
Ideologies in Online Learning Environments: The Need for Multiple Stories

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Abstract

This article uses the concept of the “single story” to address specific student stories in an online class environment. First, it discusses the known story of online students who engage in critical and analytical thinking while interacting with their peers and instructor. It then moves to another story that we often do not hear, namely the story of the student who engages in disruptive behavior that threatened the equilibrium of the classroom by injecting anger, fear, and mistrust of each other into an otherwise successful and highly acceptable online experience for students and the teacher. The article shows that we need to focus closely on how we apply learner-centered pedagogies to make sure that we foster multiple stories in our discussions of online teaching and to make sure that our need for power does not limit our understanding of our own humanity and the humanity of those who we objectify—or those who we subject to the single story we created about them.

I recently re-visited Chimamanda Adichie’s (2009) TED Talk on “The Danger of a Single Story.” A Nigerian writer and storyteller, Adichie tells us that hearing only one story, especially a story that gets told over and over again, about a people or a country, with little knowledge of the people or country, will lead to stereotypes, half-truths, and prejudice. It will never allow us to get to know a multifaceted person, or a diverse community, country, or continent. Our insistence to separate and simplify, or, as Adichie puts it, “the consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” (Adichie, 2009). Single stories are always connected to power because, in her words, “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” (Adichie, 2009).

“Your country is so beautiful!” was the most common expression when I first introduced myself to my new colleagues. “You have been to Austria? Where did you go?” would be my response. Often, I would learn that my colleagues hadn’t been to my country yet, but, they would say, “We watched the *Sound of Music* every year, sometimes twice or three times. It’s the most beautiful story. I know the lyrics to all the songs. And Edelweiss, it’s such a moving song. You are so lucky to have such beautiful lyrics for your national anthem. You are so lucky to be from Austria.” Even though my responses might vary, depending on whether I wanted to sing Austria’s national anthem—not composed by Rodgers and Hammerstein—or whether I wanted to talk about growing up in a very small, remote village far away from Salzburg and Vienna, I

knew that I was part of the single story told about Austria, a story that I didn't know existed until I left the country.

Definitive stories, and a propensity to focus on a single story, are part of my world as an international, a woman, a researcher, and an educator. Single stories surround me. Single stories are being told about me and about my profession. I hang on to single stories about Austrians, Americans, administrators, and educators. In this article, I point out some of the single stories that are part of my academic field. I show some of the accepted stories, and bring in the stories that make us think and reconsider our current approaches to teaching, especially in online learning environments. Specifically, I address two interrelated aspects of online teaching. First, I provide a brief glimpse of the single story told by researchers and teachers about online teaching principles. In this section, I also point out the absence of another story—the story of the teachers whose online classrooms did not achieve the promised and hoped-for goals highlighted in much of the literature disseminated by online teachers and administrators. Second, I move the discussion to specific student stories in an online class environment. This discussion begins with the known story of online students who engage in critical and analytical thinking. It then moves to another story, the story of the student who engages in disruptive behavior that threatens the equilibrium of the classroom by injecting anger, fear, and mistrust of each other into an otherwise successful and highly acceptable online experience for students and the teacher. I conclude by showing that we need to foster multiple stories in our online teaching practices to make sure that our need for power, as Adichie (2009) pointed out, does not limit our understanding of our own humanity and the humanity of those who we objectify—or those who we subject to the single story we created about them. I show that learner-centered pedagogies (Huba & Freed, 2000; Oblinger, 2005; Weimer, 2013) can help us in creating spaces in our classrooms and in our research that welcome multiple stories and multiple approaches to online teaching.

My research is influenced by social-constructivist and transformative epistemologies, emphasizing that we make sense of the world based on historical and social factors, and that meaning is constructed based on our experiences in the particular discourse communities with which we identify. The stories I tell, the questions I ask, the specific examples I provide, and the analytical perspective I take, also highlight possibilities for creating positive change and for reforming educational practices that marginalize the experiences of individuals and groups outside the accepted academic norm (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln, et al., 2011; Mertens, 2009). I include narrative strategies and the concept of telling many stories, not only to contextualize my own positionalities as a researcher and to make sense of my own experiences (Squire, 2008), but to also highlight the need and our ability to re-envision ourselves as teachers and practitioners. In addition, narrative approaches can become a catalyst for transformative approaches, prompting us to connect our stories and our research to actions that lead to change in established practices and that encourage inclusion over marginalization, and diversity over uniformity.

