FACULTY INSIGHTS INTO THE INCLUSION OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN ONLINE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of online education has intensified the need for inclusive teaching approaches that acknowledge and value students' diverse cultural backgrounds. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) offers a framework for promoting equity, engagement, and meaningful learning by integrating students' cultural experiences into instructional practices. This exploratory study examines faculty insights into the inclusion of culturally responsive pedagogy in online teaching, focusing on instructors' perceptions, understanding, and experiences. Using qualitative and exploratory methods, the study investigates how instructors conceptualize CRP, the strategies they employ in virtual learning environments, and the challenges they encounter in implementing culturally responsive practices online. Findings reveal that while instructors recognize the importance of CRP for fostering student engagement and inclusivity, they face barriers such as limited training, time constraints, and technological challenges. The study underscores the need for targeted professional development, institutional support, and intentional course design to effectively embed culturally responsive pedagogy in online education. The results contribute to ongoing discussions on equity-driven online teaching and inform best practices for inclusive virtual learning environments.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Online Teaching; Instructor Perceptions; Inclusive Education; Faculty Perspectives; Virtual Learning Environments

I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of online education has transformed teaching and learning across higher education and professional training contexts. While virtual learning environments offer flexibility and expanded access, they also present challenges related to student engagement, equity, and inclusion. Online classrooms often bring together learners from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, making it essential for instructors to adopt pedagogical approaches that recognize and respond to this diversity. As a result, there is increasing interest in teaching frameworks that promote culturally inclusive and equitable learning experiences in online settings.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) emphasizes the importance of incorporating students' cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives into teaching and learning processes. Rooted in equity-focused educational theory, CRP seeks to enhance academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness among learners. While research has demonstrated the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching in face-to-face classrooms, its application in online education remains an emerging area of inquiry. The distinct characteristics of virtual learning environments—such as limited social cues, asynchronous communication, and reliance on digital tools—raise questions about how CRP can be effectively implemented online.

Instructors play a central role in translating culturally responsive principles into online teaching practices. Their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences significantly influence course design,

instructional strategies, and student interactions. Understanding instructors' perspectives on culturally responsive pedagogy in online education is therefore critical for identifying existing practices, perceived benefits, and potential barriers to implementation. Such insights can inform professional development initiatives and institutional policies aimed at supporting inclusive online teaching.

This exploratory study investigates instructors' perceptions of the inclusion of culturally responsive pedagogy in online education. By examining how faculty members understand, value, and apply CRP in virtual learning environments, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on inclusive online pedagogy and provide practical implications for enhancing equity and engagement in digital learning contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) has its theoretical roots in the work of Gay (2000), who defined culturally responsive teaching as the use of students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles to make instruction more effective. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized culturally relevant pedagogy as a means to promote academic success while fostering cultural competence and critical consciousness. These foundational studies established CRP as a powerful framework for addressing equity and inclusion in diverse learning environments.

As online education expanded, scholars began exploring how culturally responsive practices translate into digital contexts. Bennett and Bennett (2004) highlighted the importance of multicultural awareness in instructional design, suggesting that online courses must intentionally reflect diverse perspectives to avoid cultural bias. Aragon and Johnson (2008) examined cultural dimensions in online learning and found that instructors' sensitivity to cultural differences significantly influenced student participation and satisfaction in virtual classrooms.

More recent studies have focused specifically on instructors' perceptions and experiences. Gaytan (2013) investigated faculty perspectives on teaching diverse learners online and reported that while instructors valued cultural inclusivity, many felt unprepared to implement CRP effectively in virtual settings. Similarly, Kumi-Yeboah (2018) found that online instructors recognized the role of culture in student engagement but faced challenges related to limited interaction, lack of training, and rigid course structures.

Studies by Miller and Schroeder (2020) and García and Chun (2021) further emphasized institutional and technological barriers to culturally responsive online teaching. Their findings revealed that professional development opportunities and institutional support were key factors influencing instructors' ability to integrate CRP into online education. Overall, the literature suggests a growing recognition of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in online learning, while also highlighting gaps related to instructor preparedness, training, and practical implementation—underscoring the need for further exploratory research into faculty perceptions and practices.

