SAFE SPACES IN ONLINE LEARNING: THE ROLE OF FACULTY PERCEPTIONS IN DESIGN AND PRACTICE

by

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(Under the Direction of Thomas C. Reeves and Janette Hill)

ABSTRACT

Research in online learning has revealed considerable information about diversity related to attributes such as culture, language, and gender. However, the research base is lacking studies examining a broader range of diversity attributes (e.g., sexual orientation, religious beliefs), specifically how these attributes are identified and acknowledged by designers and instructors of online learning. In this study, online instructors were interviewed to explore their thoughts about the terms diversity and marginalization and how their perceptions of these concepts influence the design and implementation of their online courses. Findings revealed that some online instructors broadly define diversity and marginalization and make efforts to design courses beneficial to all students. This is done by establishing clear policies and strategies supporting open communication. These policies and strategies are documented within institutional communications and course syllabi. Additionally, participants constantly review course communications to ensure adherence to established policies and strategies. The study indicated that diversity and marginalization may not always be easily seen in online learning environments as detailed information about students is often not readily available. When demographic data

relevant to diversity was absent, participants developed strategies to promote diversity and encourage active participation. For example, participants constructed generalized student identities based primarily on prior experience. These constructed identities serve as a lens for reviewing student work and interactions. A summary of suggested best practices is provided to help inform the work of online instructors.

INDEX WORDS: age, culture, difference, disability, diversity, gender, online instruction, online learning, sexual identity, sexual orientation

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all those who have ever felt wrongfully silenced and/or marginalized within any context of their lives. Although we do not always feel empowered to speak or take up for ourselves, it is encouraging to know there are people out there who want to listen and lend their support. Ultimately, we only need to worry about fitting in with ourselves.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges in contemporary educational practice is designing instruction and educational contexts where *all* learners can flourish. Impeding the successful and consistent creation of such contexts are issues of marginalization potentially as old as human civilization. With the advent of the Internet and other digital technologies, online learning has the potential for bridging communication and culture gaps, helping to support and celebrate difference while eroding separatist philosophies and marginalization.

Online learning, however, is not immune to the hindering effects of marginalizing practices that tend to plague face-to-face social interactions. Challenges facing learners due to gender, the most prevalent diversity attribute examined in the studies reviewed for this study, have been recently examined (Fahy, 2002; Ferreday, Hodgson, & Jones, 2006; Gouthro, 2004; Guiller & Durndell, 2006; Graddy, 2006; Herring, 2000; Herring, 2001; Herring & Paolillo, 2006). Often, these challenges present themselves as barriers to effective and honest communication. Some questions that have been explored include: Does the male teacher provide adequate opportunity for female students to express their opinions? Is the tone of language in class discussions such that women feel comfortable asserting their ideas? While more research is needed, the research in this area has helped inform our thinking and broadened our awareness of diversity issues in online contexts.

There are other areas that present challenges to online learners, including: learning or physical disabilities (Badge, Dawson, Cann & Scott, 2008; Igo, Riccomini, Bruning, & Pope, 2006; Raskind, Margalit, & Higgins, 2006), age (Githens, 2007; Hale, 1990; Taylor, Rose, &

Wiyono, 2004), culture (Brookfield, 2003; Guy, 1999; Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007; Henderson, 1996; Ziegahn, 2005), and/or sexual orientation (Alexander & Banks, 2004; Barrios, 2004; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Hylton, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; McKee, 2004; Woodland, 1999; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007). Despite the best intentions and efforts of designers and instructors of online learning, the (bad) habits we develop, or ascribe to, as social creatures in physical face-to-face contexts seem to persist as we venture forth into the new social arenas of cyberspace.

Background

Distance education has its roots in pragmatism; it seeks to develop best practices for instructing learners who, for any number of reasons, cannot or do not obtain the most benefit from traditional face-to-face educational environments. In line with shifting views of instructional design that has begun to chip away at the rigidity of teacher-centered methodology, distance education theory has evolved much since the early days of postal correspondence courses and the later days of instructional television. Over the past 25 years, an increasing awareness of the centrality of the learner in the instructional process has developed (Holmberg, 1995), although the roots of such a focus can be traced back many decades to Dewey, Vygotsky, and others. As technology advances, options for individualization of learning opportunities also evolve, provided learners have access to the new technological resources. Inevitably, some level of digital divide exists for some learners who must or who choose to learn at a distance. This is especially true for learners in developing countries or learners too impoverished to afford the types of computers and Internet access required for optimal online learning.

Wedemeyer (1981) wrote about learner independence in distance education and suggested it necessitates increased learner responsibility. But what does the future hold for

academic apprenticeship? A possible answer to this question in fact preceded Wedemeyer's suppositions. In the early 1970s, Moore began to write about *transactional distance*, illuminating the factors characterizing the relationship between instructor and learner. With respect to the student-teacher (*co-learner/co-instructor*) relationship, "distance" encompasses more than geographic displacement. Distance, Moore tells us, is also educational and psychological in nature. In essence, there is a depth to the perception of distance that cannot be described in terms of mere physical location. The distance between the two parties is determined by the nature of transactions (mutual exchanges) between them (Moore, 1973). Pedagogically, transactions high in structure (i.e. lectures, and often more traditional face-to-face classes) disfavor much dialogue between the parties. Conversely, low structure transactions decrease the dialogic distance between parties (e.g., inquiry-focused classes). From this perspective, *distance* is a function of structure and dialogue, not geography (Moore, 1973; Moore, 1989; Saba & Shearer, 1994).

Conceptualizing transactional distance in terms of structural functions, however, is perhaps no longer a sufficient means of describing online instructional interactions. In addition to the *type* of structure (i.e. low or high), it is also necessary to consider *interactional tone*. While others have used the term in contexts outside of online learning (see, for example, Warren, 1997), in this study *interactional tone* refers to specific language used (or omitted) that leads to an emotional/psychological response from the learner. I label as *closed interactional tone* those interactions that foster within the learner the perception that his/her voice, participation, and/or opinions are neither solicited nor welcomed within the course. *Open interactional tone* elicits an opposite response and encourages free and open dialogue among and between all parties to the interaction scenario. This notion of tone is directly relevant to any discussion of distance

education as it encounters contemporary postmodern epistemologies. Academic discourse and practice involving distance education can benefit from the lens of transactional tone, especially as instructional designers and/or instructors strive to accommodate diverse learners and reduce issues of marginalization and/or discrimination.

As one form of discrimination, *silencing* is particularly troubling in its ability to quash individual voice and impede the learning process. Though it would be an injustice to reduce its definition to simple terms, silencing refers to the conscious or subconscious suppression of opinions and ideas of the underrepresented within a social power structure favoring the majority. Silencing can and has taken place in a variety of contexts, including education. This has been a challenge in face-to-face learning environments (Tan et al., 2010), and there is some indication in the literature that this might occur online as well (Anderson, 2006; Zembylas, 2008). Most of the studies exploring ideas related to silencing have focused on the students' perspective. What is not as clear in the literature is how instructors facilitate or work to overcome silencing in their courses, particularly those offered online. Exploring instructors' perspectives related to diversity and marginalization can help give some initial insight into these issues.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructors of online learning conceptualize and employ the concepts of diversity and marginalization in the design and implementation of safe spaces in online courses. The study was informed by two research questions:

1. How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?
2. In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces in online learning?

Significance of Study

As formal and informal online learning become increasingly common, there is greater need to ensure we are meeting the needs of learners as *people* and not "pupils." This need is a basic foundational principle of adult education. Beder (1989) identified five core principles of adult education, including "Adults are capable of learning and should be treated with dignity and respect" (p. 48). There are two major rationales for online learning. The first is to extend learning opportunities to those who might otherwise not have them. The second is to enhance the quality of the learning experience. Treating people with dignity and respect is an important way of enhancing the quality of online learning, and this study is designed to reveal how online instructors are (or are not) doing this.

The study is also significant because it represents one step in a long-term research agenda to make online learning as effective and empowering as it can be, especially for marginalized learners. There is an emerging body of work within the Instructional Technology literature (Reeves, 2000; Voithofer & Foley, 2002) calling for socially responsible research. Answering this call and building upon the foundational philosophies of Paulo Freire and other critical theorists, this study seeks to further academic knowledge and awareness of diversity and marginalization within the context of online learning.

Definition of Key Terms

Culture: All behavior that is learned. May also refer to products and artifacts, concrete or abstract, of this learned behavior.

Disability: For the purposes of this study, *disability* refers to any of an individual's physical, emotional, or psychological attributes which could potentially reduce or impede access to learning.

Diversity: Difference between individuals and/or groups within any context.

Gender: The term *gender* appears frequently in this study due to its prevalence in much recent educational research. Without exception, previous Instructional Technology and online learning research has employed the term *gender* to refer solely to biological sex (from a binary perspective); although, it should be mentioned, this research has not endeavored to define *gender* explicitly[1]. The present study is guided by a broader concept of *gender* more in agreement with Hill's (2006) definition of *gender identity*.

Online learning: Any learning that takes place on the Internet.

Power: "...a relation between different individuals and groups and only exists when it is being exercised" (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 99). Power defines how much ability individuals have or perceive they have to control their environment in relationship to others.

Safe Space: Any environment in which individuals feel free and able to communicate and express ideas without fear of retribution, intimidation, marginalization, or silencing.

Sexual Orientation: "mobilized sexual and affective desires" (Hill, 2006).

Silencing: An effect of power struggles wherein certain individuals or groups either do not have, or do not perceive, the ability to participate in a dominant discourse. It is the conscious or subconscious suppression of opinions and ideas of the underrepresented within a social power structure favoring the majority.

[1] It is my opinion that by not explicitly defining the term *gender*, education research has failed to justify the validity of gender as a factor for research. I believe we could learn a great deal more about the differences in learning/performance outcomes of "girls" and "boys" by approaching data analysis in terms of (self-ascribed) gender identity.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the greatest challenges in contemporary educational practice is designing instruction and educational contexts where *all* learners can flourish. Impeding the successful and consistent creation of such contexts are issues of diversity and marginalization. With the advent of the Internet and other digital technologies, online learning has the potential for bridging communication and culture gaps, helping to support and celebrate difference while eroding separatist philosophies and marginalization.

This chapter examines research related to this study's research questions:

1. How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?
2. In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces in online learning?

Through this literature review, I seek to explore and critique the research that has already been done related to current issues of diversity and marginalization in online learning contexts. I also hope to reveal what previous scholars have recommended with respect to strategies for designing and implementing more equitable instruction within online educational safe spaces. It is important to note that "race" is not presented as a separate section as it was not prevalent in a preponderance of studies reviewed for this study. Additionally, the term *safe space*, used throughout this study, refers to any environment in which individuals feel free and able to communicate and express ideas without fear of retribution, intimidation, marginalization, or silencing. *Safe Spaces* are not discussed as a separate section of the literature review as the term is seldom mentioned specifically in studies of online learning. However, I have chosen to

substitute the term where its constituent characteristics (e.g., freedom of expression/communication, freedom from retribution, encouragement to share opinion/experience, etc.) have been mentioned explicitly in the literature.

The following search terms were used to locate literature for this review: *diversity, online learning, online instruction, culture, difference, gender, age, race, and disability*. The search for relevant literature was conducted using the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Abstracts Full Text, PyscInfo, and Academic Search Complete. Resources covered a range of years from 1990 to 2011.

Diversity and Power

For the purposes of this study, diversity is defined as "difference." Literature uncovered for this chapter contains references to various types of difference relevant to a thorough discussion of diversity and marginalization in online learning environments. As sections of this chapter shall demonstrate, the role of difference becomes evident in observations of social inequality and power struggles in online learning.

Power, defined more specifically below, is "...a relation between different individuals and groups and only exists when it is being exercised" (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 99). In the present context, instructors of online courses are the dominant social force. Although technology access can help remove social inequality (Hong Lin, 2007), technology-based learning can lead to increased power gaps if power is not used appropriately (Han, 1994). In other words, if online instructors do not use their positions of power to the fullest potential in support of a positive learning environment, "those who are traditionally disadvantaged in our system of education face the same disadvantage when confronted with the online world" (Anderson, 2005, p. 177; see also Anderson, 2006; Lockard, 2000; McGee & Briscoe, 2003; Yates, 2001).

Anderson (2006) reported on the effects of power in online learning environments. In his study, Anderson found that instructors must be aware of the role of power in social interaction and recognize the value of multiple means of communication. Anderson's study observed student interactions in online discussion forums. The courses described in the study, however, were all designed using a course template. Using a template for course design necessarily imposes structure onto course delivery, as Anderson found. He noted that instructors became aware of this structural power and perceived a lack of optimal flexibility. Instructors stated a need for students to develop their own spaces, thereby sharing power over discourse.

Within the literature, concerns over the role of the online instructor primarily take into account the nature of technological media. Digital technologies have redefined the loci and modes of interaction (or their possibilities) for educational contexts. When speaking of cyberspace, Doherty (2004) stated that "...the dissolution of geo-political boundaries has tended to also dissolve the imagined boundaries/obstacles of linguistic and cultural difference" (p. 5). In simpler terms, traditional rules no longer necessarily apply to all learning environments as cyberspace provides a venue for interaction among globally dispersed participants. This opens the educational space to innumerable possibilities for cross-cultural and linguistically diverse interactions.