The Success of Online Teachers: Fitting the Mold

I started my teaching career in the United States more than 20 years ago. In the early years of my career, teaching with technology meant to include an online component into the classroom. Mostly, we used online discussions while we were all in the same classroom. The internet was not yet fully available, and we relied on the intranet—an environment that let

computers in a single classroom talk to each other. Students who were quiet in face-to-face discussions would turn to their computer screen, and many times, they would engage in analytical and critical discussions. It went well for me in the wired classroom, and I presented at conferences and wrote about it, enthusiastically claiming the benefits of the wired classroom, and providing suggestions that would help other teachers in computer-assisted classrooms achieve success. (Gruber, 1995; Gruber, Peyton, & Bruce, 1995; Gruber, 1999)

Early research on online communication, especially asynchronous online discussions, argued that because students could log on anytime, it would lead to increased discussions with all students (Eastmond, 1994; Gruber, 1996). Furthermore, comments by Selfe and Hawisher (1999) pointed to the online classroom as more equitable. Nobody had to worry about gender and race, two features that can easily be determined in face-to-face discussions. Furthermore, economic status or geographic locations were only visible if online students would expose it. Instead, the focus would remain on the interactions and discussions that students could have in online environments, leaving out potentially discriminatory behavior based on race, gender, class, and economic background. (Selfe & Hawisher, 1999)

Additionally, researchers have pointed out that students would be able to reflect more fully before they commented in an online environment because the messages could be read and reread before any response would be made. (Mason & Kaye, 1990). This would help students who, in the traditional classroom, were not quick to answer because they needed to collect their thoughts first. It would also help the students who were quiet in class, not because they weren't interested in participating, but because they were introverted or from backgrounds where it was not expected or acceptable to speak up. (Sullivan, 2001, 2002). According to Linda Harasim (1995), for example, "asynchronous network communications tend to equalize participation, offering less opportunity to dominate and a greater opportunity for people who are reluctant to speak up in face-to face communication." (p. 206). Overall, research studies have focused much of their attention on the possibilities of online environments, ensuring teachers and administrators of the benefits of incorporating online components into the classroom.

Many of the discussions for online teaching have followed the discussions of researchers interested in exploring the move from a lecture-based approach to a student-based approach that promoted active engagement and participation of students in classroom interactions. Huba and Freed (2000), strong proponents of learner-centered education, specifically focused on learning instead of teaching, on the importance of inquiry, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving in the classroom, because, as they pointed out, "all learning—even the acquisition of a new fact—required the integration of new material with existing knowledge and is achieved through complex mental processes." (p. 112). Similarly, Maryellen Weimer (2013) supports Huba and Freed, stressing the importance of making students responsible for their learning and the importance of promoting "learning by facilitating the acquisition of knowledge." (p. 10). Similar to Huba and Freed (2000), Diana Oblinger (2005), vice president of EDUCAUSE and director of the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative, has argued very convincingly that in online course environments we need to follow learner-centered approaches and "move beyond the notion of a course as covering content to the idea of a course as constructing a series of learning environments and activities" (p. 14). This has led researchers and practitioners in the field to point out that learner-centered online course environments need to be clear and understandable and need to take into account how students learn and communicate. These environments need to engage students, acknowledge their interests and motivation, and provide personal control and choice to the learners. Furthermore, learner-centered environments need to

encourage active learning, provide feedback, and respect the diverse talents of students in the online learning environment. (Cools, Evans, & Redmond, 2009; McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Phipps, 2005; Teemant et al., 2005). As teachers, then, we understand that we can be successful in online teaching environments if we follow the guidelines outlined by advocates of learner-centered education, especially if we incorporate, as Weimer (2013) asks us to do, “carefully sequenced assignment sets, which increase the likelihood of success, with clear demonstrations of how effort makes a difference, and with teaching that lets students own the responsibility for learning and for the decisions they make about learning.” (p. 17).