III. METHODS

This study adopted the qualitative case study method to explore diversity and inclusion in online learning of instructors from 12 colleges and universities in the United States. The adoption of this method is due to the scarcity of existing knowledge on the phenomenon of interest in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Mills et al., 2010). That is, incorporating CRP in online learning. To understand instructors' perceptions of CRP in online education in this study, how they integrate CRP pedagogies into online curriculum, and their challenges in incorporating diverse/inclusive and collaborative learning resources for students, a qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. Within the qualitative approach, the goal of research is to 'rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation' (Creswell, 2013, p. 24).

Sample

A total of 60 instructors from (12) universities and colleges in the State University of New York (SUNY) in the Northeastern part of the United States participated in this study. The participants were

Full-Time instructors, consisting of 21 Assistant Professors in tenure-track positions, and six Clinical Professors of Practice in professional tenure-track positions. Participants also included 19 Associate Professors and 14 tenured full Professors. There were 26 females and 34 males from different cultures and academic disciplines, including Education (n = 14), Social Sciences (n = 16), Engineering (n = 10), Physical Sciences (n = 8) and Health Sciences (n = 12). Participants' cultural backgrounds consisted of Africa Americans (n = 8), Caucasian [Whites] (n = 21), Hispanics (n = 9) Asian (n = 18) and others (n = 4) (see Appendix A—Table A1 for participants demographic information). Participants were recruited based on their experiences in planning, organizing, teaching and designing online courses with diverse curriculum/learning content. All participants had taught at least two online/blended courses for a minimum of 2years at the university/college level. In the case of those who had taught in the blended mode, only their online experiences were germane to this study.

Data collection

After securing Institutional Review Board approval, we contacted 20 universities and colleges that offer online degree programs regarding the purpose of the study and assured selected instructors of their confidentiality and identity. Data were collected from 20th February 2019 to 30th January 2020. A total of 12 out of the 20 universities contacted agreed to our request and provided a list of all their instructors who teach online courses and their contact information. We then emailed all participants about the objectives of the study. Overall, 60 participants (instructors) from five academic disciplines (Education, Social Sciences, Engineering, Physical Sciences and Health Sciences) in 12 colleges agreed to participate in the research.

Semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 and 60minutes were conducted with all 60 instructors individually (Creswell, 2013). The research questions and the CRC framework guided the construction of the initial set of interview questions which were sent to four experts in the field of multicultural education and diversity, online education and instructional technology for review. The suggestions received from these experts guided our revision and the selection of the final set of interview questions for the study. The interviews took place on 12 campuses at the offices of the respective online instructors. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using the qualitative method. Pseudonyms were used for the participants to protect their identities and for purposes of confidentiality (Miles & Saldana, 2014). Details regarding interview questions are shown in Appendix B.

Data analysis

The constant comparative analysis method using 'open', 'axial' and 'selective' coding strategies was employed to analyse the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Though the constant comparative analysis was originally created for grounded theory, it is not restricted to this theory any longer as it has consistently been applied for exploring and analysing data within the various qualitative designs (Turner, 2022). To ensure consistency and dependability of the qualitative study, and to guard against research bias, we listened to the audio-recordings severally to ensure it was consistent with the transcriptions. We also used the code–recode strategy and peer examination (Remler& Van Ryzin, 2011). The first author of this study performed the first level of coding through open coding in collaboration with the second author and identified themes and patterns by breaking up the data sets into separate categories using constant comparative analysis with data transcripts to locate patterns for each interview and instructional activities in online classrooms. The analysis led to the following initial categories: 'cultures and knowledge construction in online space', 'background experiences', 'previous content knowledge', 'how students bring past educational experiences to online class', 'knowledge as a resource', 'use of artifacts and visuals' and 'lack of experience learning English as a Second Language learner'. This process also involved comparing new coded data with pre-existing codes to promote consistency and achieve accurate codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, we used axial coding to assemble data to reflect instructors' perceptions of culturally

