

IMPORTANCE OF FACILITATING CROSS-CULTURAL ONLINE DISCUSSION

Tricia Hudson-Matthew, & Shawn Worthy

Department of Human Service and Counseling, Metropolitan State University of Denver (USA)

Abstract

This study investigates the significance of facilitating cross-cultural online discussions to bolster cultural competence and communication skills among students, particularly within the context of a master's practicum counseling class. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrated qualitative analysis of online discussion board interactions with quantitative assessments of students' perceptions and learning outcomes. The online discussion boards were structured using culturally and linguistically responsive strategies, aiming to create an inclusive environment conducive to cross-cultural engagement. Key findings underscore the transformative impact of culturally and linguistically responsive online discussions on students' cultural competence, communication skills, and ability to effectively engage with diverse populations. Qualitative analysis revealed themes emphasizing the exposure to diverse perspectives, experiences, and communication styles as pivotal in enriching students' cultural competence. Furthermore, students demonstrated significant improvements in communication skills, including active listening, empathy, and adeptness in expressing ideas across cultural boundaries. This suggests that engaging in cross-cultural online discussions facilitated the development of nuanced communication skills essential for effective counseling practice. Quantitative assessments corroborated these qualitative findings, with students reporting heightened confidence and readiness to engage with diverse populations in their counseling practice. This was attributed to the meaningful interactions and insights garnered from cross-cultural online discussions. Such experiences not only broadened students' cultural awareness but also equipped them with practical skills vital for navigating cultural complexities in their professional endeavors. Considering these findings, several recommendations for practice emerge. Educators are encouraged to implement culturally responsive facilitation techniques, fostering inclusivity and respect for diverse perspectives within online discussion settings. Active participation from students of varied cultural backgrounds should be promoted to maximize the benefits of cross-cultural exchange. Additionally, ongoing training and support for educators in facilitating cross-cultural online discussions are essential, ensuring the continued enhancement of students' cultural competence and communication skills within the evolving landscape of online education.

Keywords: *Online course design, online pedagogy, social justice education, cultural.*

1. Introduction

In today's diverse society, counselors play a crucial role in meeting the varied needs of their clients. Essential to this role are both cultural competence and effective communication skills. In our increasingly interconnected world, where globalization shapes interactions across numerous spheres, including education, the significance of culturally responsive teaching in online learning cannot be overstated. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical approach that aims to design dynamic learning environments and utilize classroom practices that allow students from diverse cultural backgrounds to succeed academically. It involves recognizing and valuing students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives as conduits for effective teaching. Key principles of culturally responsive teaching, as outlined by Gay (2010), include validation, comprehensiveness, multidimensionality, empowerment, transformation, and emancipation.

With the expanding enrollment in online programs, educators must possess the knowledge and resources to cultivate inclusive learning environments that respect the cultural diversity of their students. This study delves into the potential of cross-cultural online discussions within counseling education programs, such as those offered at MSU Denver, to enhance students' cultural competence and communication abilities. By facilitating meaningful exchanges among students from diverse cultural

backgrounds, these discussions aim to equip future counselors with the skills needed to engage successfully with clients from various cultural contexts. Additionally, this paper explores the principles of culturally responsive teaching and their practical application in online education, offering insights and recommendations for educators and instructional designers alike.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted within a master's practicum counseling class, where students were tasked with sharing their backgrounds and culture on online discussion boards and responding to their peers' posts. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative analysis of online discussion interactions with quantitative assessments of students' perceptions and learning outcomes. Culturally and linguistically responsive strategies were integrated into the design and facilitation of the online discussions. This research paper adopts a qualitative approach, synthesizing insights from existing literature on culturally responsive teaching and drawing upon practical examples from the authors' experiences in education and instructional design. The methodology involves analyzing key principles and best practices of culturally responsive teaching and exploring their application in the context of online education. Additionally, demographic data, such as enrollment statistics, are considered to provide context for the importance of culturally responsive teaching in addressing the diverse needs of students in online courses.

3. Findings and recommendations

Qualitative analysis revealed that students perceived cross-cultural online discussions as instrumental in enhancing their cultural competence and communication skills. Themes emerged highlighting the value of exposure to diverse perspectives, experiences, and communication styles. Students reported increased confidence in interacting with clients from different cultures, expressing reduced feelings of fear or incompetence. The online discussions facilitated a deeper understanding of cultural nuances, leading to enhanced therapeutic connections with clients and classmates.

Quantitative assessments supported these qualitative findings, indicating significant improvements in students' perceptions of their cultural competence and communication skills following participation in cross-cultural online discussions. The findings suggest that integrating culturally responsive practices into online discussions can effectively prepare counseling students for working with diverse populations in their professional practice.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for integrating cross-cultural online discussions across counseling education programs. Educators should prioritize the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive strategies in designing online discussion activities. Encouraging active participation and peer interaction can further enhance the benefits of cross-cultural exchange. Additionally, providing ongoing training and support for educators is crucial for ensuring the successful implementation of cross-cultural online discussions in counseling education.