Differences in such attributes as language and culture, which are increasingly a part of a globalized online learning context, lead to different expectations for the learning environment between instructors and students, as well as between different groups of students in single courses. For example, many Asian learners express frustrations in online courses with western instructors and students due to differences in communication styles and tools (see, for example, May, 2011; see also Wang, 2007). Most online instructors teaching courses in North America

are western and bring an individualist perspective to the learning environment. Such instructors, for example, may make the "assumption that online collaboration in teacher-defined tasks and questions in online courses is learner-centered and flexible, because it allows decentralization of the learning process" (Gulati, 2008, p.68). However, such an accommodation might only serve to alienate those collectivist learners who are used to more direct, teacher-centered approaches. These non-western learners may respond emotionally to their lack of certainty in negotiating a western individualist online course. Emotions have been shown to play an important role in cultural diversity and social justice (Callahan, 2004; Ziegahn, 2005) and may influence how "online learners set the context for how learning will take place...from the beginning of an online course to its end" (Zembylas, 2008, p. 76). As Wang and Reeves (2007) pointed out, "a sound instructional design needs to consider not only the designers' cultural background, but also that of the learners. However, challenges arise under this ideal situation when the core pedagogical values in one culture are culturally inappropriate in another" (p. 9). Being aware of the various ways that learners may react is therefore important in the overall pedagogical process. To help achieve this awareness, Wang and Reeves (pp. 10-11) provide a set of guiding questions for the design of online courses with potentially multicultural audiences.

- From where are the online courses originating?
- Who has designed these courses?
- Who are the students that are taking them?
- Who are the teachers that are teaching them?
- What is the nature of the content and to what degree is the content subject to different cultural interpretations?

- What is the nature of the pedagogy used in the design of the courses, and to what degree does the pedagogical design accommodate cultural differences?

The role of emotion in cross-cultural online learning may be further augmented due to perceptions that social inequality and power gaps stem from apathy toward the underrepresented on the part of those holding power (instructors) (Han, 1994). It is difficult to imagine such perceptions are entirely avoidable as differences in power would appear to occur naturally in cross-cultural educational contexts. Even "when teachers define discussion topics that require learners to participate because their grades depend on it, power differences in learning processes are inevitable" (Gulati, 2008, p.187). This means that even the act of structuring a course (i.e. grading policy, assignments) demonstrates the instructor's position of power over students. This is because the instructor, although usually working within a larger organizational framework, frequently has sole authority over course design and evaluation of performance.

If the influence of power is to be mitigated in online learning contexts, the importance of trust must also be considered. "The issue of trust is central to all communication" (Gulati, 2008, p.188). With respect to online courses, trust is essential if students are to be expected to share their work and ideas (Zembylas, 2008), particularly with colleagues whom they may never physically meet. In a recent study, Zembylas (2008) noted that "learners would never have shared such material if they had felt that the environment was threatening or disrespectful" (p. 79). When trust is not present, silent participation may emerge as a means of preserving privacy and safety (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000). "In an online discussion some learners may choose silence because they feel uncomfortable in putting their opinions out in the open, while some may feel unconfident in challenging others' views" (Gulati, 2008, p. 187).

It would appear from the literature that instructors of online learning should seek to design online courses free from the above-mentioned pitfalls of diversity in order to avoid silence and power struggles. Unfortunately, "because of individual difference, there is no real 'best' design" (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 410). Instructors are, however, encouraged to keep certain considerations in mind when designing online courses in order to appropriately execute the duties of their social role, including demonstrating a desire to teach online, encouraging students to express their ideas, providing extensive opportunities for communication and interaction, maintaining and integrating updated materials, and providing clear expectations (Wang, 2007).

According to Sales Ciges (2001), "...one of the key aspects of online education is the teacher's capacity to produce positive interaction sequences with and among students. The fundamental aim of such a process is to build a learning community that makes it possible to openly exchange ideas, information and feelings" (p. 137). The social role of the instructor is to create a stimulating, and ideally pleasant, environment for learning by interacting with students on a regular basis and being aware of their activities (Baltes, 2010). Online learning should be a safe medium, allowing opportunities for sharing emotion and beliefs (Zembylas, 2008). To accomplish this, learning environments must be sensitive to difference (Baltes, 2010). A clear policy on interaction etiquette should be established at the beginning of the course as it sets the tone for a non-threatening learning environment (Li, 2009). A basic appreciation for difference, therefore, serves as the first step in designing effective online learning for diverse learners.

The following sections of this chapter illuminate those aspects of diversity most salient in the literature examined for this review: *culture, gender, disability, age, and sexual orientation.* As the literature on diversity in online learning is emergent and evolving, this list should not be

considered exhaustive. Finally, implications for best practices in the design of online safe spaces for learning are outlined.

Culture

> Culture…is the sum total of all learned behavior…it exerts a profound influence on our behavior, our attitudes, how we solve problems, how we interact with each other as social beings, the values we carry with us, and the spiritual beliefs we hold (Smith, & Ayers, 2006, pp. 402-403).

If we are to agree with Smith and Ayers' (2006) definition of culture, it is not difficult to see why it should be an essential consideration in the design of online learning. Following a universal formula for learning, each of us interprets new information through the lens of past experience derived primarily through social interaction, not conceived in a vacuum. This socially constructed past experience is the knowledge and behavioral manifestation of culture as described by Smith and Ayers, and, as no two of us share perfectly identical life experiences, differences between individuals, and thereby between the cultures we create and depend upon, are doubtless inevitable.

As technologies for online communication continue to augment the facilitation of learning, culture must play a vital role in meeting the demands of diverse learners around the world. Cultural differences, as described above, are the result of sociocultural processes and contexts providing or denying access to power (Brookfield, 2003; Guy, 1999; Ziegahn, 2005). As a vehicle for potentially immeasurable knowledge distribution and creation, online learning can in many cases help people achieve access to power previously denied them by cultural customs and exigencies.

What are some of these cultural impediments preventing access to knowledge and power? Culture generates numerous social expectations among which are roles and relationships, gender roles, concepts of time, humor, politics, economics, and language (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007). In short, our cultural identities and experience greatly influence how we perceive, think about, and interact with the world around us. In western cultures, for example, we tend to harbor an "analytic, mechanistic world view in which decision-making is based on matters of expediency, efficiency, and cost-benefit considerations" (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 404). Such a worldview would seem easily coupled with capitalistic individualism (Hofstede, 1986), a behavioral condition easily recognizable in American schools where the importance of good grades and high standardized test scores tends to outweigh that of learning. A heavily individualistic perspective of how one thrives in the world doubtless encourages further divisions of power. As the individual seeks to improve access to power for the self, the 'other' is inevitably relegated to the margins of society.

The role of an individualistic perspective can be readily observed in most online learning environments originating in North America as the design of online learning traditionally reflects the values of an English-speaking world view (Chase, Macfayden, Reeder, & Roche, 2002; Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Macfayden, 2005). In the majority of studies available, online courses are hosted by western institutions and demonstrate that technology-based instruction contains values and assumptions of the dominant culture (Chen, Mashhadi, Ang, & Harkrider, 1999; Smith & Ayers, 2006).

In non-western cultures, however, world views are more holistic (Hofstede, 1986). "Both natural and human elements - as well as their interrelationships - are incorporated in the construction of meaning and purpose" (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 404). This non-western view is

more congruent with collectivism wherein the sense of self is not necessarily exalted to levels observed in western cultures. Instead, a stronger sense of community and group identification is arguably constituted from the holistic belief that the self cannot act alone if the culture is to thrive.

The design of online learning is not immune to cultural influence. Likewise, "…instructional designers…are not immune from the influence of their own cultural blinders" (Rogers et al., 2007, p. 198). As most online instructors of courses that originate from North America are likely western individualists, it is not impossible to imagine the negative impact this can have on non-western learners. In one recent study, non-western participants did not feel that instructors paid attention to issues of cultural diversity (Tan, Nabb, Aagard, & Kim, 2010). In addition, participants perceived that online learning does not promote cultural understanding as much as face-to-face learning (Tan et al., 2010). Another study found that collectivist (non-western) learners did not feel individualist instructors were aware of cultural difference in the online classroom (Tapanes, Smith, & White, 2008). Tapanes et al. (2008) conducted a qualitative study employing an electronic survey containing Likert-type questions. Surveys were sent to both instructors and students. The goal was to ascertain whether instructors considered culture in the design of online courses and whether students perceived cultural considerations were taken into account. An obstacle to interpreting the finding that individualistic instructors were unaware of cultural difference is the fact that cultural perspectives (individualistic v. collectivist) of the participants were "assigned" by the researchers based solely on participants' nationalities. It is unknown from the study if students self-identified along this same measure. Whereas this is certainly possible, subsequent research could allow for student self-identification in order to avoid potential ambiguities.

Hannon and D'Netto (2007) conducted a study of online students in three separate courses of a Business program. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data; however, follow-up interviews were not employed because responses were anonymous. Hannon and D'Netto's (2007) study showed a lack of peer engagement and intercultural communication between instructors and students of collectivist and individualist world views. These findings stem from the fact that "virtual spaces are connected to real life cultural conditions of the students" (Zhang & Kenny, 2010, p. 29) and that the instructor's cultural background interacts with the diverse cultures of students (Baltes, 2010). Hannon and D'Netto's study, however, should be cautiously viewed as it represents a mere snapshot of perspectives. Without follow-up questions, interviews, or observations of course interactions, the validity of the results cannot be ascertained with certainty.

In a study observing students in an online course focused on cultural issues, Ziegahn (2005) found that one's cultural positionality is an important factor in shaping critical reflection of emotional and cultural issues. Ziegahn arrived at his findings by using constant comparison to analyze course postings; however, cultural imbalance within the sample raises concerns about validity. Of seventeen participants, eleven were "European American." It is questionable whether data skewed toward a cultural majority can be adequately representative of cultural issues in online learning. Also, of these same seventeen participants, six were pursuing cultural studies as an academic specialty. It is possible these students were predisposed to discuss cultural issues within their course postings. Furthermore, ten of the students, more than half, had spent at least one year working or studying abroad.

Zembylas (2008) also observed students in online courses focusing on cultural and social issues. In a recent action research study of adult learners, Zembylas used qualitative techniques

to analyze interviews, course emails, student journals, an instructor journal, field notes, student work, and discussion board postings. His findings indicate that adult learners can use the online educational environment to express emotions related to difficult topics such as discrimination and prejudice. The findings also showed that learning practices surrounding cultural topics within this environment were constantly, and critically, reflected upon and negotiated. However, Zembylas' study, as action research, can be limited by potential underlying power issues within the courses observed. This is because the researcher was also the instructor. It is possible participants modified their disclosures during the study due to a perception of the researcher/instructor occupying a position of power.

Of great influence on course satisfaction, which according to Hannon and D'Netto (2007) depends heavily on cultural difference, is difference in language use to include vernacular, acronyms, text, and other communication tools (Tan et al., 2010). This is because different cultural communication patterns can lead to miscommunication in online courses where visual cues are usually absent and non-verbal communication cues differ from face-to-face contexts (Anderson & Simpson, 2007; Chase et al., 2002; Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005; Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010; Reeder, Macfayden, & Chase, 2004).

Rogers et al. (2007), in a recent qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, looked at additional barriers to the design of culturally sensitive instructional products. Among these barriers are cost, dependability, Internet speed, and electricity access. Rogers et al. (2007) reported that instructional design theory is too often focused solely on content development and suffers from a lack of evaluation in real-world practice. They also point out the limitations imposed by organizational structures and their tight control over the role of designers and the design process, with particular respect to implementation. Their study, however, was an

exploratory case study of instructional designers, not instructors. This may actually lead it to be more beneficial to the current study. One of the principal findings of Rogers et al. was that instructional designers faced difficulty in designing for cultural diversity because they were not often given opportunities to evaluate designs in real world practice. Instructors, however, engage with such evaluation as a condition of their profession and, therefore, can potentially reap the benefits of design-based practice.

A more recent exploratory case study was conducted by Zhang and Kenny (2010) who also considered the affects of culture on learner perceptions of online courses. Findings suggested that some international students taking online courses originating in the United States may demonstrate low participation rates due to a lack of understanding of language and cultural communication styles. This study is significant in that it engaged participants in discussion through emails, interviews, an online survey, and direct observation for the duration of an entire semester. Qualitative methods were used for data analysis. What is unclear, however, is how the three international students discussed were selected for the case study. Out of fifty-three solicited students, thirteen volunteered with one withdrawal. It is assumed the three international students were selected from these remaining twelve volunteers; however, selection criteria were not provided.

Another study from 2010 by Liu et al. also used an exploratory case study approach to examine the affect of culture within an online Business program. Like Rogers et al. (2007), they uncovered the potentially negative effects of cultural barriers such as language and recommended that efforts be made to identify and remove such barriers in the design process. Using constant comparison, Liu et al. analyzed data from interviews and focus groups. Students were given their preference of telephone, face-to-face, or email interviews. This increases the

validity of the data as it demonstrates a desire to ensure all students have equal opportunity to provide their views.

When instructors and researchers are free to explore culture in instructional design, which aspects of culture are most significant? How can relevant cultural knowledge be obtained and implemented? The importance of these questions cannot be overstated. As learners around the world are increasingly exposed to other cultures via the Internet, online instructors must be flexible and open to diverse learning needs. "…educational programs must be aligned with learner needs, interests, values, student perceptions, communication styles, and desired learning outcomes that apply within a particular context" (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 408). This call for a multiple-cultures model of instructional design has its roots in twentieth century educational research and extends its plea for adequate response (Henderson, 1996). Even today, distance learning originating in the United States "often reduces knowledge to explicit discrete data, which decontextualizes content and encourages linear, analytical thinking" (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 406) representative of western culture and philosophy and supportive of a hegemonic diffusion of knowledge and power in favor of western society.

Online instructors have several options at their disposal for heightening their own awareness of culture as an issue and factor of learning. This is important because "…becoming aware that *there are* significant differences between cultures does not mean that you are aware of what all of those differences are or of all the ways in which they influence learning" (Rogers et al., 2007, p. 202). In a recent case study, Rogers et al. (2007) conducted interviews of twelve participants involved in the design of multicultural instruction. In part, the study sought to uncover strategies for increasing cultural awareness (of instructional designers) and

incorporating this awareness into instructional design. Some of the strategies mentioned by participants include:

- Engage in simulations
- Take courses about cultural difference
- Read relevant research
- Solicit feedback
- Work on (design) teams with members of other cultures
- Participate on field visits (where applicable and possible) with expert guides

In light of such strategies, instructors of online learning have several tools at their disposal to gain awareness of and begin to seriously consider aspects of diversity in the design phase of instructional design for online learning.