In addition to encouraging a learner-centered environment, researchers also emphasize the importance of creating a social presence in our online classrooms. According to Tu and McIsaac (2002), such presence is defined as "the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction to another intellectual entity in the CMC environment" (p. 146). Early researchers have pointed out that instructors with a higher level of social presence are perceived as more positive and effective (Christophel, 1990), and that interaction skills that create teacher immediacy and encouragement (Gunawardena, 1995) are seen as desirable qualities in online teachers.

To achieve social presence, Steven Aragon (2003) has noted that designers need to develop a welcome message, including student profiles, incorporating audio, limit class size, and structuring collaborative learning activities. Instructors, the most important players in creating social presence, need to contribute to discussion boards, promptly answer email, give frequent feedback, strike up conversations, tell personal stories, use humor and emoticons, address students by name, and give them options about addressing the instructor. And even though the instructor is primarily responsible for encouraging social presence, students too are encouraged to contribute to discussion boards, answer their email, start a conversation, use humor and emoticons, and use appropriate titles. (pp. 62-67).

These explorations of online teaching and learning environments often lead to one accepted story for online teachers: if you implement the suggestions provided by other successful online teachers, you too will be successful in teaching online. If you understand the importance of learner-centered interactions, and if you pay attention to the tenets of social presence, you too can overcome the difficulties that might otherwise arise in online classrooms. As Adichie (2009) points out, we are “impressionable and vulnerable ... in the face of a story” (“Danger”), especially when the story tells us that we can be members of a professional group that has experienced success and is highly valued by colleagues, students, and administrators. We hope that we too can address our younger colleagues and give them advice about incorporating online teaching methods, pointing out to them, similar to Gatreau, Stang, Street, and Guillaume (2014), “the use of technology ... has helped us to shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. Seat time is redefined by authentic learning experiences and assessable student outcomes.” (p. 28)

The Dream of a Single Story: The Success of Online Teaching

My own teaching experiences have often been closely aligned with the positive experiences outlined by colleagues and researchers, and encouraged by administrators. When I started teaching at my current institution in 1996, my course load included one course per year taught via instructional television. Students from different branch campuses could see each other on a monitor, and they could see me at the teacher desk, or they could see the slides that I had put together. I was paying attention to three monitors and also keeping an eye on the students

who were sitting in the same room with me. We would have discussions that were slightly time-delayed, or we would see somebody talk, but the sound wasn't working. Sometimes, students at a site would only hear us, but they couldn't see any of their peers or the teacher. Despite all the technology issues, students felt fortunate that they could be in school without having to leave their families or drive hundreds of miles to make it to the main campus from the reservation or from a small rural community. I applied pedagogical principles closely aligned to learner-centered principles (Huba & Freed, 2000; Weimer, 2013) in an environment that would have been easier to manage with lectures and quizzes and without student interaction or discussion. But I saw the importance of student engagement in online environments, even when the technology often did not cooperate.

Now that the technology has moved to include fully online teaching environments, I have moved to teaching online rhetoric and composition courses in addition to face-to-face courses. I am very conscious of following Weimer's (2013) suggestions to encourage students to develop "as autonomous, self-directed, and self-regulating learners" (p. 10) where students "become learning partners" (p. 13) who explore, question, analyze, and write about issues relevant to the course topic. I also closely align course progression, content, student-student interactions, and instructor-student interactions to underscore that "students' perceptions of instructor behaviors such as the provision of feedback, availability, engagement of student in their learning, and instructors' communication and interaction with online learners are important elements in student satisfaction." (Halupa & Bolliger, 2013, p. 60).

In one of my yearly online graduate courses, for example, I use learner-centered approaches to focus specifically on how language and diversity function in and control teaching environments. We address the theoretical and practical foundations of language practices, focus on how educational and professional institutions support or question literacy practices, look at the discourse conventions of different ethnic groups and political, socio-economic, and environmental communities, and read and discuss gendered identities in learning environments. Students are asked to use language critically and consciously to participate in an academic and professional community. They are encouraged to study the changing relationships between language and cultures and contextualize the nature of discourse communities. They write papers that are grounded in their cultural, social, and political subjectivities to gain critical understanding about the influence of cultural perspectives on language, and they conduct informed research and analysis of literate practices in different discourse communities to produce scholarly papers designed toward publication within the discipline.