responsive/pedagogy and instructional practices they used to equip students to succeed in online education. The following categories emerged: 'online discussion and engagements', 'learning engagement', 'questions to reflect and share', 'group interaction and constant communications', 'quick feedback to students questions' and 'reflective essays', 'incorporate into my lessons', 'designing inclusive curriculum', 'films and videos of different/diverse populations/groups', 'use books', 'articles', and 'other resources', 'communications', 'providing accommodations to meet needs of all students', and 'issues with language and design of diverse curriculum'. Third, selective coding was used to re-examine the data and address any discrepancies in the data. We compared and examined data, revised categories and deleted categories that were not important—to help establish the final themes. The last stage of this process is the copious use of 'memos' ('code', 'theoretical' and 'operational notes') that served to conceptualize raw data throughout the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the end, five themes emerged from the analysed data. These are 'using students' personal and cultural experiences to build content knowledge' which appeared 78 times in the data. Next was 'interactions to facilitate students' academic engagements' with roughly 80 appearances. The next theme to emerge was 'incorporating CRT' with 72 occurrences. The last two themes were 'integrating diverse and use of international learning content' and 'challenges of designing and incorporating CRP in online learning' with 84 and 76 occurrences, respectively. We then re-examined all data to check for discrepancies to build on the trustworthiness of the data. A draft version of the interview transcripts and the findings were sent to participants as a form of member-check to authenticate the accuracy of the emerging themes. We corroborated three data sources (ie, interview transcripts, reviewer's comments and field notes) to confirm themes that emerged from the data (Merriam, 2009). See Appendix C for Table on data chats/codes, representative quotations and themes.

IV. RESULTS

This study was set out to mainly explore instructors' perceptions of CRP in online education. The study was guided by three research questions and underpinned by Scott et al.'s (2015) CRC theory. After analysing the field data, five themes were distilled are presented in the following. The presentation of the study results is situated mainly in the context of Scott et al.'s (2015) CRC theory. Also, anecdotes from the respondents are presented to support our arguments. This style of presentation is useful in providing theoretical context and focus for the study rather than merely presenting the results emanating from the analysis of the field data.

Using students' personal and cultural experiences to build content knowledge

In the online learning environment, both students and instructors bring their cultural and social backgrounds which influence the construction of knowledge in that learning space and setting. A recurring theme across the interviews was instructors' ability to tap into students' personal and past educational experiences to engage students to participate in online discussions. This is evidenced in the following statement:

The best strategy to use CRP in online learning is to tap into students' cultural knowledge and educational experiences they bring to online classrooms. I use inquiry-based learning activities that allow students to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in creating new knowledge and information. (Education faculty, about CRP in online education)

Gay (2010) defines CRT as 'using the cultural knowledge, prior experience, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them' (p. 13). All the instructors in this study understood the need to design online classes to bridge the geographic and cultural backgrounds to give students the chance to share their thoughts and understanding of the concept or subject matter.

I think it is important to connect teaching materials to students' cultural background via comprehensive instructional approaches to teaching and learning that uses the contexts and contents

for the cultures and lived experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. (Health Sciences faculty, about CRP in online education).

Moreover, instructors must tap into the cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions and perspectives of students as well as scaffold instruction that builds bridges between cultural experiences of diverse students and curriculum contents to promote higher academic performance (Jørgensen et al., 2020). An instructor in the social sciences noted: 'To promote effective online teaching that meets the needs of all students, I use books, articles, films, music, audio recordings and varied teaching resources to explain and visualize examples of diverse learners and communication'. The preceding aligns with Dover's (2013) statement that culturally responsive educators use constructivist methods to develop bridges to connect students' cultural references to academic skills and concepts. Instructors agreed with the above statements and articulated that 'tapping into students' experiences helped them to connect to teaching materials and concepts in their online learning space

Another instructor in education stated: 'As a professor of teacher education, I design online courses that tap into students' cultural and past educational experiences to help them connect to the information or say the learning contents'. This instructor reflected her awareness of using students' cultural knowledge as a resource to facilitate students' engagement and participation in the online discussion forums.

Interactions to facilitate students' academic engagement

All the instructors recognized the importance of communication with students in online learning. For example, they communicated with students via weekly announcements to remind them of upcoming topics, group work formation, due dates and modifications that they may make to the course. For instance, an Instructor shared the following statement as an important way to keep students progressing toward course goals and expectations.

Communication with students is very important to me because sometimes with written academic language at the graduate level, some of them struggle. Especially if they are international students and are not too well informed about what is conventional language and what they should be using. I find it important to inform them about that in the beginning, so that there's no miscommunication or misunderstanding which may become a bigger problem later. (Engineering faculty, about interactions in online learning).