The above mentioned literature pertaining to cultural issues in online learning highlights the need of instructors to be aware of potential barriers to learning that cultural difference can engender. These barriers, such as language difference and communication styles, often result from instructors not considering such factors as course structure, learning styles, and power relationships. Instructors should consider as many cultural factors as possible in the design of online learning and should promote engagement and flexibility through design-based practice.

Gender

Although the majority of literature found for this study examines gender, not one study or theoretical piece reviewed for this study bestows the term "gender" with any particular connotation or attribute beyond the implied binary of male/female biological sex. Within the fields of Sociology and social justice research, however, this binary has become the subject of profound deconstructionist critique (*see* Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Messner, 2007) inspired by

the earlier philosophical considerations and social thought experiments of structuralists and post-structuralists alike (see Barthes, 1970; see also Foucault, 1976). Embracing these efforts to more fully comprehend and appreciate human variation and social behavior, some disciplines within Education, notably Adult Education and Workforce/Human Resources Education, have also begun to regard gender as a continuum of characteristics resisting all attempts at categorical definition (*see* Hill, 2006).

Despite the presence of a problematized gender in these sectors of Education, the notions of continuum and variability of gender appear to have been neglected or forgotten in the development of online teaching and learning research which continues to reinforce the archetypal biological binary. When gender has been used as a factor in this research - a rather common practice - means of ascertaining the gender status of participants have rarely been described. From a binary perspective, however, gender differences have been found to exert influence over research data within the following contexts: language use/interaction style, access to power, instructor interaction, and social demands/constraints.

Several recent studies and reviews have examined the interaction of gender and language use in online environments (Fahy, 2002; Ferreday, Hodgson, & Jones, 2006; Gouthro, 2004; Guiller & Durndell, 2006; Graddy, 2006; Herring, 2000; Herring, 2001; Herring & Paolillo, 2006). These studies have applied principles learned from face-to-face communications between men and women as well as theoretical work on identity development. The presupposition that female language use is epistolary and male language use is expository represents the trend in hypothesizing gendered behavior extended to online environments. Table 2.1 lists the predominant characteristics of epistolary (female) and expository (male) language as found in the online teaching and learning literature.

Table 2.1

Summary of the Characteristics of Male and Female Language Use

	Characteristic	***Reference***
Male (expository)	Adversarial, self-promoting, contentious	Herring (2000) (2001)
	assertive, informational, direct	Graddy (2006)
	authoritative, strong assertions and presuppositions, rhetorical questions, sarcasm, humor	Guiller & Durndell (2006)
Female (epistolary)	Qualifying, apologetic, sympathetic, polite, sharing	Herring (2000) (2001)
	Interpersonal connections	Graddy (2006); Gouthro (2004)
	Attenuated (qualifiers, personal opinion), compliments, emotional references, self-disclosure	Guiller & Durndell (2006)

Whereas the stereotyped characteristics of epistolary and expository language have been detected within unisex groups in asynchronous online contexts (Herring, 2000, 2001), moderated communication of mixed sex teams reveals little, if any, significant difference between the language choices of males and females (Fahy, 2002; Graddy, 2006). In Graddy's (2006) study, participants were observed in two types of conversational situations online: moderated discussion and team interaction. Moderated discussions are characterized by instructor interaction where the instructor initiates communication with the interjection of pertinent, sometimes contentious, questions or remarks. Students in Graddy's study, following such a contentious prompt, were asked to "defend their proposed solutions…and respond to the queries

and criticisms of the other students" (p. 215). This imposed conversational structure (QUESTION > RESPONSE > CRITIQUE) upon mixed sex groups detracts somewhat from the freedom of participants to produce natural language patterns coinciding with traditionally accepted behavioral norms. The literature suggests that the differences between natural language use and language use in moderated communication is dependent on context and group composition.

As in moderated discussions, participants working in team or group contexts also provide data inconsistent with expectations of gendered language use. Specifically, women, when working in teams with men, tend to shed many of the attenuated features of female discourse in favor of a more expository style. In doing so, women modify their behavior through a process of *self-categorization* where their "self-conceptions may shift from idiosyncratic to shared identity as team members" (Graddy, 2006, p. 223). While self-categorization is not exclusive to female-only groups, the attachment of one's self to a shared identity can be an invaluable part of situating one's self within a broader social context which can reduce the negative impact of marginalization. For women, this represents an ability to adapt to contexts requiring task accomplishment by employing language that is more assertive and less apologetic, linguistic characteristics placing them on an even playing field with male counterparts. This phenomenon is consistent with other research indicating that gender-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is subject to strong contextual influence, most notably "the gender of the person or persons to whom the individual is communicating" (Savicki & Kelley, 2000, p. 823). This, in combination with group composition, serves to sculpt trends in interaction patterns as Savicki and Kelley (2000) reported in a meta-review of four studies they conducted to examine interactions between gender and group composition in CMC. However, Savicki and Kelley

concluded their paper with a caution that researchers and practitioners should not assume stereotypic communications among men and women communicating online because of significant within group variance.

Group composition in online and computer-mediated communication can lead to many issues not easily observed due to the distributed nature of interaction. This observational difficulty, however, should not be allowed to undermine efforts to provide both men and women with equal access to learning. Online instructors hoping to appreciate the needs of all learners regardless of gender should recognize that "power issues may not be as apparent in the distance classroom since the students are not as visible" (Gouthro, 2004, p. 452). Gouthro (2004) reminds us that all education serves a purpose and impacts people at all levels of its design and implementation. Instructors must therefore be aware of the variation in access to power of students.

An awareness of historical social and/or cultural restraints placed upon particular marginalized groups is one area in which instructors can bring awareness. As indicated by Gouthro (2004), "women's educational experiences are frequently influenced by problems and demands in their personal lives" (p. 455). A clear example of this need was highlighted by Ferreday et al. (2006) in a case study examining the ways power operates within communicative events in learning contexts. The participants in their study underwent interviews in which gender was not an issue introduced by the researchers. It was noted that when participants mentioned the issue, it was "usually in response to particular situations where men outnumbered women or vice versa" (Ferreday et al., 2006, p. 230), perhaps indicating perceptions of minority status/positionality within group compositions where the opposite sex occupied a clear numeric majority.

Other studies exploring the affect of gender on learning in online environments also depend on results obtained from participant samples with unbalanced gender distributions. Rovai and Baker (2005) used quantitative methods to observe differences between males and females with respect to social community, learning community, and perceived learning. They found that female students felt more connected to other students and perceived greater learning outcomes than males. Although this study provided self-report of gender via an online survey, female participants (n=162) outnumbered males (n=31) more than five to one. The authors note the sample population represents that of K-12 educators; however, it would be difficult to generalize the study's findings due to the gender imbalance.

In reporting that gender was a factor in the relationship between learning style and student engagement in online educational contexts, Garland and Martin (2005) also analyzed findings from a sample containing gender imbalance. Females (n=102) greatly outnumbered males (n=66). Additionally, gender was not self-reported, but obtained from university records.

Unlike Rovai and Baker (2005) and Garland and Martin (2005), Chyung (2007) reported findings from a majority male (n=44) sample (female (n=37)). Although the gender distribution was significantly more balanced than that of other studies, Chyung's study is the only one reviewed for this chapter having a male majority. As with Rovai and Baker's study, this may be due to the nature of the academic program (Instructional Technology). It is possible the program traditionally attracts more male than female students. Chyung's findings, like those of Rovai and Baker (2005) also suggest higher levels of engagement and perceived learning achievement for female students despite the male majority.

Research on gender-based communication in online environments is also not free from the burden of methodological constraints. In a recent study examining the relationship between

interaction styles and gender among undergraduate students in online class discussion groups, Guiller and Durndell (2006) sought to "resolve some of the methodological problems inherent in other studies by incorporating the *reliable inference of gender*" and "use of real-life mixed-gender groups…" (p. 372, emphasis added). Guiller and Durndell's study looked at language interaction styles within the online communications of 148 female and forty-nine male students in undergraduate Psychology courses. These communications were part of optional course modules conducted over four semesters and containing subgroups in which students discussed topics related to course content. All groups, excluding one, contained sizeable female majorities. Guiller and Durndell found that females were more likely than males to express agreement. Males were more likely to use authoritative language and disagree with others.

Of primary concern to a valid interpretation of Guiller and Durndell's data is the composition of the study's 'mixed-sex' groups (only one with a male majority). Without a more even distribution of gender, however ascertained, any claims that language use is most appropriately associated with gender are at best tenuous. Although many studies in education employ convenience sampling, a more purposive design of research is indispensable if one seeks to give voice to silenced groups. Furthermore, in a study where the concept of gender is not problematized, as described above, any outlying data from the majority group is not likely to be examined for its significance. This is the case with Guiller and Durndell's study that, through the aid of qualitative data analysis software, quantified the factors of gender and interaction style.

The studies mentioned in this section demonstrate the influence of gender over course interactions and learner satisfaction. Perceived differences in power between males and females are influential and especially influential in mixed group scenarios. Research reveals that females

feel more connected to other students and therefore exhibit interaction styles more open to input from others. Males use authoritative language and are more likely to disagree with others.

To summarize the above studies exploring the effect of gender in online learning, it is best to restate the primary methodological shortcoming shared by all of them with the possible exception of Chyung (2007). Participant samples within the majority of studies represent a lack of equal distribution with respect to gender. Furthermore, gender is not defined in these studies and is rarely obtained through self-report. Any generalizations of findings to broader contexts must be regarded with caution. In order for future research on this issue to firmly assert findings and ideas, it is imperative that more purposeful sampling procedures be employed leading to gender-balanced samples.

Sexual Orientation

One thing that stood out to me as I reviewed the literature is that there is very little, if any, discussion of sexual orientation. Why is the research literature virtually silent on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues in online learning? Are we to assume that such issues do not exist or are not sufficiently relevant to inquiries of knowledge and truth in online learning contexts? How do we know contemporary practice in online learning meets the needs of LGBTQ learners? I believe these questions shall not be answered until scholars and practitioners recognize the exercise of power within online contexts. With respect to LGBTQ learners in online contexts, power is predominantly evidenced by silence.

Recognition of power has been slow to evolve due to the distributed nature of online learning. "Power issues may not be as apparent in the distance classroom since the students are not as visible" (Gouthro, 2004, p. 452). Foucault told us that power "…is a relation between different individuals and groups and only exists when it is being exercised" (O'Farrell, 2005, p.

99). Certainly, communications within online learning contexts are relational in the sense implied by Foucault (see also Bakhtin, 1986). This means these communications are subject to the constraints of perceived power. For example, some students may be reluctant to make comments that could be seen as challenging to the authority of the instructor. It can be proposed, therefore, that power can, and is indeed likely to, exist in online learning environments.

Silence reinforces the perception that non-normative sexualities are "taboo" or "inappropriate" (Alexander & Banks, 2004). This is a contributing factor in the decision of many students and faculty to not 'come out' within the educational environment. Many of these concerns were discussed in a recent survey study by Holley and Steiner (2005) in which students were asked to describe their experiences in social work courses and list why they were considered to be safe or unsafe. Unsafe classroom experiences were characterized by instructors who were "critical of or chastised students, were biased, opinionated, or judgmental; and refused to consider others' opinions" (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 57). Fear, worry, intimidation, little or no confidence, and vulnerability contributed to low student participation in unsafe courses. Students may also remain silent within unsafe contexts because they "place most of the responsibility for classroom environment on instructors, and may not be aware of their roles and responsibilities in creating or hindering the development of safe spaces" (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 59).

Disability

As this chapter examines how online and distance learning technologies may hinder or promote more equal access to all learners in a variety of ways, the needs of disabled learners must not be overlooked. Equal accessibility for disabled learners is the right thing to do and is required by federal law as prescribed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

codified at 20 U.S.C. [United States Code] § 1400 (Foley & Regan, 2002; Hong Lin, 2007). Designers of online courses should be aware of potential disability issues because many students with both physical and cognitive impairments drop out of online classes when they are unable to locate or take advantage of appropriate support (Grabinger, Aplin, & Ponnapp-Brenner, 2008; Ito, 2004; Silva, 2004).

Difficulties in obtaining support are often caused by not being able to access support at the physical site of the institution or the unavoidable necessity of disclosing one's disability in order to take advantage of available support (Grabinger et al., 2008). Because of this, Grabinger et al. (2008) have suggested that "accommodations for those with disabilities must be located *within the instruction* rather than placing on students the onus of finding support outside of the course environment" (p. 64, emphasis in the original). Grabinger et al. (2008) also recommend a universal design for learning that "promotes the use of digital tools to improve differentiation" (p. 67). This call for an attention to difference stems from the traditional labeling of students as either "normal" or "disabled," leading instructors to teach all students with the same methods, predominantly lecture via voice or text (Grabinger et al., 2008).

A recent ethnographic study by Raskind, Margalit, and Higgins (2006) of users of "a public website designed for children with learning and attention problems" (p. 254) provided insight into how the Internet may be employed to attend to the needs of children (and likely adults) who have one or more learning disabilities (LD). To find participants for their study, Raskind et al. utilized the messaging and chat features of a pre-existing website. Using an electronic key word search, they selected participants who had self-identified as LD. Through an analysis of emails between participants, they found that "participation in virtual communities may provide children the opportunity to explore and accentuate their strengths, abilities and

special talents, removed from the real world that often places a greater emphasis on deficits" (Raskind et al., 2006, pp. 265-266). Data were interpreted as implicating a desire to self-disclose LD status and adhere to a group identity. Whereas this insight is certainly useful to designers of online educational materials, it should be noted that Raskind et al. (2006) conducted their research under the assumption that the website constituted a safe environment for their participants. In order to safeguard privacy, instructors may wish to control access to online resources specifically targeted at LD learners.

