



Online collaborative learning activities: The perspectives of African American female students



Jianxia Du ^{a,*}, Xun Ge ^b, Jianzhong Xu ^c

^a University of Macau, China

^b University of Oklahoma, USA

^c Mississippi State University, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 February 2014

Received in revised form

16 October 2014

Accepted 21 November 2014

Available online 28 November 2014

Keywords:

Cooperative/collaborative learning

Distance education and telelearning

Gender studies

Homework

Interactive learning environments

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the perspectives of African American female students toward online collaborative learning. The participants were nine African American female graduate students in an online multimedia instructional design course in the southeastern United States. A qualitative study was conducted, with data obtained from open-ended interviews, along with relevant posts on chat rooms and online bulletin boards in relation to an assessable collaborative online assignment. Data revealed that the perspectives of African American women toward online collaborative learning could be categorized into four themes, including (a) preference to work in a racially mixed group, (b) preference to be a leader in the group, (c) learning-oriented reasons (rather than social or peer oriented reasons) for online collaborative learning, and (d) timid attitude toward online discussions.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Collaborative learning has been increasingly used in educational settings. Literature continues to support collaborative learning and its positive effects on students (Harvard, Du, & Xu, 2008). It has become widely accepted, in recent years, that students learn more effectively when they collaborate with others (Pattanpichet, 2011; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002; Yazici, 2004). As a result, more and more instructors are incorporating collaborative learning as a major instructional strategy in online environments. However, little research has been conducted to examine the role of culture and gender on online collaborative learning (Ashong & Commander, 2012; Boyette, 2008).

Consequently, it would be critical to examine the perspectives of African American female students toward online collaborative learning, as culture may play an important role in online learning settings (McLoughlin, 2001; Uzner, 2009), and as the increasing number of African American students have enrolled in online courses (Ashong & Commander, 2012; Waits & Lewis, 2003). A study such as this would be particularly important, as African American students may approach online collaborative learning differently (e.g., negative attitudes toward online learning and few online posts; Okwumabua, Walker, Hu, & Watson, 2011; Rovai & Ponton, 2005), and as many African American female students may encounter specific challenges in online collaborative environments (e.g., online discussions; Du & Anderson, 2003).

Our justification for focusing on African American female students in the present study is further informed by the trend in post-baccalaureate enrollment over the past three decades (Aud et al., 2012). Postbaccalaureate enrollment has increased every year since 1983, reaching 2.9 million students in 2010. Specifically, in every year since 1988, women have consisted of more than half of the post baccalaureate enrollment, reaching 59% in 2010. The largest gender gap within a single racial/ethnic group occurred among African American students. In 2010, the number of African American males and females enrolling in postbaccalaureate programs were 106,000 and 256,000, in which African American females accounted for 71%.

Likewise, according to another survey (US Census Bureau, 2011), African Americans females are beating out all other groups, regardless race or gender, when it comes to college enrollment. For example, 9.7% of African Americans females are enrolled in college, followed by Asian females (8.7%), Asian males (8.4%), Caucasian females (7.1%), and African Americans males (7.0%). Furthermore, African Americans

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macao, China. Tel.: +86 853 8397 8780.
E-mail address: jianxiadu@umac.mo (J. Du).

females are exceeding African Americans males in regards to earning Master and Doctoral degrees (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education [JBHE], 2004). The data shows that African American females earned 63.1% of all doctorates awarded to African Americans. Since 1990 the number of African American females earning Ph.Ds have increased from 550 to 1037, which represents an 89% increase. In contrast, Ph.Ds. awarded to African American males increased 73%, specifically from 351 to 607 (Hayes, Cunningham, & Courseault, 2006). Given these demographic changes in higher education, we can no longer afford to overlook the perspectives of American African female students, with their participation in online collaborative activities in particular.

2. Related literature

In order to better understand learners' experience, we examined African American female students' online learning experiences through the lenses of African Americans' learning preferences as well as motivational theory focusing on their cultural identity and self-determination. We hope these lenses will help to shed light on the perspectives of African American female students toward online collaborative learning activities.