Furthermore, all the instructors indicated the use of digital tools in the Learning/Course Management Systems to create space for students to have consistent communications. They maintained consistent communication and provided feedback to students' questions in the discussion posts. This highlights the instructors' awareness of how cultural differences can affect how they communicate (Kim & Park, 2015). Multiple instructors reported creating avenues to establish consistent communication avenues and feedback to students' questions to enhance intercultural interaction in online learning. Their views are summed up in one instructor's explanation,

Studies have shown that differences in the communication styles of learners from different cultures have been reported in varying contexts (Yang et al., 2010). Hence, instructors must incorporate strategies that demonstrate interpersonal understanding, and social networking diversity to help students exchange ideas and experiences with each other (Mittelmeier et al., 2018).

Incorporating culturally responsive teaching

Gay (2010) asserts that teachers need to understand that culture and differences are important ideologies for CRT. In that regard, about 50 of the instructors acknowledged that online teaching may focus on social, teaching and cognitive presence to connect with the cultural, social and educational backgrounds of students (Garrison et al., 2000). For instance, one instructor stated:

Furthermore, almost all the instructors emphasized that the inclusion of CRP in the online curriculum helps to create accommodation and caring for student engagement and participation in an online discussion to achieve higher academic performance. For example, one instructor in engineering noted:

'Using CRP in my class helps students to do critical dialogue to connect readings to everyday life experiences'. For 90% of the instructors, "CRP in online education allows them to engage students to do critical reflection to understand how cultural and social experiences shape their understanding of the concepts learned." The interviews revealed that instructors in health sciences, social sciences and education provided students with cultural awareness activity and shared their cultural backgrounds in the early state of the online course. The aim was to provide students opportunities to share their cultural backgrounds with instructors and peers which Jørgensen et al. (2020) believe is the beginning of trusting relationships and to get to know each other's background. An instructor in health sciences illustrated: 'I have students from different cultural backgrounds, so I respect and honor their cultures, preferences, and opinions. I also let all students practice same to foster effective cross-cultural collaborative learning'. Another instructor added a similar view in the following,

I'm a White male and teach online classes in African American studies. I am cognizant of my attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about different cultural groups [students], so I design instructional strategies that enable students to connect to the learning contents. I use learning activities—cultural awareness activity in the first week that allows students to get to know each other's background and experiences they bring to the online classroom. I believe this promotes CRT in my class. (Social Sciences faculty, about Incorporating CRT)

According to Freire (1998), instructors must create learning environments where students develop voices and perspectives and are allowed to participate (fully) in the multiple discourses available in a learning context. Freire (1998) identifies that the preceding will elevate students from being information consumers to people who are capable of constructing and deconstructing information. Again, recognizing the multiple cultures students bring to the online environment helps instructors to design conducive learning environments that foster students' engagement and critical dialogue that work to connect course contents relatable to their life experiences. Consequently, it is in the right direction that Gómez-Rey et al. (2016) call for instructors to be aware of the advantages of cultural factors in online education and the need to design culturally relevant instruction that is relatable to the needs of diverse online learners.

As an instructor, sometimes you get into the occasion that you see some posts that are not culturally very acceptable, so I think at that time, it's best to isolate and insulate those aspects. Again, it is also important to address issues of sensitivity in my online classes to help students, especially diverse learners. I create a conducive online space that allows students to share their personal experiences and address misunderstandings in the discussion forum. (Physical Sciences faculty, about multicultural education)

The instructors cited above showed in-depth understanding of the relevance of multiculturalism in online education to help them design instructional activities to meet the learning needs of all students. As noted by Bennett (2001), multiculturalism in online learning provides the chance for instructors to recognize the importance of classroom climate, satisfaction, social interaction, motivation, and issues of culture and language communication.