More recently, Badge, Dawson, Cann, and Scott (2008) moved beyond observations of Internet chats and emails to empirically examine difficulties LD learners might have with access to online learning tools designed with specific software applications. Conducting usability tests with lessons constructed with Flash, Adobe Presenter, and Impatica, Badge et al. found that the disability test group took advantage of more features (e.g.,, buttons, tabs) than did a non-LD control group. Despite this finding, there was no significant difference between content assessment scores, exercise completion times, or use of search tools (Badge et al., 2008).

To seek an understanding of Badge et al.'s (2008) findings, we must consider the nature of educational tasks in online contexts as they relate to known learning needs of LD students. Igo et al. (2006) reminded us that LD students have difficulty processing text in general. In a comparative analysis of online note taking (typing) and copy/paste, Igo et al. found that learning outcomes were a function of both note taking technique and type of assessment derived from the notes' content. For example, "multiple-choice performances were significantly higher for topics that were noted by pasting than for topics that were noted by writing and typing" (Igo, Riccomini, Bruning, & Pope, 2006, p. 95). In other words, Igo et al. found that the processing of text is facilitated by copy/paste where related assessment exercises present similar or identical

text patterns. This process, known as transfer-appropriate processing (Igo et al., 2006), is, however, traditionally regarded as weak learning. This type of weak learning was also found when students applied typed or written notes that were taken verbatim from source materials (Igo et al., 2006). One would expect, therefore, that LD students should type notes in their own words; however, "in short, in the rare cases where students chose to take paraphrase notes, their attempts seemed to come at the expense of note quality. That is, they built notes inferior to those that contained verbatim text ideas" (Igo et al., p. 96).

The above-mentioned studies present more questions than answers concerning the design of online learning for disabled learners; however, certain principles can be gleaned from their findings. Online spaces can indeed be useful for disabled learners as spaces for communicating their life experiences with their peers (Raskind et al., 2006). To associate this communicative predisposition with more intentional learning, instructional designers need to employ development tools with multiple and diverse features (Badge et al., 2008) in ways that integrate assessment format with the presentation structure of content (Igo et al., 2006). Recognizing that disabled learners already enjoy social presence on the Internet, instructional designers may also wish to focus on learner-centered, flexible delivery of content.

Age

Age is little discussed in research on online learning, yet shares the potential with other group identifying characteristics (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation) for creating marginalized groups. Often, when we hear that members of a particular group experience challenges to online learning, we tend to think, in deficit terms, that the entire group may lack the capacity to excel in online education as contemporarily designed. As Githens (2007) points out, "It is common to attribute negative traits to group membership (e.g., based on age, race, gender,

disability, sexuality) rather than individual differences" (p. 331). These negative stereotypes, however, can have the undesirable effect of altering one's performance in online educational environments (Githens, 2007).

There are several factors associated with age that can cause older learners to require special considerations in the design of online learning. As an example, sensory changes such as vision or hearing problems may lead to difficulties in interpreting online materials. Videos may be too difficult to see; audio may not be sufficiently loud (Hale, 1990). These challenges can seem to 'younger' instructors and researchers as supporting negative stereotypes about older learners. In turn, these learners may become hesitant to take full advantage of online resources out of fear of displaying low aptitude for learning or even memory loss (Hale, 1990). There are yet other obstacles to online learning that may impact older adults more than their young counterparts. Older adults may have become accustomed to traditional class differences, gender roles, or educational barriers which may impact reading level, technology skills, etc. (Githens, 2007).

Several design techniques are available to assist older learners experiencing sensory changes. Print-friendly versions of materials can be provided (Taylor, Rose, & Wiyono, 2004). Speech and audio can be slowed to a more comprehensible pace (VanBiervliet, 2004. Cited in Githens, 2007). Githens (2007) recommends asynchronous course delivery as a means of attending to at least some of these needs of older adult learners.

Githens (2007) also suggests that (video/computer) games and mobile devices may not be up to the task of providing older learners with support for interpersonal interaction and dialogue while meeting the challenges of sensory change. "…users of games are often forced to proceed rapidly, with less time for thought and contemplation" (Githens, 2007, p. 336). Games can also

require users to notice subtleties in the interface/game environment. These characteristics of most computer/video games would seem directly intended for much younger audiences, yet as research into games for learning becomes increasingly popular, it may be time to consider how to expand these tools to encompass a broader range of educational consumer.

In summary, older learners face several potential barriers to obtaining the maximum intended benefit of online courses. These barriers may be physical (e.g., slowed reaction time) or social/psychological (e.g., dependence on long-term habits). Online courses consisting of mixed age groups can, if not carefully designed and implemented, lead to negative stereotyping of older individuals, thereby potentially hampering their performance.

Implications for Practice

No two marginalized groups share identical histories or obstacles. There is, however, one common need that is palpable within online learning contexts and certainly within the capabilities of designers and practitioners. Every learner, regardless of group identification or affiliation, requires and deserves a safe space for learning defined as any environment in which individuals feel free and able to communicate and express ideas without fear of retribution, intimidation, marginalization, or silencing (Alexander & Banks, 2004; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Cosier & Sanders, 2007; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Ferreday et al., 2006; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Hylton, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Woodland, 1999; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007).

The research reviewed in this chapter reveals many recommendations for instructors designing online courses for multicultural learners. These recommendations can be categorized as applying to either the design phase or the implementation phase of instructional design. Within the design phase, instructors must be aware of the influence their own cultural identity has over course design. They must keep in mind that culture is the foundation of knowledge

construction (Baltes, 2010; Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Irvine & York, 1995; Liu et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2001; Morgan, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Reeder et al., 2004; Thomas, Mitchell, & Joseph, 2002) and will, therefore, necessarily influence the structure and content of any online course.

To alleviate the potential problems the instructor's own cultural positionality might impose, instructor beliefs and biases must be critically examined (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010) so that appropriate content, assignments, and flexibility geared toward promoting diversity and problematizing identity can be incorporated (Alexander & Banks, 2004). Throughout the implementation of the course, it is important for instructors to encourage open communication by providing varied assignments and offering multiple ways to communicate, including opportunities for anonymous contributions (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Graddy, 2006; McKee, 2004; Woodland, 1999). Additional recommendations are listed in Table 2.2, providing a summary of the literature on current best practices for creating online safe spaces, several of which have been more thoroughly described in the chapter.

Table 2.2

Summary of Best Practices for Online Safe Spaces

Phase in Instructional Design	***Practice***	***Reference***
Design Phase	-Define role as instructor.	Sales Ciges, 2001
	-Consider potential diversity during the design process.	Edmundson, 2007; Young, 2008
	-Acknowledge the existence of difference and potential accommodations such as flexibility in format and activities.	Collis, 1999; Cosier & Sanders, 2007; Henderson, 1996; Liu et al., 2010; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2009
	-Consider culture as the foundation of knowledge construction.	Baltes, 2010; Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Irvine & York, 1995; Liu et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2001; Morgan, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Reeder et al., 2004; Thomas, Mitchell, & Joseph, 2002
	-Remove potentially cultural barriers.	Liu et al., 2010
	-Instructor's critical reflection of beliefs and biases.	Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010
	-Introduce diversity texts and issues. -Investigate safe spaces of relevance online. -Problematize all aspects of identity. -Employ diversity literacy in teaching and research.	Alexander & Banks, 2004
	Practice	***Reference***
Implementation Phase	-Establish clear policies at course inception.	Li, 2009
	-Communicate cultural underpinnings of instructional approaches and allow student input.	Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010
	-Encourage students to engage with discussion topics over an extended period of time (particularly useful in synchronous environments).	McKee, 2004
	-Encourage students to ask questions of others -Value student contributions. -Avoid stereotypes	Sales Ciges, 2001
	-Provide opportunities for anonymous participation where possible.	DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Graddy, 2006; Woodland, 1999
	-Examine all text. -Require a certain number of student responses -encourage participation. -Review online discussions and facilitate if needed. -Make sure requirements are clear. -Have frequent and consistent interaction.	Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007; Zembylas, 2008

Summary

This chapter has highlighted issues concerning diversity and marginalization in online learning environments as well as examining those aspects of diversity most salient in the literature: culture, age, gender, disability, and sexual orientation. Whereas there are certainly other ways in which groups are marginalized, these represent an urgent need for new strategies in the design and implementation of online learning. It has been demonstrated that learners can be made to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome within the educational environment for various reasons resulting from traditional social and cultural behaviors and/or the inability of the educational environment to create a safe space for discussion and learning. The strategies presented are an important first step in moving beyond separatist educational techniques serving only those groups with power. Hopefully, awareness of diversity and marginalization in online learning contexts will continue to evolve within online learning research so as to envision and test new strategies for equalizing educational access.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructors of online learning conceptualize and employ the concepts of diversity and marginalization in the design and implementation of safe spaces in online courses. My work was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?
2. In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization affect the design and implementation of safe spaces in online learning?

This chapter outlines the methodology used for this study. It was important to design a study that would provide a wealth of data because of the inherent complexity of the constructs involved, especially diversity and marginalization. I chose to conduct interviews and employ qualitative methods of data analysis.

Participants

Two criteria were used for selecting participants: they must have had previous experience teaching and/or designing online courses which included marginalized learners and they had to have a minimum of five years experience in their respective fields. A recruitment email message (see Appendix A) was sent out to Instructional Technology faculty listservs at several universities in order to solicit participants. Ten participants were recruited over the span of six months. Most of the participants are faculty members in Instructional Technology departments; however, a few teach in other areas with either half or most of their teaching taking place online.

Non-IT participants were referred through snowball sampling by other participants. Participants were geographically distributed across much of the United States. Male participants (N=6) outnumbered female participants (N=4). Table 3.1 lists the pseudonyms of participants and their qualifying criteria for this study.

Table 3.1

Participant Data

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Years Teaching Online**	**Field of Study**	**Years in Field**
Angie	F	8	Instructional Tech.	15
Ben	M	10+	Instructional Tech.	10+
Brandon	M	8	Counseling	10+
Cheryl	F	6	Instructional Design	10+
David	M	10+	Instructional Tech.	15
Emily	F	6	Instructional Tech.	10+
Joan	F	10+	Family Counseling	20
John	M	11	Instructional Tech.	15
Mark	M	5+	Instructional Tech.	10+
Paul	M	5+	Counseling	20

Research Design

As I explored this topic in a way that sought to ascertain opinion, perspective, and experience, it was appropriate to employ a qualitative research design for this study. Qualitative research seeks to understand and describe the meaning of lived experience as it reflects the construction of reality through interaction with the social world (Merriam et al., 2002).

Although contemporary qualitative research is comprised of a number of methodological camps, each with its own specialized methods of inquiry (e.g., narrative analysis, critical ethnography, etc.), qualitative research as a family of inquiry approaches can be described as having five identifying features as presented by Bogdan and Biklen (2003).

1. *Naturalistic Inquiry*: this feature refers to those studies employing observation techniques and immersion within the natural setting of the phenomenon being observed.
2. *Descriptive Data*: unlike studies using statistical analysis, qualitative studies use words, not numbers, to describe meaning and experience.
3. *Concern with Process*: qualitative studies are not preoccupied with particular outcomes as much as understanding the process of the lived experience.
4. *Inductive Analysis*: qualitative research does not seek to test hypotheses; rather, meaning and understanding of experience emerge from data.
5. *Meaning Making*: of primary concern to qualitative studies is how the participants themselves make sense of their own experiences.

Qualitative research was relevant to this study because my goal was to understand faculty perceptions of the process by which they have come to hold their views and/or exercise particular practices. My task was to represent these perceptions and the relevant professional/personal experiences of participants through description of findings from an inductive analysis of the data. This task was complicated by the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic that was well served by careful questioning respectful of individual differences and opinions.

This study employed a basic, interpretive qualitative research design. Of relevance to the goals of this particular study was an understanding of how researchers and instructors perceive

their roles and obligations in the design and implementation of online courses with respect to safe spaces. Several specific data collection methods can be employed with this methodology, including interviews, surveys, focus groups, and participant observation. Interviews were selected as they provide a wealth of data leading to a comprehensive view of participant experience and an opportunity to relate this experience with rich, thick description.

Interviews

Ten participants took part in semi-structured interviews designed to collect their individual subjective 'meaning' of diversity issues in online learning and the design of online safe spaces for marginalized learners (see Appendix B for the interview protocol). Prior to the interviews, participants gave consent to participate (see Appendix C). Participants were informed of the requirements of the study and times were arranged for the interviews.

Given that participants were selected from various geographic locations, several interviews were conducted via telephone or Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP). Interested participants were given a list of VOIP resources from which to select. Certain VOIP tools are preferred due to their widespread availability, low cost (most often free), and digital audio recording functionality. Suggested options included:

- Skype
- Yahoo! Instant Messenger
- MSN Messenger
- AOL Instant Messenger

In this study, all participants elected to be contacted via telephone. Participant telephones were called from a Skype account in order to take advantage of Skype features for audio recording. Interviews, averaging 60 minutes, were recorded using Pamela, a Skype compatible digital audio

recorder. Digital audio files were stored on a password-protected USB storage device and destroyed immediately following transcription.

Data Analysis: Coding and Categorization

Grounded theory analysis techniques (e.g., constant comparison for coding and categorization) were used for analyzing the data for this study. Coding is employed by many qualitative researchers as a means of breaking apart empirical data in an effort to draw out patterns and theoretical concepts. Coding allowed me to "search through…data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics your data cover, and then write down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns." (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p. 173). These "words and phrases" (codes) can also be thought of as labels. A "label…simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). This aspect of encompassing *all* of the data is a central element of grounded theory coding (Strauss, 1987). As I attempted to account for all data, coding explained them and guided the collection of additional data (Charmaz, 2006). In essence, coding helped me to "define what is happening in the data…" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46).

Grounded theory advocates at least two coding phases: initial and focused (Charmaz, 2006). This provides multiple levels of analysis in which I was able to engage in the reduction and categorization of data, paving the way for eventual theoretical interpretation.

