A Modest Feature for Repositioning Minoritized Online Students to Support Disciplinary Engagement and Achievement

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Abstract: A feature was added to an existing online graduate education course to support engagement and learning of students who find themselves minoritized by the composition of classes and/or the disciplinary knowledge in those classes. This feature was a reflection on *cultural engagement.* It led to a dramatic increase in students' use of sociopolitical controversies to frame their engagement. This allowed the instructor to *reposition* minoritized students and helped majoritized students recognize their potential implicit bias.

Keywords: equity, access, online learning, productive disciplinary engagement, repositioning

Recent years have seen an explosion of research in the learning sciences examining the role of power and privilege in the pursuit of "equitable" education (e.g., Esmonde & Booker, 2017). This work examines the inherently political nature of school learning and the devastation of "deficit-oriented" responses to inequity. A core concern is that politicized curricula and implicit biases in teachers undermines the engagement (and therefore achievement) of students who are "minoritized" by curricula, teachers, and peers (Bang, 2015). Indeed, that is precisely what happened in 2018 when the first author was teaching *Assessment in Schools,* an online graduate course. One student complained bitterly in the anonymous course evaluations that the instructor and the textbook were so "politically correct" it was difficult to even imagine applying course knowledge while completing weekly public (to the class) "wikifolio" assignments and posting threaded comments.

While certainly not the same as systemic injury from racist practices, this complaint was significant for three reasons. First, this course is central to ongoing efforts for iteratively refining an online course design framework called Participatory Learning and Assessment (PLA, Hickey, Chartrand, & Andrews, accepted). Second, PLA uses Engle & Conant's (2002) principles for *productive disciplinary engagement* (PDE) to help students "problematize" course content from their own perspectives and hold students accountable for their participation in disciplinary discourse. This student's perceived inability to apply course content likely also undermined engagement with formative self-assessments and four informal reflections (*contextual, collaborative, consequential,* and *conceptual engagement*) in each assignment, and achievement on three graded exams.

The third reason this student's complaint was significant is because it exemplified the concerns that Agarwal and Sengupta-Irving (2019) raised about using PDE without attending to issues of power. After conceding that the PDE principles might expand the participation of minoritized students relative to traditional curricula, they questioned the extent to which this will occur. This is because minoritized students are routinely "positioned out" of classroom discourse by more advantaged and powerful teachers and peers (e.g., Philip, Gupta, Elby, & Turpen, 2016). Specifically, Agarwal and Sengupta-Irving argued that (1) problematizing content in ways that challenge culturally dominant ways of knowing can lead to racialized controversies, (2) supporting *intellectual* authority may ignore the power of *social* authority, (3) gaining authority to share and justify one's ideas is easier than critiquing and revising ideas, and (4) minoritized students may fail to connect disciplinary concepts with the majoritized racial and cultural meanings embedded in educational resources.

In response to their concerns, Agarwal and Sengupta-Irving extended the PDE principles to support instructor *repositioning*. They introduced four new *Connective and Productive Disciplinary Engagement* (CPDE) principles for repositioning minoritized students: (1) use sociopolitical uncertainties to help problematize disciplinary knowledge, (2) curb undue social authority, (3) ensure equitable accountability, and (4) treat sociopolitical controversies as resources. In order to support repositioning via public instructor comments in the course, a fifth reflection was added for *Cultural Engagement: "How did your cultural, racial, sexual, (dis)ability and/or gender orientation shape the way you engaged in this assignment?"* We believe the *seemingly* modest nature of this new feature is important because it might appeal to adjuncts with little control over assignments and no control over curriculum, and it might mitigate the resistance that instructors may encounter from more assertive approaches to equity (e.g., Walsh & Tsurusaki. 2018)

To explore the impact of the new reflection and instructor repositioning, we compared the wikifolos and threaded discussions in the 2018 section with those in 2019 section. We analyzed the contents of the wikifolios (excluding the cultural reflections) and threaded comments to determine the extent to which students used sociopolitical controversies to problematize course content in the two courses; the content of the cultural reflection

were analyzed separately to document dominant themes. In the 2018 section, 22 students posted 230 wikifolios across the eleven assignments. Just 26 of them (11%) were coded as including sociopolitical controversies. The majority of the 26 (15) sociopolitical references were made in an assignment that covered assessment *bias* All but one of the remaining sociopolitical references were made in an assignment that covered *standardized testing.*

In 2019, two students introduced themselves as members of the LGBTQ+ community. One of those two included a reference to that status in the cultural reflection on the first graded assignment: "As a member of an often marginalized group, I take particular care in highlighting a wide range of opinions and perspectives in my classroom, especially when selecting texts and other media for consumption in the classroom." A different student announced a conservative political orientation within the cultural reflection on the fifth assignment (on *Reliability and Bias*). This student stated "The personal factor in question here is my world-view that rests on conservatism, and that certainly was apparent in how lopsided my engagement was given the two areas of this assignment." Rather than chastise the student for shallow engagement, the instructor elected to encourage the student to further explore her biases. The obvious open question is whether the instructor should have suggested that the student's willingness to accept a potentially reduced grade because "life is not fair" was a false equivalency when applied to the problem of racial bias in classroom assessment. The instructor instead pointed out that the course was designed to allow flexibility in engagement.

Looking across 198 completed wikifolios and comments, 112 of the 198 wikifolios (56%) in 2019 made reference to sociopolitical controversies. Notably there were at least four weekly references to sociopolitical issues across students. Nearly half of the sociopolitical controversies concerned assessment bias, but nearly half of those were raised outside of the *Reliability and Fairness* assignment. Notably, just under one third of the comments that were judged to be sociopolitical controversies were responses to instructor comments or questions.

Analysis of the cultural reflections found that 35 surfaced the sort of implicit bias that critical teacher educators have long argued is the actual source of racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes. Another 22 of the cultural reflections that were coded as sociopolitical controversies concerned the needs of English language learners or disabled students. Notably, there were no complaint about bias or inability to apply content in the 2019 anonymous course evaluations.

We concluded that the cultural reflections and repositioning (a) increased the use of sociopolitical controversies to problematize student engagement, (b) created a "safe space" for discussing sociopolitical controversies and personal factors that then spilled over into wikifolios and the threaded discussions, and (c) helped members of dominant groups better appreciate the privilege and potential biases. By creating additional associations with *personal* experience (rather than just professional), the cultural reflections likely resulted in more generative learning for *all* students by drawing on the unique perspectives of minoritized students.

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