Students are especially encouraged to analyze how language is structured, supported, and sustained by particular discourse communities. They are asked to draw connections between culture and language, and how and when cultures follow or break literate traditions. This leads them to think more critically on how culture and education co-exist, and how presentation and representation can limit or promote specific cultures' literacy work. They end by addressing global perspectives on language and diversity, specifically focusing on perceptions of literate behaviors based on English-language skills.

Class activities are structured to make sure that students could learn about each other, could collaborate with each other, and could also evaluate their own and each other's participation in the learning process. At the beginning of each course, I emphasize social presence (Aragon, 2003) by asking students to introduce themselves to their fellow classmates who are often quite willing to share detailed information on their lives. They are enrolled in a master's program in the English department and are not able to attend campus classes but take

online courses for their degree requirements. Many of them are full time K-12 or community college teachers who need a degree in the field of rhetoric and writing to continue their job or get a promotion. Some work as freelance writers, editors, or professional writers and hope to switch careers. A few are former or current military personnel who want to become teachers. Very few are continuing students without job experiences. And in addition to full-time jobs, many raise a family or just finished raising the family and are now ready for new challenges. The conversations in the introduction section of the course are always lively, with much affirmation for each other and with a positive attitude for the course challenges ahead.

Similar to student introductions, I also include an introduction in the course that focuses on my professional and academic background. They learn that I received my PhD at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. I let them know that my areas of specialization include writing studies, literacy studies, digital literacy, gender studies, and rhetoric and composition studies. I also let them know that I directed the university's writing program for five years, and trained and supervised more than 40 graduate assistants every year. And I include that I have been teaching for more than 25 years, and that I have been a faculty member at my current institution for more than 15 years. I also provide a link to my vita so that they can learn more about my work in the areas that are covered in the course materials. In other words, in addition to providing contextual information to my students, I establish my professional ethos, a practice I have engaged in for many years based on my own experiences as a woman teacher and also based on my conversations with other teachers whose expertise was questioned many times because of their informal initial approach to the classroom. As Tu and McIsaac (2010) point out, including social context into classroom environments—how students and the teacher understand the purpose of interacting—helps students and teachers create a positive and respectful social presence.

In addition to creating social presence through personal and professional introductions, I also want to make sure that the environment that they are entering is a professional environment that differs from other online environments that they might be familiar with. Unlike comments on Facebook, or unlike posts on personal blogs, they are now expected to read extensively and write analytically about what they read. They are also expected to respond to each other's comments by referring back to the readings instead of referring to their own opinions alone. I participate in the discussions, redirect comments and move them to new topics. And I evaluate their formal papers, providing many comments to make sure that they will be successful with their next writing assignment. I follow Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) who pointed out that for students to learn, interactions need to be structured and systematic and need to support a community of inquiry. Loose and social interactions, on the other hand, do not effectively support learning environments.

Students in this course and in my other online courses evaluate their own participation in the discussion based on a rubric that asks them to focus on timeliness, collaboration and significance of their contribution, and the scholarly nature of their posts. To be evaluated as outstanding, students let me know whether they focused on analysis or synthesis of course materials in their initial and subsequent posts. They tell me whether they only summarized or only stated their opinions. They point out whether they included their own experiences and referred to their colleagues' postings, all supported by scholarly evidence, including citations to external materials. And they also let me know in their evaluation whether their comments were thoughtful, academic, stimulating, and pertinent to the assigned topic.

In most cases, students evaluate their own participation honestly and more severely than I

do. They point out that their responses were timely, but that they were more focused on a tangent and didn't participate fully in the main discussions taking place. They also acknowledge when their participation did not include analysis but was mostly opinion-based, and they are proud when their comments were well received and used in other discussions. In other words, students take their participation seriously, and are honest about pointing out what they learned, when they did well, and when they missed out because they didn't participate as fully and as seriously as they could have. This means that they participate in self-regulatory and learner-directed learning, which, according to Phil Benson (2005), includes "learners' involvement in self-assessment of their objective and of their subjectively felt needs and in planning, monitoring, and evaluation of their learning." (p. 33).