Initial (Open) Coding

Initial, or open, coding refers to my first systematic attempt to reduce or make sense of data. In taking this first approach to assigning labels to patterns and topics, I remained open to any number of theoretical possibilities in an effort to allow the data to speak for themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Initial coding is often conducted as a "…word by word, line by line analysis questioning the data in order to identify concepts and categories which can then be dimensionalized (broken apart further)" (Grbich, 2007, p. 74). Additionally, data may be analyzed by incident (a particular moment in the data that can constitute a unique segment of data for analysis), whole sentence, paragraph, or entire document (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Charmaz (2006) provides persuasive reasoning for employing line-by-line coding in stating that it "frees you from becoming so immersed in your respondents' worldviews that you accept them without question" (p. 51). Additionally, line-by-line coding "gives you leads to pursue" (Charmaz, 2006, p.53), providing guidance toward theoretical sampling.

For this study I decided upon the sentence or phrased response as the unit of analysis. This phase of analysis engaged me in an interrogatory exchange with the data. I asked questions such as: "What is this data a study of?" (Glaser, 1978); "From whose point of view are the data?" (Charmaz, 2006). A key aspect of this stage of analysis was the attempt to maintain distance between my subjectivities and the meaning of experience as presented in the data. One way to accomplish this was with "speed and spontaneity" (Charmaz, 2006). I moved quickly –though not rushed– through the data and identified topics and patterns as they appeared without excessive reflection that could have led to premature theoretical interpretation. Allowing the data to speak for themselves in this way served to 'ground' interpretations made during subsequent stages of analysis.

Grounding interpretations in the data can also be enhanced by the application of *in vivo* codes. These codes consist of actual words or phrases found within the data themselves. They allow me to "preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). Additionally, the use of action language such as gerunds – verb forms

of nouns – serves to emphasize processes in the lived experiences described by the data. This emphasis on process is taken from Glaser's (1978) explication of grounded theory principles. A focus on process illuminates the movement of participants' lives. This movement is considered a better representation of an ambulant and dynamic reality than the static representation of concrete substantive topics.

Focused Coding

Once the open/initial coding phase was "completed," I turned toward a focus on coding to reduce codes to emerging categories or concepts (Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2006). This process entailed the careful selection of codes which appeared to contain particular significance, be it to me, the research questions, or the data (and participants) themselves. This careful selection, which necessarily integrated discipline-specific subjectivities as well as my own, has been referred to as *selective coding* or *theoretical sampling* and traces its roots to early studies in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The purpose of focused coding is to strengthen codes and categories as they emerge and bridge the analytical, interpretive, and theoretical processes of qualitative inquiry. Initial codes are reconsidered and categories are verified against them. This enhanced the validity of my interpretations of the data. Although subjectivities cannot be avoided, focused coding allows me to assert that any and all interpretations depend upon the data and are not derived from pure conjecture.

The depth of focused coding involved in the analytic process depended on varying factors such as the nature of the research questions and my personal research style. Multiple layers of focus can serve to support axial coding (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) which delineates the dimensions and properties of a category (Charmaz, 2006). With axial coding, I

developed a category by linking it with subcategories and describing relationships between them. A continued focus on categories also directed me toward theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) in which I looked for relationships between categories in an effort to develop middle ground theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Beginning with coding and continuing for the duration of the analytic process, constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) provided me with opportunities to connect topics, patterns, and ideas with each other, as well as verify them against the data. Comparing codes and various data sets led to the formation of tentative categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2006). These tentative categories were then compared with each other, as well as with other codes from the data.

Coding "impels us to make our participants' language problematic to render an analysis of it. Coding should inspire us to examine hidden assumptions in our own use of language as well as that of our participants" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47). It is this emphasis on the language and meaning of data in conjunction with our own subjectivities that is at the heart of coding and categorization. Exercising this consideration as we code and constantly comparing our data is essential to asserting the validity of our interpretations (see Appendix D for a sample of codes).

Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

For this study, it was assumed that marginalization of learners is present in online environments as these environments too often mimic traditional classroom instruction, language, and culture where such marginalization is known to exist.

It was also assumed that researchers and practitioners of online learning are unaware of the specific needs of all types of learners with respect to diversity and potential marginalization.

This assumption was derived from the paucity of relevant research within Instructional Technology and online learning literature.

The greatest limitation of this study rests with its proposed data collection method. Interviews with professors and online course designers only shed light on one side of the story; however, the goal is to find out how diversity issues are (or are not) regularly addressed in online courses and related research. Future studies need to engage in direct and/or participant observation so as to examine textual data gleaned from faculty/student and student/student interactions. Additionally, this research area will benefit from in-depth interviews with marginalized students so as to further enrich our understanding of how diversity and marginalization influence the learning process.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructors of online learning conceptualize and employ the concepts of diversity and marginalization in the design and implementation of safe spaces in online courses. An analysis of the data revealed several significant categories aligned with this study's two research questions:

1. How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?
2. In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces in online learning?

Although common methods of presenting findings (i.e. charts, graphs, tables, etc.) were possible, an expository presentation style has been selected as most conducive to guiding the reader through a labyrinth of potentially misunderstood and deceptively disparate data. From its earliest stages, this study revealed that few instructors intentionally consider diversity in either the design or implementation of online courses. They do, however, believe in the effectiveness of awareness and open communication, leading them at times to unknowingly create, and even propagate, an educational environment welcoming of myriad diversity ideals. An expository presentation style connects the varied experiences of the participants as they relate to the topic under review. Results are presented by research question.

As stated in chapter 3, ten participants responded to a call for interviews. All interviews were conducted using Skype calling to participants' phones. Skype was used in order to facilitate audio recording with its partnering software, Pamela.

Research Question One: How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?

Defining Diversity

Across the data, the term "diversity" is defined by participants in varied ways unique to each one's own experience; however, common among all definitions is the concept of *difference*. For this study, therefore, diversity is broadly defined as difference from a perceived norm or norms. Although a singular definition drawn from participant accounts cannot be said to be generalizable, such a definition can be conceptualized for the purposes of examining the results of the present study. Moreover, this definition highlights a key factor common to all stages of both the design and implementation of online learning.

Difference is palpable in participant responses when asked to describe one's understanding of the term 'diversity'.

> "I think about it in a number of ways. I think about cultural diversity. I think about diversity of ideas. I think about diversity of experience. When I think of diversity, I think of it as *difference*. Those *differences* that people have" (Mark, emphasis added).

Mark's concept of diversity is not unique. It is representative of an archetypal response reflecting a broad, if not full, array of perspectives both tolerating and accepting of others. Also not unlike the responses of fellow participants, Mark's statement on diversity supports its broad-reaching scope with several concrete, foundational exemplars of difference as manifested in certain individuals or groups (e.g., culture, ideas, experience). Such is also the case with Paul.

> "The old thing *about everybody being the same just does not hold up*; so, when I construct the term diversity...I don't construct that in nearly the ethnic or gender or any of the usual categorical terms" (Paul, emphasis added).

Paul's response, however, differs in that foundational "categorical terms" are presented as negative examples. Ethnicity and gender, and other unspecified categories, appear to represent a break from tradition, an intentional distancing from an "old thing" not constructed in "nearly" the same fashion as Mark's current views with respect to diversity. Mark portrays himself as an outsider to the longstanding notion that individuals are "the same." Angie appears to share Mark's experience of adopting modified views.

> "I used to think of gender or race issues...maybe gay and lesbian issues, but now I also think diversity in perspective and opinion, so it's pretty broad...not just culture, race, gender, gay and lesbian issues, but all of it. Also even just diversity in opinion or perspective. For me, that works in terms of teaching, so it's pretty broad" (Angie, 28-34).

Angie speaks of "perspective and opinion" as contributing factors to her contemporary views, supplying the more particular terms of "culture, race, gender, gay and lesbian" as representative of a more constrained historic point of view. Unlike Mark, however, Angie's response claims the past perspective as her own, eliminating the possibility of an exclusive reference to a witnessed history of her academic field. Expressing herself in the first person, she reveals a personal transition to a broader conception of diversity, whereas Mark seems to both begin and complete his response with an unambiguous delineation of the separation between himself and any academic or professional tradition.

With respect to identifying what is considered in conceptualizing diversity, Paul and Angie imply change over time. Paul refers to similitude as an "old thing." While separating himself from this view, he also indicates his perception that there has perhaps been a shift in what is considered diverse. Providing a clue to a multistage shift is his use of categorical terms. Invoking ethnicity and gender - in much the same way Angie began her definition with gender

and race - implies an historical focus within academic discourse on the nature of learners. This discourse would appear to have been labored with efforts to classify learners within a carefully crafted nomenclature of difference. Historically, each learner was placed within a narrow category in accordance with "perceived" outward appearance: sexual orientation, race, culture, gender, ethnicity, etc. Although the data do not support further musings on the origins or nature of this historic classification, it is not without merit to speculate that such classification may have influenced how participants conceptualized students in the past. Furthermore, as these categories surfaced within an initial definition of diversity for many, if not most, participants, it can be argued that a broad separation, or move toward separation, from the stated categories is either recent or still very much at the forefront of thinking about student diversity in online contexts.

It can be posited that contemporary conceptions of diversity refuse to wholeheartedly embrace the all too convenient categorizations of the recent past. Mark's and Angie's responses indicate thinking in broader terms that appear, on their face, to utilize the more flexible concept of difference. With a broader paradigm, participants may become more aware of diversity as it imports on specific students within a specific course. Such is the case with Joan.

> "When I think of diversity, the first thing that comes to my mind are *different* demographics, and probably the main ones that people would use to define their own sense of identity that would vary from person to person" (Joan, emphasis added).

At first glance, one might jump to the immediate conclusion that, like Angie and Paul, Joan references the category-based classification of race, gender, culture, etc. Such an initial conclusion might seem supported by key terms such as "demographics" or "the main ones." Certainly, Joan draws upon her knowledge of this classification; however, Joan departs greatly from her co-participants in suggesting that students "define their own sense of identity."

Of significance to Joan's conceptualization of diversity is the category of online student identity. Joan establishes a clear framework for the self-disclosure of student demographic information.

Joan appears to recognize the potential for a plethora of diverse groups within her online courses. It is perhaps this recognition which leads her to openly and pluralistically define diversity as "different demographics," self-defined and subject to great individual variation. Her non-imposing view that demographics are derived from student disclosure is further encapsulated within her expanded schema of diversity.

> "...probably the main ones that people would use to define their own sense of identity that would vary from person to person. It may be religion, it may be gender, it may be ethnicity or sexuality, able-ism, or age, family status, whatever that might be" (Joan).

In addition to these initial considerations, Joan points out early on that she perceives differences in her awareness of diversity between face-to-face and online courses. "...in a face-to-face class, diversity often times is defined by what you can see about the person" (Joan). The context of online courses, however, often supplies significant levels of anonymity for students given the frequently lacking presence of visual cues with which to identify student demographics. In this context, "diversity takes on a broader meaning" (Joan). This 'broader meaning', in Joan's view, includes a larger set of possible diversity characteristics including language proficiency, physical ability, and geographic distance.

Of note in Joan's broadened conceptualization of diversity in online courses is her repeated conviction that student demographics should be self-defined. Although certain basic demographic data are available to her through course rolls, the majority of what Joan knows

about her students comes from introductory activities she weaves into the design of all her online courses. "...a week that's dedicated to having them introduce themselves...I ask them to post an introduction" (Joan). The introductory assignment is common in online learning and is believed to support a learning environment encouraging of all learners (Sales Ciges, 2001). Here, Joan opens her courses to student input and content. From the beginning, Joan's courses establish an acceptance of student thoughts and ideas. This is perhaps beneficial to Joan's students who, according to her interview, are predominantly American and therefore accustomed to a western style of teaching which is at times collaborative (see chapter 2). This introductory assignment, in Joan's view, is intended to elicit such collaboration through student participation.

Defining Marginalization

Based on the data, the term "marginalization" could be most accurately described as *exclusion*. The data provide examples of exclusion as well as attempt to qualify its significance with respect to online learning.

> "I define it (marginalization) as people who are, for whatever reason, not given the same opportunities or not valued in ways that others are. Sometimes I actually think about it kind of concretely in my mind, kind of abstract, I sometimes think about it as someone that is on a piece of paper, they're not quite in the text. They're out on the other side of the red lines on a piece of notebook paper. They just can't quite make it into main conversations - the main text- the main body of the literature" (Mark).

Mark outlines his mental schema for marginalization as a line drawn on paper. Anything beyond the line is not part of the primary, textual space. Someone who is marginalized, therefore, would seem to exist in a space separate from the majority, both seeing and being seen with little, if any, interaction between the two.

The concept of exclusion in Mark's definition appears to imply an apparent effort on the part of the marginalized to interact with or perhaps become part of the dominant group. "They just can't quite make it into main conversations" (Mark). The word "quite" implies that the marginalized group does, in fact, exercise some expression or influence within the dominant narrative; however, the extent of such influence falls short of becoming an equalizing force. Potential explanations for this shortcoming may be found by examining the reasons marginalization exists and the extant circumstances that seem to sustain it.

Paul provides a view of marginalization as the result of social interaction influenced by perceptions of diversity.

> "(marginalization) comes from a social construction that a particular form of diversity is undesirable or less desirable. The socially constructed response to that difference becomes a harmful force that harms both the one who does the marginalizing as well as the one who gets marginalized" (Paul).

From this definition, members of the majority socially interact and commonly identify one or more attributes of underrepresented individuals or groups that render underrepresented members "less desirable." These attributes appear to be selected because they elicit negative affective responses, they are not considered acceptable attributes by the majority. As a result, according to Paul, harm ensues. This harm, to both the majority and those underrepresented, manifests itself in the separation of the two.

David's definition is similar. "Marginalization is, not to put too fine a point on it, when someone doesn't fit in for whatever reason. If they are different in such a way that others choose to exclude them" (David). David's assertion is that the separation between the majority and the underrepresented results from an exclusionary action on the part of the majority. Other

participants, however, suppose the possibility that underrepresented members may at times self-exclude. “I think we have a tendency to align ourselves with people most similar to us” (Ben). Once within a group, however, individuals are not forever bound to their initial associations as Ben further suggests.

