



ARE VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS COLORBLIND?

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E-learning, increasingly employed in nursing education, has been embraced as a means to enhance options for all students, particularly those with limited educational opportunities. Although a desire to increase access for underserved students is often cited, disparities in availability, usage, and quality of e-learning persist among diverse households and student populations when compared to the general population. In this article, these issues will be examined along with reflection on the extent to which culture has been integrated into on-line design and instruction. Historical and cultural aspects, circumscribing virtual classrooms, are discussed using African Americans as an exemplar. The imperative to harness the democratizing potential of this educational format is underscored. In this article, culture will be examined in light of the significant growth in on-line nursing education over the past several decades. (Index words: E-learning; Virtual classroom; Culture; Nursing education; African Americans; Digital divide) *J Prof Nurs* 31:407–415, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

TAKING COURSES AND completing degrees on-line has become an established enterprise in higher education and is increasingly employed in nursing education. In their 10th annual survey of on-line learning, the Babson Survey Research Group and The College Board found that during the fall, 2011 term, the number of students taking at least one on-line course exceeded 6.1 million. The survey, reflecting responses of more than 2,800 academic leaders, reported that 32% of higher education students were taking at least one course on-line in 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In addition to the traditional on-line courses currently being offered throughout the nation, a cadre of major universities are promoting and using massive open on-line courses, an international platform that offers classes and tuition free to thousands of students across the globe (Mazoue, 2013). Universities benefit from on-line instruction because student enrollments can be boosted without increasing classroom facilities and students can be enrolled from a larger geographical area. In 2011, chief

academic officers in 63% of higher education institutions in the United States reported that on-line learning was critical to their institutions' long-term strategic planning, especially in light of the recent economic downturn (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In addition to the institutional benefits of e-learning, flexibility and accessibility often make on-line instruction a preferred option for students (Hill, 2006, Jefferson & Arnold, 2009). The goal of this article is to call attention to some of the cultural dimensions related to e-learning because it is increasingly becoming a primary educational modality in nursing education.

E-learning involves teaching and learning supported by electronic technologies that provide a structure for learning directed at impacting knowledge construction by the learner (Tavangarian, Leypold, Nolting, Roser, & Voight, 2004). Through e-learning, instructors and learners are connected for interactivity and collaborative sharing (Cognitive Design Solutions, 2005). This form of learning has been embraced as a means to democratize the educational experience for all students and to enhance access to educational options, including low-income and racial/ethnic minority students with limited educational opportunities (Buzzetto-Moore, 2008; Olaniran, 2009). However, whether e-learning promotes comparable access to educational experiences for all students, or contributes to an inequitable experience, is in question. The conundrum of the role culture plays in on-line learning is equally important. Some educators, for example, have referred to on-line learning as a “colorblind” environment or one in which the culture of the instructor and student is not considered

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relevant (Enger, 2006, p.7). However, others contend that a multiculturalist perspective, whereby conditions are constructed to allow participants to understand the particularities of their own and others' life experiences and culture, is optimal (Bruch, Jehangir, Jacobs, & Ghere, 2004). These questions are quite pertinent for nursing because on-line learning is being mainstreamed into nursing programs and is often touted as an expedient and cost-effective way of recruiting, retaining, and providing curricular offerings, especially to nontraditional and racial/ethnic minority students. Although most of the schools of nursing employ hybrid courses and programs, the number of exclusively on-line programs in nursing is increasing. Currently, there are more than 100 fully on-line Registered Nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs, greater than 400 Registered Nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs offered, at least, partially on-line, and numerous on-line Master of Science in Nursing and Doctor of Nursing Practice programs (AACN, 2014; Kolowich, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to explore cultural dimensions and implications of on-line learning for nursing education. African Americans are presented as an exemplar because persistent inequities are well documented in this racial/ethnic group's educational and life experiences (Chae, Lincoln, & Jackson, 2011; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2002; Spillane, 2012). In addition, more on-line related research is available, albeit limited, on African Americans than other groups, although the need to address this issue for all U.S. racial/ethnic minority students is acknowledged. The intent of this article is not to proscribe but rather to raise consciousness about the role of culture in the on-line teaching-learning process in nursing education.

Does a Digital Divide Still Exist?

E-learning, for African Americans, has been likened to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark ruling that legally ended segregation in public schools (Journell, 2007). Segregated schools were a consequence of Jim Crow laws requiring separate facilities and institutions for Blacks and Whites in all areas of daily living: educational institutions, drinking fountains, restrooms, eating facilities, housing and neighborhoods, recreational areas, businesses, hospitals, and even cemeteries (Landman, 2004). *Brown v. Board of Education* aimed to eliminate separate and unequal schools. Despite this legal ruling more than half a century ago, the extent to which African American students currently have equal access to a quality education is disputable. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that e-learning may not give equal access and may, in fact, heighten existing gaps in enrollment and retention and affect student engagement and satisfaction with courses (Journell, 2007). Related empirical data are not available; thus, possible adverse effects of e-learning are unknown. Given this, consideration of the literature and contemplation of the history and experience of African Americans, relative to technology and e-learning, are important and provide a foundation for further exploration.

There are disparate views about the utility and potential of e-learning for African Americans. These

distinct perspectives are rooted in the debate about the digital divide, which refers to an imbalance in terms of physical access to technology and the resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital citizen (Selwyn, 2004; Whaley, 2004). It is the chasm between individuals, racial/ethnic groups, households, businesses, geographic areas, gender, or different socioeconomic levels and respective opportunities to access and use of information and communication technologies for a wide range of activities. Primary focus has been on the digital split related to access to technology and socioeconomic status. In the 1990s, a robust literature documented marked inequities in access to technology and related academic performance and career mobility among students from different socioeconomic groups (Agada, 1999; Bucy, 2000; Doctor, 1991). However, extensive governmental and private efforts have been made to close these divides, and many academicians, technologists, and others are convinced that a digital divide no longer exists (Bates, Malakoff, Kane, & Pulidindi, 2012; Okwumabua, Walker, Hu, & Watson, 2011). Similarly, the U.S. Census Bureau (2013) and other sources (Raine, 2012) have documented narrowing disparities in the use and access to technology among racial/ethnic groups. Despite these findings, fewer African Americans, when compared to the general population, have access to computers and Internet service in their homes, although they may have access in public settings (Raine, 2012). In 2009, 65% of White Americans and 46% of African Americans had home broadband (Pew Research Center, 2014). By 2013, 74% of Whites and 62% of Blacks had broadband access at home (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although broadband rates have steadily grown for all Americans, lower levels of broadband use limit access to technology resources and opportunities (Raine, 2009). For example, most on-line educators agree that broadband (high speed), versus dial up service, is necessary to be successful in on-line courses. In addition, it is noteworthy that functionality and growth of smartphone technology have been significant over the past several years, are more readily available across all demographic groups, and have contributed to diminishing the digital divide. Smartphones are not a platform for e-learning, however.

Many scholars argue that the digital divide, often associated with socioeconomic status, is attributed to differential access; however, access is only part of the issue. Exploring the qualities of differential use and the "social and cultural norms that reinforce" the digital divide is also crucial (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2009, pg. 246). Despite a shrinking digital divide related to socioeconomic status and access (Cotton & Jelenewicz, 2006; Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2001b), there is a significant body of literature suggesting that a digital divide, based solely on race, persists (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Mullis, Mullis, & Cornille, 2007; Slate, Manuel, & Brinson, 2002). As consideration is given to improving access to on-line learning, it must be acknowledged that closing the digital divide means more than merely providing the necessary technology for

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