Integrating diverse and use of internationalized learning contents
Interviews indicated that all instructors agreed on the need to design instructional online learning with a focus on integrated global online learning environments to include multiple cultures and contents that share with the cultures and experiences of students. Examples of incorporating films to promote global curriculum in online courses are Frontline: Ghosts of Rwanda that featured interviews and personal reflections to teach genocide. In the light of the foregoing, an instructor in education remarked:

I integrate global contents in my online course to facilitate intercultural interactions in the discussion forums. I believe this will provide opportunities for international students to share ideas and perspectives on topics based on their cultural and past experiences. Inclusion of global or international

contents provides opportunities for students to do collaborative activities via sharing of new ideas from their peers and instructors. Global content promotes critical thinking and dialogue for students in online learning. (Education faculty, diverse learning contents)

For this instructor, incorporating global themes or international curricula into the learning resources and academic assignments for students promote collaborations, increases engagement between students and promotes critical thinking and dialogue in online learning (Jørgensen et al., 2020). An instructor in social sciences also recalled: 'I engage students via instructional activities that comprise global contents like globally related contents documentaries and films such as 'Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai' and the 'The Rising Girls' and articles 'Taking on the Taboos That Keep Women Out of India's Workforce' to help students connect to the learning materials and co-construct new knowledge'. Similarly, an instructor shared:

I teach environmental sciences and often use global contents materials to help students get different perspectives on how environmental challenges are solved in other countries—they serve as agents to facilitate cross-cultural collaborations and diverse contributions to build new ideas. (Physical Sciences faculty, diverse learning contents)

On a similar note, an instructor in engineering noted:

To meet the needs of international students and a better understanding of individual cultural differences in my online class, I use diverse cultural contexts by creating an online classroom environment that accommodate, celebrates, and builds upon the cultural capital that students bring to the virtual space. (Engineering faculty, diverse learning environment)

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of 60 instructors from 12 colleges and universities on CRP in online education. This study adopted Scott's CRC theory (Scott et al., 2015) to support data collection, data analysis and the discussion of the results. The findings of this study revealed that instructors, particularly, those in education, engineering, health, and social sciences recognized the varied cultural experiences students bring to the online classrooms based on which they developed content that connect to students' experiences and cultural backgrounds. These instructors recognized the cultural experiences students bring to the online classroom as multicultural resources and cultural capital that they could tap into to design dimensional practice to help diverse learners succeed in online education (Du et al., 2015). Instructors used instructional strategies such as collaborative learning activities to help students engage in online discussions and interactions about course contents with the purpose of becoming active participants in the construction of new knowledge.

Another important finding of this study was that instructors used diverse resources to facilitate students' interactions, preferences and understanding of the course content to help the students succeed in online learning. These included varied reading content, global content and culturally relevant resources to improve the impact of multicultural education in online learning environments. Furthermore, instructors particularly those in education, engineering, health and social sciences used globally related content and readings such as books, articles, audios and films to help diverse students, particularly, international students to connect to course content (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009; Jørgensen et al., 2020). Instructors indicated that the inclusion of global reading materials/resources and examples provided opportunities for diverse students to contribute to the construction of new knowledge as well as become active learners in online classrooms and connect to the learning materials and contents in online education. Such strategies conform with the CRC theory as the incorporation of diverse content brings more meaning to the curriculum and eventually builds a community of online students (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2015).

Another interesting finding from this study was that the instructors used cross-cultural interactions as pedagogical practices to facilitate students' engagement and participation to help students attain academic achievement in online education. According to instructors using cross-cultural interactions

empowered diverse students to interact with both peers and instructors from different socio-cultural backgrounds in online classrooms. This activity helped students contribute to the co-construction of new knowledge via consistent dialogue and sharing of ideas from different perspectives (Scott et al., 2015). Liu et al. (2010) recommended that instructors must incorporate learning activities that 'accommodate different cultural pedagogy' and 'appreciate cultural differences' (p. 182), co-construction, and negotiation with peers (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Schreiber & Valle, 2013), and improve internalization of knowledge with the opportunity to examine personal views, respond to the multiple and challenging views of colleagues, and negotiate shared understandings (Schreiber & Valle, 2013).

V. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study underscores the growing importance of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in online education and highlights instructors' perceptions as a critical factor in its effective implementation. The findings indicate that instructors generally recognize the value of culturally responsive teaching for promoting student engagement, inclusivity, and equitable learning outcomes in virtual environments. However, despite positive attitudes toward CRP, many instructors face challenges related to limited professional training, time constraints, and difficulties adapting culturally responsive strategies to online platforms.

The study also reveals the need for stronger institutional support, including targeted professional development, flexible course design frameworks, and access to inclusive digital tools. Addressing these factors can empower instructors to move beyond awareness toward consistent and meaningful integration of CRP in online teaching. Overall, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive online pedagogy and provides practical insights for educators and institutions seeking to foster culturally responsive and equitable online learning environments.

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