> "I think marginalization is a fluid concept. I mean, I think it is very contextual. Someone can be marginalized in one context, but not in another. They can also move into the role of marginalizing others. I think we have a tendency to align ourselves with people most similar to us. It's unfortunate, but often times we take this to the extreme. We think that the only way to protect the integrity of our small groups or communities is to forcefully keep out everybody else. This happens everywhere in society...education is no different…except with education we're talking many times about a system that marginalizes individuals. As educators designing instruction for individuals, we have to ask ourselves if and how we want to be part of the solution" (Ben).

Ben's concept of fluid marginalization poses several pragmatic obstacles facing online instructors. First, if individuals are free to, and in fact do, move between positions of marginalization and oppression, how do instructional designers or instructors decide upon whose perspective should be used when designing and/or implementing instruction? Should this fluctuate over time as roles shift? How, if at all, can instructors plan for such fluctuations in advance? Can regarding a student as "oppressed" cloud an instructor's judgment such that s/he does not recognize role shifts in time to prevent future acts of marginalization? Ben offers a possible first step to responding to these concerns by indicating instructors must first demonstrate a concern for addressing instances of marginalization.

A possible second step is to identify when and where marginalization might occur within online learning. Angie provided insight into how this could be accomplished. "I think the instructor always has to be aware of what is going on. You have to look at the discussion boards, read the postings. You have to know who is not sharing. It might be that some students feel they can't and you would definitely want to know that" (Angie). Here, Angie states that instructor awareness can lead to identifying instances of marginalization.

Angie also speaks of fluid, changing marginalization. "...it's always situational...so I tend to think of it as whoever feels like an outsider" (Angie). "...whoever feels like an outsider" (Angie) requires that marginalization be identified, at the moment of the marginalizing act, from the perspective of the person feeling excluded or marginalized. Identifying marginalization from the perspective of the person being marginalized would seem to alleviate, if not eliminate, several obstacles created by the fluidity of marginalization. If, for instance, an instructor focuses solely on interactions (communication and behavior) within the online context, it may be possible to identify role shift and increase professional distance from individual students, freeing the mind to attend to offending actions rather than preconceived notions or stereotypes. Marginalizing actions may also highlight areas or practices which may be modified in order to prevent such future actions. Of course, some obstacles remain. Most noteworthy is that of access.

"As an online teacher, I think of marginalization as having to do with accessibility to the educational environment and experience" (Joan). Joan's concept of marginalization is rather targeted to issues surrounding access. Joan did not define "access". It is possible she refers singularly to technological access; however, access may also be denied to individuals who cannot participate for a plethora of reasons including emotional, physical, mental, etc.

(Grabinger, Aplin, & Ponnapp-Brenner, 2008; Ito, 2004; Silva, 2004). Without delving into instruction 'in the moment', Joan draws attention to the striking fact that the act of *attempting* to take part in online learning may bring certain individuals face-to-face with varied and exclusionary circumstances.

Angie echoes the importance of access as a site of marginalization.

> "... In reality it's also an access issue, access to power, access to information ...so you could feel like an outsider and not really be and you could also feel like an insider and you're, for whatever reason -- race, gender, gay/lesbian issues, whatever - you could be someone who's left out of power loops..and that's actually more important, so I think of it as personal...people feeling like outsiders but to me, it's a lot more important to think of people left out of access to resources or power or information" (Angie).

Angie's perspective depicts marginalization as a relative, and perhaps at times *temporary*, condition defined by one's interactions, potentially limited in number and scope by varying degrees of access to social and/or technological systems. What counts as marginalization, therefore, is "personal" and dynamic.

In summary, the above findings show that participants share a common conceptualization of diversity as difference. Marginalization is a state of exclusion, self-selected or imposed by others, resulting from this difference. The following section presents findings demonstrating how these perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of online courses.

Research Question Two: In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces in online learning?

Getting to Know Students Online

What do instructors of online learning know about their students in terms of demographics and diversity? How, if at all, has online learning, wherein students are invisible to a degree not found in face-to-face settings, changed the nature of academic interaction? Is it even necessary to consider demographics and their potential import to interaction in the design of online learning environments? The data for this study suggest such information can indeed be useful, but must be cautiously solicited and used primarily for the purposes of interpreting student work and communication. Demographic data are used by participants as a reference to promote instructor awareness of difference holistically within a specific online course. This information can, and should, also be used to plan for diversity in the design of future courses.

Participants in this study obtained demographic information about their students in various ways, although much, if not most, of this information was indirectly given. The most common way of learning about students is via the use of introductory assignments at the beginning of a course. These assignments are often meant to be 'icebreakers' aimed at encouraging interaction thought to be a pre-requisite for successful course communication. Joan, for example, invites students to write stories describing their prior experience with the subject matter. "…stories... they definitely tell a lot about who they are, and all different kinds of diversity, and experiences they've had with marginalization in other areas of their life as well" (Joan).

In Joan's case, the course subject matter is that of a 'helping profession', Counseling, and lends itself readily to discussion of diversity issues; however, she contends students share any

personal information freely." the students can decide whether to answer. Sometimes they share very, very, personal stories" (Joan). Perhaps it is Joan's experience in the counseling profession that predisposes her to encourage, rather than require, her students to provide certain information. If so, this predisposition is also exhibited in her attitude toward empowering students to control for themselves any personal disclosures as illustrated in the following quote:

> "...a week that's dedicated to having them introduce themselves, and share what they want to get out of the class and what they feel like they are bringing to the learning environment as well, and so I ask them to post an introduction, and I post mine after theirs, to kind of encourage them to share whatever they feel like, instead of just emulating my introduction, and they do have a rubric with some ideas, but they can disclose, you know, whatever, they feel comfortable with, I invite them to share a picture if they feel comfortable, um, none of them have so far. But some of them do come in on camera. Some of the different things they can list are family status, ethnicity, different things like that, they can list those things if they want to, if they want the other students to know them on that level, but none of those elements is required, and then I do a really full listing about myself afterwards, and try to include anything that any of the students included about themselves. So that's how they can know a little about each other, but they have a level of control over that...that you might not have in a face to face environment, because no one will see them, necessarily" (Joan).

It can be inferred from Joan's comments that there is some necessity for this 'encouragement' - a careful and tactful solicitation of personal demographic information- as a result of the online environment. She highlights a primary distinction between this environment and face-to-face

courses: "no one will see them". The element of invisibility, or lack of visual cues, is repeated frequently by participants. Whereas some hail it as positive, encouraging increased student communication, many others warn of the dangers of invisibility for instructors.

> “Very often the students will choose for whatever reason to not turn on their cameras, so I may not be aware of what my students look like..and for me that is a positive thing because it means that I have to take them seriously and because some of the usual socially conditioned cues are missing I can't respond to them as one of "those" because I don't know. That is a positive, but the downside is because some of those cues are missing...it's very easy if you are not careful to assume "everybody is just like me", (Paul).

> "...because we don't see each other, we don't know each other's background as well, then perhaps an appreciation for diversity is not there" (Mark).

Paul and Mark's comments imply the lack of visual cues can create a scenario where diversity goes unnoticed. In this case, instructors clearly risk making assumptions that students are similar, not only to each other, but to the instructor as well, leading to an absence of "appreciation" for presumably valuable student difference. The data show that instructors are aware of invisibility or ambiguity and desire ways to successfully work with it in the design and implementation of instruction.

> "...some training in how to deal with ambiguity of who you're interacting with. Is this a male? Is this a female? Is this a middle-aged person? Is this a young person? Is this an elderly person? Is this a Caucasian person? Is this an African American person? A Hispanic person? An Asian person? What's the socio-economic status of this person?

> What are the physical challenges? That stuff's really blurred and maybe there ought to be more training in how to deal with that ambiguity and helping people to clarify, you know, is it more useful for you within your teaching style to keep this ambiguous or do you want to take steps to clarify?" (Mark).

This concern over a lack of preparation for dealing with ambiguity online is common across the data. David shares Mark's call for more training of faculty with respect to ambiguity to teach online courses.

> "I think it is certainly time for us...the academy, to own up to the challenges we all face teaching online classes. For years there have been those folks who pushed heavily for increased use of online learning...and I think that's a good thing, but we simply are not succeeding at the rates predicted. Many of our online students either don't complete, or fail to succeed at, their online classes. I know there are different reasons for that, but perhaps one large reason is that we don't know all we should about these mysterious students we hardly know anything about. Maybe it's time to look at ways of changing that and learning how we can better prepare both our students and our instructors to do better in the online environment" (David).

Ben calls for training as well; however, he cautions against perceiving ambiguity as innately negative.

> "You know, we talk about this from time to time in our department meetings...how we wonder if our online courses are as effective as our face-to-face classes. I get the impression that many people don't think so, but I wonder if maybe we haven't developed an accurate way of evaluating online classes. For one thing, we talk about not knowing what our students look like all the time...or what facial expressions they're making...or

> what body language they use. I think there is a lot of value in the 'unknown' student. I believe I have had students who were genuinely more engaged with a course specifically because it was online. Usually no one sees what they look like, so maybe they feel more confident that their voices will be heard. And you know what, I'm not so sure that, as the instructor, that I even need to know any of those things. It kind of frees me up to focus on the content of the course" (Ben).

The most common way of creating abstract student identity is through making conjecture about student educational needs based on the limited amount of demographic data at the instructor's disposal. For example, Cheryl introduces the issue of language and how students may be perceived based on writing style and ability.

> "...I never know how to perfectly phrase various aspects of the lesson...especially in synchronous format...because I don't know that much about them. I mean, about the only thing I assume is that they should all have some working knowledge of English by virtue of being accepted to the program! But obviously even language ability...writing stands out most of all...is *not* the same for everybody. For example, how do I know that it's necessarily a girl writing the more 'flowery', polite language? I don't! And if it's a boy, does that tell me anything about him? So...I kind of try to make the best of it. I guess that means that lots of times I end of doing what I would do face-to-face, but maybe that's what I should be doing. I always learned a lot from my face-to-face classes, so I think it's probably a good thing to make use of all your experiences as best you can" (Cheryl).

The first assumption Cheryl makes with respect to language is that her students should all possess minimal communicative skills in English. She implies this minimal level should be sufficient for communication in her online classes. She also states her belief that her academic

program bears gate keeping responsibilities for assessing English language skills. She follows this statement with questions treating the relationship between writing/language styles and gender. Here, she draws upon the experience of, at least, perceiving that certain types of language utterances may be used more commonly by males than females or vice versa. She clearly cautions this cannot be assumed true for all students. When she finds she cannot rely on such instinctual assumptions, her recourse is to adapt her previous methods of teaching face-to-face courses to the online environment.

Cheryl is not alone in questioning the use of language by students online. Brandon speaks of it as well with respect to limited English proficient students.

> "...and then there's the language issue. Obviously, I want all my students to do well, but, as a professor, I do sometimes get tired of essentially tutoring students in English. I have a student now like that. This young man, I think, is Asian based on his name. I have a lot of trouble making sense of his postings on the discussion board sometimes and several times I've just had to privately email him and ask him to clarify what he was trying to say. That's strange to me because my Asian students have generally been much better with English in the past" (Brandon).

Regardless of whether it is correct to associate one student with others based solely on race, Brandon uses his conceptualization of Asian students drawn from past experience to assess the young man's performance.

Brandon makes two important points with these comments. First, writing ability has the potential to negatively impact communication within an online course. If students are not visible to the instructor, the instructor does not have the luxury of evaluating student comments alongside body language and, where online communication is primarily text based, vocal tone

and intonation. Without these non-text cues Brandon explains that communication between instructor and student can completely break down, requiring the instructor to explicitly seek clarification.

Brandon's second point concerns the student's race. He believes the student is Asian; he also believes the student is male. Brandon makes what he now determines to be a false comparison between the current student and Asian students he has taught in the past. Because of this, Brandon assesses the student's performance (in writing) as negative. Possibly there are other factors contributing to the student's deficient writing skills; however, for Brandon, as the instructor, the schema of "Asian" has allowed him a way of conceptualizing the student's identity. With some identity in mind, imagined or otherwise, Brandon selects from a range of options the one he feels will best lead to comprehensible, successful communication.

Mark comments on writing ability as well.

> "...maybe because someone doesn't write as well or doesn't express himself or herself as well in writing, maybe I don't give them the breaks or understand them in context as well as I would if I were interacting with them face to face where I would have more of an understanding of what they were saying. How they were saying...etcetera. We put a lot of weight, I think in how people write, or present themselves in writing..." (Mark).

Mark's comment is a recognition of the instructor's position of dominance with respect to students.

Concerning gender, Brandon and Mark express concerns over mistakes derived from ambiguous names. "I don't often times know if they're ---if it's just text base, sometimes, if someone's name is like Pat, you know, or a name like that, I don't know if it's a male pat or a female Pat sometimes" (Mark).

> "I once wrote "Yes, Sir" in a response to a post by a young woman. That was really embarrassing. I always thought she was a man based on her name. It never once occurred to me that it was woman. After that happened, I got really worried that I had maybe done that before but didn't know it! I wonder if I've ever had a student who felt alienated for any reason because of something stupid I said" (Brandon).

Of import is that Brandon is thinking about the imagined, versus real, characteristics of his students. He shows some measure of concern over not offending his students based on the category of gender. Although he arrives at no solution to the problem of ambiguity, he demonstrates reflection on instructional practice as it attempts to address the lack of visual cues present in fact-to-face contexts.

The topic of gender is also breached by Emily who, unlike most other participants, interjects this dimension of diversity from her own perspective. "As a woman, I may be hypersensitive to certain issues or maybe read too much into it when students say certain things...or maybe even when they don't say anything at all during specific class discussions" (Emily). Not only does Emily recognize the potential impact of her own gender identity on her performance as an instructor, she further establishes gender as a significant dimension of diversity by projecting its influence beyond herself and onto an analysis of silence. Contemplating one's own gender as an instructor evaluating a course implies it may be relevant either to the content of the course itself or its participants. With this comment, Emily provides an evaluative concept with which to self-assess instruction and interaction. Regardless of the true impact of gender, her own or her students', the contemplation of gender likely sensitizes her to the importance of diversity in general within the context of her online courses.