Table 1. Assessment Tool for Cross-Cultural Online Discussions.

<i>Assessment Criteria</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Cultural Competence</i>	<i>Evaluate students' understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural perspectives through their contributions to online discussions.</i>
<i>Communication Skills</i>	<i>Assess the clarity, empathy, and effectiveness of students' communication with peers from different cultural backgrounds.</i>
<i>Active Participation</i>	<i>Measure the level of engagement and involvement of students in cross-cultural discussions, including frequency and quality of posts.</i>
<i>Reflection and Growth</i>	<i>Encourage students to reflect on their own cultural biases, communication styles, and learning experiences throughout the discussions.</i>
<i>Peer Feedback</i>	<i>Provide opportunities for students to give and receive constructive feedback on their cross-cultural interactions and contributions.</i>

* Assessment tool adapted from research findings and recommendations for practice in facilitating cross-cultural online discussions (see Sections: Findings and Recommendations, Key Findings and Recommendations).

Table 2. Comparison of Cultural Competence Assessment Tools.

Assessment Tool	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory	Self-report questionnaire measuring an individual's ability to adapt to different cultures and environments.	Quantitative data for comparison over time	Self-report bias; Limited cultural scope
Intercultural Development Inventory	Assesses intercultural competence based on developmental stages of sensitivity, understanding, and engagement.	Provides insights into developmental progress	Requires trained facilitators for use
Cultural Intelligence Scale	Measures an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings.	Offers a comprehensive assessment	Complex scoring system
Multicultural Personality Questionnaire	Evaluates an individual's multicultural attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.	Focuses on individual traits and behaviors	May not capture contextual factors

*Table adapted from various assessment tools used in cultural competence research and practice.

This table provides a comparison of different assessment tools used to measure cultural competence. It outlines their descriptions, advantages, and disadvantages, offering insights into the suitability of each tool for different contexts and purposes.

Cross-Cultural Online Discussion Questionnaire

(Please answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your ability.)

1. Demographic Information:
 - Gender:
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary/Other
 - 2. Age:
 - Under 18
 - 18-24
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55-64
 - 65 or older
3. Ethnicity/Race (optional):
4. Online Discussion Experience:
5. How frequently did you participate in cross-cultural online discussions during your counseling education program?
 - Rarely
 - Occasionally
 - Frequently
 - Very frequently
6. How comfortable were you participating in cross-cultural online discussions?
 - Very uncomfortable
 - Uncomfortable
 - Neutral
 - Comfortable
 - Very comfortable
7. What aspects of cross-cultural online discussions did you find most beneficial for enhancing your cultural competence and communication skills? (Open-ended)

8. Were there any challenges you encountered while engaging in cross-cultural online discussions? If so, please describe. (Open-ended)
9. Did participating in cross-cultural online discussions influence your understanding of cultural diversity and its relevance to counseling practice?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure

Perceived Learning Outcomes:

10. How do you perceive your level of cultural competence before and after participating in cross-cultural online discussions?
 - Significantly lower before
 - Slightly lower before
 - No change
 - Slightly higher after
 - Significantly higher after
11. How do you perceive your communication skills in engaging with individuals from different cultural backgrounds before and after participating in cross-cultural online discussions?
 - Significantly lower before
 - Slightly lower before
 - No change
 - Slightly higher after
 - Significantly higher after

Overall Satisfaction:

12. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the overall experience of participating in cross-cultural online discussions in your counseling education program?

Additional Feedback:

13. Is there any additional feedback or suggestions you would like to provide regarding the implementation of cross-cultural online discussions in counseling education?

4. Conclusion

In an increasingly interconnected world, facilitating cross-cultural online discussions holds immense importance for fostering cultural competence and effective communication skills among students. Our study, conducted within a master's practicum counseling class, highlighted the transformative impact of such discussions on students' abilities to engage with diverse populations. Through qualitative analysis and quantitative assessments, we found that culturally and linguistically responsive online discussions not only enriched students' cultural awareness but also enhanced their communication skills, including active listening, empathy, and the ability to navigate cultural complexities.

The findings underscore the need for educators to prioritize the integration of culturally responsive practices into online learning environments. By embracing principles of validation, comprehensiveness, empowerment, and transformation, educators can create inclusive spaces that honor the diverse perspectives and experiences of students. Active participation from students of varied cultural backgrounds is crucial for maximizing the benefits of cross-cultural exchange and preparing future counselors to effectively serve diverse populations.

Moving forward, it is essential for educators to receive ongoing training and support in facilitating cross-cultural online discussions. This will ensure the continued enhancement of students' cultural competence and communication skills within the evolving landscape of online education. Additionally, continued research and collaboration among educators, instructional designers, and practitioners are needed to refine best practices and advance the field of culturally responsive teaching in online counseling education.

In conclusion, facilitating cross-cultural online discussions is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a vital component of preparing students to navigate the complexities of our multicultural world. By embracing diversity and fostering intercultural understanding, educators can empower students to become culturally competent counselors capable of making meaningful contributions to the field.

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