for engaging in the course material and topics that might be emotionally uncomfortable for them in various and unexpected ways. As instructor, I kept notes and wrote to my mentor as a checks-and-balance approach to engaging in the course as a teacher but also as a learner.

### 1.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was triangulated around the concepts of LIS critical theory (Buschman, 2007), LIS cultural competency (Overall, 2009; Jaeger, et.al., 2011), and online learning theory (Hughes, 2004). Critical theory in LIS informs the instructor's pedagogical approach to teaching about cultural competency in terms of the ways in which power of positionality affects class dynamics for the instructor as leader and facilitator but yet (in this research) a person of color, coupled with student positionality of European American women as students (learners) in a structured virtual environment, not as requisite leaders reflected in the demographics of American librarianship that is consistently 90 percent European American women (Jaeger, et. al., 2011; American Library Association, 2012).

The emerging specialization of cultural competency in LIS looks at how in librarianship, culture and knowledge are often seen as separate concepts, whereas in actuality, we glean our knowledge based on

our cultural conditionings and practices. In the LIS online classroom, cultural competency is enacted as I presented course information as a holistic package that encased “knowledge” (the multicultural reading project), LIS research (weekly readings and tasks), and LIS culture (ongoing professional collaboration and discourse in discussion forums) which, applied intersectionally, is often a new approach to librarianship for most LIS professionals. Jaeger, et. al. (2011) charges LIS educators and professionals to do the hard work of reflection and discussion to bring the profession up to par for working with 21<sup>st</sup> century diverse populations. Hughes (2004) encourages great care towards online student learners because the focus for online education is not the teaching of it, but the learning of it. In this vein, online instructors are continual learners, as well.

## 2 Conclusion

The course was taught for the first time during a summer term with a group of eight Master’s LIS students, all female, 7 European American, 1 African American, all professionally working in librarianship. Early outcomes indicate that the online learning context was a predictably safe space for learning in terms of students being able to write and more fully think about learning responses before conveying those responses as a part of class discourse. However, the online environment proved to also be a space that limited full teacher-student interaction *and mutual understanding* that face-to-face experience solidly confers. In the online environment of teaching and learning about one’s own cultural identity constructs, perceptions, assumptions, and biases, and then interacting with others about those ideas seemed to create a double consciousness in students. On the one hand, in-class conversations were cordial, respectful, deeply nuanced and thought-provoking in amazing ways. Student writing and thinking as applied to the ongoing reading immersion project was a continual improvement for most students as they incorporated instructor feedback into cumulative assignment submissions. Final papers and project submissions indicated deep student learning, yet student course evaluations indicated dissatisfactions with course structure, instructor “expertise” (or not), and course workload. This was a puzzling outcome not only because in-class discourse indicated another value of response, but also because most of the students in the course earned the grade of “A”, with just one other student earning a “B”, and one student earning a grade of “Incomplete” due to a sudden medical emergency. The disconnect between online student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions and the submitted student evaluations leaves room for further practitioner research to tease out where the disconnect began and the perceived common ground ended.

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