In addition to language, race, and gender, some participants in this study fill in demographic data gaps via assumptions based on the age of students. "I think it's not as common in grad school, I've heard colleagues say it's more common with undergrads, because they're just younger and more impulsive and don't necessarily think about it" (Angie). "... grad school, I think that's the difference. They're pretty careful. They're more seasoned. And they can handle their own problems" (Angie).

Interpreting Silence

Silence, as described in chapter 2, represents attention paid to what is *not* said stemming from the assumption that individuals may communicate fear, intimidation, disdain, mistrust, uncertainty, etc. through a, often intentional, lack of response. This connotation of *silence* as portraying negative affect appears salient in the data for this study. When students fail, or refuse, to respond, participants demonstrate an instinctual need to make sense of silence by implicating unspoken, or unwritten, reasons for its occurrence. As Mark states, "I have to wonder about people that might just shut down, because what we don't know is whether people are shutting down and not saying anything because they don't feel it's safe to say it" (Mark). Of import is Mark's impression that he *has* to wonder about this. He implies with this remark that his position as instructor requires attention to promoting an atmosphere of safety and open communication for his students. Silence, therefore, causes him to wonder if such an atmosphere ever existed or is at risk.

Joan speaks a great deal about silence and goes a step further in attempting to outline several reasons it may occur. "I do believe that it's likely that students are withholding some of the things that they might have been more open about in a school that wasn't Christian affiliated" (Joan). Here, Joan makes it quite clear that the conservative religious nature of her institution

may lead certain students to not disclose their ideas or experiences about some topics. In this case, the dominant culture outside the online environment may influence online interaction through its impact on student affect.

Another potential cause for silencing Joan provides involves her professional discipline, Counseling.

> "Often times students won't talk about an intimate experience they've have or something that might be considered diagnosable. I can see students withholding that kind of information on their demographics. Nobody's brought up actively being in a situation. They always talk about situations that are with family members or have been resolved so if someone were experiencing some sort of repression based on their demographics, they may not bring it up in the class even if it was happening" (Joan).

In this example, Joan's students, if they have encountered the experiences being discussed, are not likely to make these experiences public in reference to themselves. Their stories, rather, are shared from the perspective of others whom they know.

Joan seems to also indicate a suspicion that students themselves, at times, construct fictitious third parties as a vehicle for self-expression. It is not clear, however, the extent to which this does, or does not, occur. Joan's statements are based on conjecture for which it could be difficult to obtain evidentiary data due to the obfuscating essence of silence. Even though, by its nature, silence is difficult to describe precisely, Joan does say she is "...always aware that it could be happening."

John also mentions instructor awareness as a potential tool for interpreting silence. "I think a big part of my job is to know from the beginning that all my students will be different on some level, be it academic, cultural...whatever. And because you can never know everything for

sure about a student when you're teaching online, you have to pay real close attention to what they're saying, or not saying, so you don't risk shutting them out" (John). The idea of instructor awareness as a means of planning for diversity is documented in the research literature described in chapter 2 (*see* Collis, 1999; Cosier & Sanders (2007); Henderson, 1996; Liu et al., 2010; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2009).

Creating Safe Spaces for Online Learning

The final category derived from the data concerns the concept of *safe spaces* for learning. The term *safe space*, described earlier in the review of the literature, calls for a learning environment conducive to open communication free from intimidation, fear, and/or discrimination. This working definition is illuminated by the participants of this study. "I think creating a space where people can disclose, but for people to be quiet as well, I think is useful" (Mark).

A singular description of *safe spaces* is found within the data via explanations of why such spaces are important to open communication in online learning. Brandon, for example, discusses variations in learner characteristics and how they can interact with the method of online course delivery.

> "It is very important to always be aware of how the technology you are using either supports or interferes with communication about the topic. For example, if your course has mostly synchronous sessions, are you leaving behind students who need extra time to think about a response? What about those who don't speak fluent English? Or those who may have speech or hearing problems? For those students, it might be best to offer extensive opportunities to communicate with text, like in discussion boards" (Brandon).

Brandon's example supplies several obstacles to effective communication that could become problematic in synchronous online learning scenarios. In this example it is posited that a purely synchronous course could ignore the unique differences among certain individuals or groups of learners who may require extra time and/or text options in order to maximize their interactions within the course. It is implied that all possible steps to ensure equal access to course communications should be taken.

Mark and Emily furnish personal connections through the assumption of the necessity to feel safe during social interaction. "I have to wonder about people that might just shut down, because what we don't know is whether people are shutting down and not saying anything because they don't feel it's safe to say it" (Mark).

Emily establishes that the online course, depending on its curriculum, could serve as the sole venue for communication for some students. "The class setting should always be open. Some students might not have the same opportunities I do to talk about things openly in their private lives. Our class might be the only time they can do that and find support" (Emily). With this statement is the recognition that safe spaces may benefit students in holistic ways, not restricted to explicit curricular objectives.

Joan also makes a connection between safety and holistic learning. "...when students can't self-disclose about certain topics, my whole class suffers. The learning experience isn't as good for anybody" (Joan). Recognition of this connection is expressed by other participants as well. Mark emphasizes safety as a potential impediment to student engagement and interaction. "I have to wonder about people that might just shut down, because what we don't know is whether people are shutting down and not saying anything because they don't feel it's safe to say it (Mark).

After establishing a need for safe spaces in online learning, the data anchor the creation of such spaces at a central starting point: the instructor. "...it's up to the facilitator to make him feel comfortable" (Joan). "As an instructor, I believe it is my job to read as many of those discussion postings as I can. My students deserve to know that their voices are being heard. The class setting should always be open" (Emily). Joan and Emily do not merely suggest that instructors consider safe spaces in the design of their courses; they firmly assert it is the instructor's responsibility to do so.

At the heart of the instructor's responsibility is an awareness of student perceptions of safety. Emily provides clear guidance on how to encourage perceptions of safety from a course's inception through the use of detailed documentation of course policies and procedures. "...the support must be there from the beginning. We have to establish a culture of open communication through the syllabus and program policies" (Emily). Joan also speaks of the importance of course documentation to perceptions of safety. "Written down in policy, they see that I take it very seriously. My policy goes above and beyond the university policy on that. and at the beginning of lectures I make sure that I read that part out loud and let them know that I do take it seriously" (Joan).

Joan explains that documentation helps students by providing clear expectations for course interactions which integrate safe space ideals, establishing safety as the default atmosphere for the course.

> "...the first thing, I think, is that you need to have good, strong documentation that you will stand behind...that expects and lays out the expectations for students that they will behave appropriately toward each other. I call it the 'netiquette' section of my syllabus and it lays out that any student who verbally attacks another students either through the

> online learning environment or through emails back and forth to each other fails the class" (Joan).

Joan and Emily both advocate a constant awareness of safe space ideals throughout the duration of a particular online course. "...we have to practice this culture through all of our course interactions" (Emily). Instructor awareness and engagement is presented as key to maintaining perceptions of safe space.

> "...it's also important that I am very aware of the conversations that are happening between the students. I can't monitor the email, but you can't have online discussion and be one of those faculty who just doesn't look at it ever. I go in and read every post between every student. Sometimes it's not a lot. Some weeks it's voluminous. Every week I respond to their posts...so they know that I'm reading and they know that I'm engaged with what they're saying back and forth" (Joan).

Joan continues her support for instructor engagement by outlining her intentions for the affective nature of the online course environment. "I hope that the students who feel like they can't disclose that kind of status will somehow get the message from me that this is an *accepting* place, that I also *respect* that they are not disclosing" (Joan, emphasis added.). Her theme of acceptance and respect is echoed again with the revelation of her own affective intent in the design of her online courses. "I try to create *balance* with that and open a *safe* place for the conversation while letting people feel *secure* that I won't let it go somewhere that is going to shut down the conversation and make anyone feel like they don't belong...and if that does happen, I will follow up and make it right" (Joan). This declaration of her commitment to an open communicative environment is meant to inform students they should be able to enjoy a measure

of safety and security in course interactions without fear of ridicule or reprisal, neither from the instructor nor other students.

Summary

This chapter has presented the data in an expository fashion organized around each of the study's two research questions. First, I discussed how diversity and marginalization are perceived by instructors of online learning as being framed in terms of difference. I also discussed that conceptualizations of diversity are subject to change over time and have recently diverged from the traditional paradigm of determining diversity solely from observations of static physical and personality attributes. The fluid nature of marginalization, dependent on positionality of the actors, was also discussed.

Second, data related to the use of diversity and marginalization perspectives in the design and implementation of online learning were examined. Data were presented indicating how instructors use limited demographic information and their own personal experiences to imagine fictitious student characteristics. Instructors consider these characteristics as they plan, implement and modify course curricula and communications. Characteristics of safe spaces were also discussed as they promote diversity and potentially reduce instances of marginalization.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This study examined how some instructors of online learning conceptualize diversity and marginalization. How these conceptualizations impact the design and implementation of online courses was also explored. An analysis of the data revealed several significant categories aligned with this study's two research questions:

1. How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?
2. In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces in online learning?

Overall, this study has confirmed the findings of several previous studies. Primarily, it has been shown that online instructors perceive it is beneficial to create safe spaces for learning in online courses. This perception stems from a belief that learners share more in environments that are non-threatening and respectful (see Zembylas, 2008). This agrees with Holley and Steiner's (2005) survey study of student perceptions of safe spaces.

In order to articulate to students the instructor's desire to create a safe learning space, participants in this study have indicated a need for instructors to establish clear policies for interaction at the beginning of online courses (see Li, 2009). These policies reflect the instructors' awareness of diversity and tend to include provisions for multiple means of communication (see Anderson, 2006; see also Baltes, 2010). Additionally, course procedures include activities/discussion prompts designed to encourage students to participate and express their ideas (see Wang, 2007).

In addition to these overall findings, I will discuss three major findings in more detail, two related to the first research question and one related to the second research question. Next I propose implications for practice and further research based on the results of this study.

Research Question One: How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?

Diversity

Diversity was characterized as *difference*. Participants spoke of diversity as any difference that creates a real or perceived distinction between individuals or groups. Although difference was at the core of each participant's conceptualization of diversity, definitions encompassed other issues such as technology access, language ability, writing ability, race, culture, and gender. Participants also indicated a shift away from identifying diversity based on these categories. Participants stated that the traditional paradigm of diversity focused perhaps too heavily on difference based solely on visual cues (e.g., gender). A new, broader, paradigm has emerged recognizing perspectives and opinions as important attributes of diversity. This paradigm is consistent with previous studies which have highlighted a need to be mindful of diversity of perspective and opinion because such diversity is often derived from cultural differences influencing all learners (Edmundson, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2002; Young, 2008).

At least one participant expanded the new paradigm by suggesting that students define their own characteristics of diversity through self-disclosure. As noted in Joan's interview, instructors may ask students to identify personal demographic data, without providing a limiting selection of options, or simply ensure open communication allowing students to interject any

information they perceive to be relevant. This expanded concept accommodates a broad spectrum of difference subject to great individual variation.

Marginalization

Marginalization was characterized by *exclusion*. Participants expanded the common factor of *difference* to suggest that this difference causes division between and within groups. This division becomes exclusionary as individuals and groups seek to associate with others sharing common interests. Participants suggested that exclusion is an inevitable outcome as some individuals group together to become a dominant majority. Any individual or group not part of this dominant majority becomes, consequently, marginalized (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1976; Freire, 1970/2007; Hylton, 2005; O'Farrell, 2005). Participants do not agree on exactly how exclusion occurs. Some suggest it is the result of the dominant group finding attributes of marginalized groups to be less desirable. Others implicate a social friction resulting from efforts on the part of the underrepresented to interact with or become part of the dominant group.

An individual's status within the dominant/marginalized dichotomy is not always permanent (Butler, 1990; Freire, 1970/2007). Participants suggest flexibility of status based on the specific characteristics defining the commonalities of the dominant group. Although an individual may share the common characteristics of one dominant group, s/he cannot expect to share the common characteristics of *all* dominant groups. Individuals can, therefore, be in both dominant and underrepresented groups simultaneously (Butler, 1990). Participants also noted that some underrepresented group members may at times self-exclude.

Marginalization is, therefore, the result of power struggles. As discussed in chapter 2, marginalization is the effect of those holding power excluding those who do not. Recognizing that one's identity (be it self-ascribed or socially imposed) greatly determines one's subjection to

exclusion may allow instructors to recognize a fluidity of power as it may shift between individuals, groups, and/or circumstances. Being able to recognize power struggles and marginalization can help instructors provide the context for marginalized learners to gain access to more equal learning as discussed by Freire (1970/2007). In accordance with Freire's philosophy, the traditional banking model of education is ill-suited for promoting diversity in online learning environments as it fails to problematize the instructor's position of dominance and promote the open forum necessary for marginalized individuals to exercise the vocalization of their own thoughts and opinions.

Participants suggested online instructors, in order to effectively mitigate marginalization in online courses, must first demonstrate a concern for addressing instances of diversity and marginalization. Next, instructors must be able to identify marginalization when it occurs in online courses. This can be done by analyzing textual interactions and/or, in the case of synchronous instruction, monitoring voice communications. It was suggested that marginalization should be determined from the perspective of the learner.

Research Question Two: In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces for online learning?

Constructing Student Identity

Participants in this study point out that the online course environment, which frequently lacks a bilateral video component, can cause student diversity to go unnoticed in the absence of visual cues. Whereas this may mitigate marginalization or conflict sometimes experienced between groups in face-to-face contexts, this study has shown that some instructors are concerned that the positive contributions diversity can make to the educational environment may be lost. Perhaps because of this, many participants in this study have attempted to obtain

categorizing demographic data about online students. This is usually accomplished by means of an introductory assignment encouraging students to self-disclose personal experience. Participants also analyze textual course communications to learn about their students.