2.1. African Americans' learning preferences

Culture is defined as “the beliefs, value systems, norms, mores, myths, and structural elements of a given organization, tribe, or society” (Watson, Ho, & Raman, 1994, p. 46). Individuals and groups carry the culture (e.g., norms, values, and attitudes) which manifests itself in how a group interprets and reacts to its environment (Collis, 1999).

African Americans in general are high context learners who are field-dependent, and they prefer to work in groups as opposed to working individually (White, 1992). Boykin (1986) reiterated that African Americans learn more in environments that not only have affect, but in ones that are harmonious, involve cooperation, and include a strong sense of community. Other confirmations of the importance of the social component to African American learning come from Gallien and Peterson (2004) who reported how African American learners take on personable approaches to learning rather than independent and analytical means. In addition, Anderson and Adams (1992) echoed similar findings as they reported how African American students have “competence in cooperation, performance, visual perception, symbolic expression, narrative, and are less comfortable when they must complete tasks which require independence, or verbal skills” (p. 21).

The importance of the learning preferences among African American learners is further corroborated in the study by Duncan and Barber-Freeman (2008). In their empirical study, participation in learning community was found to connect with students' academic success. They ascertained that African American graduate students who joined learning communities, where learning goals are intentionally defined in response to their learning preferences, outperformed those who did not participate. In learning communities, African American students earned higher grades, improved writing skills, increased communication skills, and formed life-long friendships with peers.

2.2. Possible selves and academic outcomes

Self-concept, i.e. a sense of self, is a multidimensional construct used to depict the outcome of the complicated process of how one views oneself (Leflot, Onghena, & Colpin, 2010). African American students have a strong self-concept about themselves rooted in their ethnic, cultural, and historical background. Research indicates that African American students' beliefs about self and their race identity influence their educational development. Chavous et al. (2003) found that students who possess positive view towards their self-identity as an African American tend to have more positive academic performance and group identification. It is also implied in the same study that students' beliefs in their racial identity may link to their future academic attainment.

To explain the plausible relation between self-concept and academic outcome, Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry resorted to the concept of possible selves (PS) (2006). We would like to explore how African American female students' self-concept and identity drives their motivation for academic success in online collaborative learning environments. Literature indicates that PS differs in self-regulatory effectiveness. As Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) stated.

Self-regulatory effort improves when individuals have both positive PS (goals) and negative PS (fears) in the same domain. When PSs are balanced, individuals select the strategies that both increase the likelihood of becoming like the positive PS and decrease the likelihood of becoming like the negative PSs, thereby focusing on self-regulation and broadening effort. (p. 188)

An expected PS is linked to strategies to attaining the goal while a feared PS is linked to strategies to avoid them. Oyserman et al.'s (2006) study demonstrated that social psychological conceptualization of selves is a powerful motivational source. Depending on the circumstances, learners may take either discrepancy-increasing (prevention) or discrepancy-reducing strategies (promotion).

2.3. Motivation theory: Self-determination and self-efficacy

Another line of literature, which may help us to understand African American female students' experiences in online collaborative learning environments, is the self-determination theory, which identifies three basic needs: *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* that underlie the nature and quality of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy refers to the feeling to be in control of different facets of one's life. Perceptions of autonomy are important beyond motivation. It helps us to understand that progressively more internalized intrinsic motivation tends to more self-regulatory behaviors. Relatedness refers to students' sense of belonging in a learning community, such as acceptance, inclusion, and support. Relatedness indicates the quality of the relationship between students and teachers (Reeve, 2006). In a collaborative learning environment, learners develop shared understanding and peer relationship over time and establish a common language through working towards common goals. This kind of relatedness can motivate African American female students in particular to encourage each other to overcome obstacles and achieve their learning goals. Competence is the need of feeling that one can be successful

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/348290>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/348290>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)