A concern over a lack of preparation for dealing with ambiguity online was expressed by participants. Calls were made for professional development of online instructors aimed specifically at online teaching methods. Participants shared stories of frustration resulting from a lack of demographic data potentially useful in addressing differences in course performance and learning outcomes for online students. Participants create, sometimes subconsciously, imagined student identity archetypes in order to help navigate course interactions and explain learning outcomes. These imagined archetypes are frequently derived from instructors attempting to interpret silence, what is not said by students. The interpretation of silence requires caution as it inherently makes assumptions about students which cannot be said to be true in all cases. Participants also expressed concern that limitations of online courses (e.g., little audio/video) can create situations wherein some students are not able to equally participate. For the most part, the online courses described by participants were asynchronous, text-based courses that provide little choice in type of student input. Participants noticed that certain students were not as prepared as others for online courses. For example, according to the participants, limited English proficient students do not perform well in synchronous online environments where they are unable to use visual cues to interpret meaning and may therefore become lost in a quickly paced conversation. International and limited English proficient students also often require extra time to read course materials and prepare assignments.

In order to effectively manage instances of potential marginalization, participants indicate that an awareness of potential diversity should be considered in online course design.

Participants engage in a range of techniques from providing introductory *get to know you* assignments to providing extra time and flexibility for discussion.

Implications for Practice: Creating Safe Spaces for Learning

The data from this study have implications for the design of online courses in which safe spaces for interaction and learning can be created. Figure 5.1 lists the necessary elements of creating safe spaces in online courses. The element of evaluation is taken from the literature discussed in Chapter 2 as it provides a means of assessing and potentially modifying the learning environment in order to achieve and/or maintain the goal of a safe space.

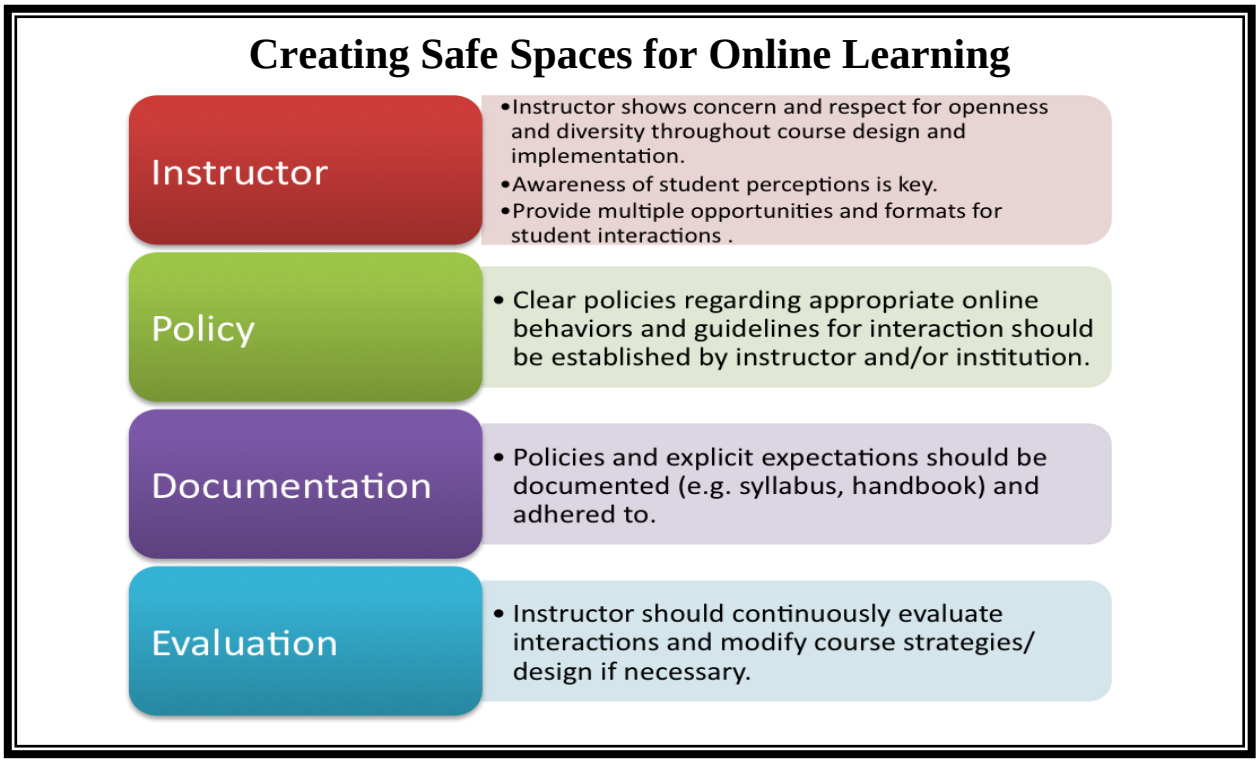

Figure 5.1. Elements of online safe spaces.

Instructor

Although each of the above elements presents tasks for instructors, the first situates the instructor as having primary responsibility for designing a course wherein diversity is respected

and valued. Instructor awareness and flexibility of task reinforces lessons learned from existing literature (Collis, 1999; Cosier & Sanders (2007); Edmundson, 2007; Henderson, 1996; Liu et al., 2010; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2009; Sales Ciges, 2001; Young, 2008). Instructor awareness sets the stage for potential instances of marginalization by allowing necessary flexibility in design and implementation as pointed out by Liu et al. (2010). "The central notion of the flexible approach is that the key aspects of course design should be contingent on the cultural dimension of the course, and should be flexible enough to allow the students and instructors to choose their own learning and teaching styles as the course progresses" (p. 178). Additionally, Sales Ciges (2001) emphasized the value of flexibility in fostering participation. "By diversifying the tasks and content contained in the course, students will better understand that flexibility and adaptation to individual needs are specific characteristics of the course" (p. 145).

Policy and documentation.

Policy and documentation are closely associated as they highlight the importance of communicating clear expectations to students. These expectations should reflect policy and requirements of both the instructor *and* the institution in order to communicate support. Participants suggested policy recommendations that attempt to avoid the dangers of simply moving a face-to-face course online (Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; McLoughlin, 2001; Wilson, 2001). Recommendations include introducing texts and materials treating diversity issues, specify what constitutes minimum participation, provide clear instruction concerning plagiarism and nature of interactions, keep language direct and clear, and provide for variation in student communication and work (Alexander & Banks, 2001; Irvine & York, 1995; Liu et al., 2010; Sales Ciges, 2001; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2004; Zembylas, 2008).

Evaluation

The element of evaluation is central and should be ongoing throughout all stages of online course design and implementation. Once policies are communicated, it is the role of the instructor to continuously ensure that all students have equal access to course participation and learning. The only to do this is to monitor course interactions and student work. Instructors are encouraged to observe as many course interactions as possible, including reading a predominance of discussion board postings. This allows the instructor to identify potential instances of marginalization and employ the flexibility of the course design toward modifications promoting equality in access to learning (Edmundson, 2007; Young, 2008; Liu et al., 2010; McKee, 2004; Zembylas, 2008; Sales Ciges, 2001).

As presented, safe spaces can be conceptualized as a process of interaction between each of the elements: instructor, policy, documentation, and evaluation. No one of these elements can act alone to address all the needs of diverse and marginalized learners. Therefore, designers and instructors of online courses should carefully consider each element with an eye toward flexibility at all stages of online course design and implementation.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are a variety of areas that can be explored for future research based on the results of this study. In addition to teaching online, all of the participants for this study have previously taught, or currently teach, face-to-face courses. As specific reasons for treating online courses differently from face-to-face courses with respect to diversity and marginalization were not provided by participants, it cannot be said that the findings of this study are relevant only to online courses. Additional research is needed to examine any differences that might exist between the two contexts.

Additionally, the participants of this study did not provide examples of marginalization within group interactions. Future studies will need to specifically question participants concerning group interactions with respect to diversity and marginalization. As these topics are not commonly addressed in online learning research and practice, it is possible the participants of this study would have provided more examples had follow-up interviews been conducted, allowing participants more time for the thoughtful consideration of their responses. Case studies or participant observation of certain instructors, such as Joan, would also provide a more detailed look at the specific nature of online interactions and how individual instructors conceptualize their roles.

Several of this study's findings warrant further research. Perhaps the most salient is the implication of changes over time with respect to what counts as "diversity." Participant responses suggested a break from past trends of identifying diversity by visible characteristics such as race and sex. After suggesting this, however, participants often discussed "diverse" students in terms of traditional categorizations, indicating a disconnect between what they say about diversity and the conceptualizations of diversity they employ in the practice of teaching online. Is this an indication that perceptions of diversity have moved into a post-identity era? Or is it possible participants are avoiding what they might perceive as controversial topics? These questions are worth posing and exploring.

An exploration of biases and prejudices is another area for future research. The literature reviewed for this study, as well as its findings, highlight the importance of the online instructor's role in creating and fostering a safe learning environment. This being the case, it is certainly relevant to question and/or problematize any and all potential biases or prejudices of online instructors as part of any thorough evaluation of their success in creating safe spaces.

Reflections and Limitations

Upon reflection, there are several changes to this study that would have strengthened its findings. First, a larger pool of participants would provide more insight into the issues associated with creating safe spaces for online learning. The current sample size of ten may be adequate for an exploratory study; however, it is insufficient for generalizing results to broader populations. Larger sample sizes in future studies may help situate the findings of this study within broader educational contexts.

In addition to a larger participant pool, more demographic data about participants would be useful to explain differences across responses and to provide the reader with a clearer picture of the "experience" qualitative research hopes to depict. It is suggested that future studies consider the following demographic characteristics of participants: age, race, and ethnicity. These characteristics could possibly be used to explain why participants highlight and/or connect with specific characteristics in their responses. For example, are participants more likely to mention or focus on learner characteristics that match their own? An examination of such possibilities may help strengthen the validity of findings and their ability to be generalized.

Another limitation of this study is its lack of techniques for strengthening validity. Future studies exploring such topics as diversity need to strive for increased accuracy in reporting participant experience. Perhaps the best way to do this is through member checking. Two participants requested follow-up analyses of their interview data. These participants were requested to provide feedback if they felt the analysis was not representative of their intended responses. Neither participant responded to this request. It is unknown if this failure to respond constituted agreement with the analysis. Future studies could benefit from making concerted efforts to both member check and conduct follow-up interviews.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Email

Online Course Instructors Wanted for Research Study

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether instructors of online learning are aware of diversity issues and discover how designers and instructors of online education conceptualize diversity and marginalization with respect to the creation of safe spaces for online learning. I am interested in learning the perspectives of instructors and researchers who have taught online courses and/or conducted research on Online Learning and have taught a minimum of one online course.

Participation will consist of an interview of approximately one hour duration.

Study participants must have taught at least one online course and have a minimum five years experience in their field.

You have received this request because you have been identified as an instructor and/or researcher of Online Learning. Your contact information was obtained either from your department's online faculty directory or from a colleague familiar with your work.

For more information and/or to volunteer for this study please contact:

Kenyon Brown, kenyon@uga.edu

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working within the field of IT research/teaching online courses?
2. Briefly describe your professional experiences with online learning.
3. How do you define diversity? Marginalization?
4. What implications might diversity have for an online educational context?
5. With respect to interaction in online instruction, what differences do you perceive between students of different nationalities, races, genders, etc.?
6. Which other elements/issues of diversity do you feel are salient in online instruction?
7. How have you fostered student interactions/communication in online courses? How might you do this differently in the future?
8. Describe your ideal online course.
9. Describe any differences you have noticed in social interactions among students between face-to-face and online courses?

Appendix C

Consent Script

I agree to participate in a research study titled "Designing for Diversity in Online Learning: An Analysis of Faculty Perceptions" conducted by Kenyon Brown, a doctoral candidate with the Department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Janette Hill, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy, University of Georgia (542-4035). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or at any time stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this study is to discover how designers and instructors of online education conceptualize diversity and marginalization with respect to online learning. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do instructors of online learning define diversity and marginalization?
2. In what ways, if any, do instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization influence the design and implementation of safe spaces in online instruction?

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

Participate in an interview (approximately 1 hour). The interview is optional. Participants will self-select for the interview by indicating their willingness to be interviewed through responding to the email solicitation. Interviews will primarily be conducted and audio-recorded using a Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) technology such as Skpe or AOL Instant Messenger. Interviews may also be conducted face-to-face where feasible and/or by phone. All interviews will be audio recorded.

The benefit for me is that I will have the opportunity to have my voice heard regarding my personal experience with designing and/or delivering online learning. The benefit to society is that my feedback may inform the design of future online courses, helping to make them more sensitive to individual differences. No discomfort, harm, stress or other risks are expected. The interviews will be confidential. **Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed.**

The only identifying information pertinent to the study is the email addresses of the participants, and this information will be known only to the researcher. The email address will be kept for the sole purpose of contacting the participants for the interview and will be destroyed immediately after the interview has been conducted. Transcriptions from the interviews will be retained on a secure drive for at least 3 years after completion of the study and only the researcher involved in the study will have access to the data.

All audio recordings will be destroyed immediately following transcription. The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.

Contact information: Kenyon Brown, **kenyon@uga.edu**

By responding to this email, you acknowledge that you understand your rights as a participant in the study and what you will be asked to do as a participant in the study. You acknowledge that you are at least 18 years old. You also acknowledge that you understand you may print and retain a copy of this consent form for your records.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

Appendix D

Code Sample

Code Sample: *Silencing*

Text	*Code*	*Category*
"…it's likely students are withholding…"	Withholding	Silencing
…students won't talk…"	Not talking	
"…an overall lack of response"	No response	
"…we don't know if people are shutting down…"	Shutting down	

Code Sample: Constructing student identity

Text	*Code*	*Category*
"I imagine my students who may be in the same boat may feel the same way I do."	Imagining student characteristics	Constructing student identity
"I usually don't know if they identify that way or not…"	Questioning student identity	
"I once wrote Yes, Sir in a message to a young woman…"	Mistaking student characteristics	