To create a structured approach within a learner-centered and learner-directed classroom, students engage in readings and discussion and analysis of the readings, creating a knowledge base for students, and also encouraging students to learn through interactions with each other and to develop learning skills that make them responsible for learning (Weimer, 2013, p. 11). Readings are challenging, and include James Paul Gee's (1989) discussion of literacy; Stuart Hall's (1996) exploration of identity, representation, and the other; Jamie Candelaria Greene's (1994) argument of an anglocentric bias in histories of American literacies; Teresa McCarty and Lucille Watahomigie's (1998) investigation of language and literacy in Native American and Native Alaskan communities; Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) examination of mestiza consciousness; and the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE, 2007) and Kosciw et al.'s (2012) findings and resolutions on LGBT students.

Students' stories, in most cases, highlight the importance of becoming more aware of diversity in literacy education. Students often realize that their definition of literacy was confined by their understanding of normative codes, and that, in order to be inclusive of all their students in the classroom, they need to adjust their teaching pedagogy. Teachers in the online class have often not been exposed to NCTE's (2007) "Resolution on Strengthening Teacher Knowledge of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Issues," which addresses key points to help teachers understand and work with LGBT students. For many, it is also the first time that they read Kosciw et al.'s (2012) "Key Findings on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in our Nation's Schools" where they learn, for example, that almost 75 % of students heard homophobic comments at school, nine out of ten students hear the word "gay" used negatively, and more than 80% have been harassed verbally, and about 40% have been abused physically in schools. The study also points out that 60 % of students did not report harassment to their teachers or the school administrators because they didn't believe that anything would be done (Kosciw, et al., 2012).

Kosciw et al.'s (2012) findings often surprise students who are also prospective and current teachers participating in the online discussions. After posting their first responses to the readings and reflecting on each other's comments, the discussions usually move quickly to how we—teachers who might have made insensitive comments, used heteronormative expressions in the class, didn't notice the student who avoids his classmates, or didn't interfere when a student was being teased—can incorporate LGBT issues in the classroom to provide a safe learning space for all students.

Most semesters, students in my online courses in general and this course in particular, discuss how much they learned, and how much they appreciated the collaboration with other students, the engaged discussions they had with each other, and the improvement they see in their writing. Based on the tenets of successful online courses, my course fulfills the

requirements outlined in current research on online teaching. I establish clear and understandable guidelines, I acknowledge students' diverse interests, I encourage interaction and collaboration, and I provide much feedback to my students. I create what Diana Oblinger (2005) calls a "series of learning environments and activities" (p. 15), establishing my ethos, but also providing much room for establishing social presence as a teacher while encouraging students to incorporate their own experiences as teachers, parents, and professionals, and to interact with each other to "develop autonomy as learners." (Benson, 2005, p. 33).

Learning happens, and students are eager to express their satisfaction with the course. Comments usually include "I have learned so much in this course," "I am going to apply what I learned in this course in my own classroom," "the course gave me new language to address literacy issues with my students," and "it was an eye-opening experience to learn that literacy goes far beyond reading and writing." Like most semesters, it was a successful course for the students and also for me, re-affirming my pedagogical practices, my belief in learner-centered education, and my conviction that online learning can be as, if not more, successful as face-to-face learning in developing successful learning moments. My positive online experiences contribute to the myth of the "single story" of successful online practices, because my story is in perfect alignment with the research that perpetuates the ease with which success can be achieved.

The Demise of a Single Story: When Things Fall Apart

When teacher stories diverge from the accepted narrative, we become uneasy and often are unsure how to proceed. Research on problematic classroom interactions in the field of online teaching is sparse, especially when problematic situations are based on emotionally charged responses to course topics. Because "Literacy and Diversity" addresses multiple issues related to dominant literacies, primary and secondary discourses, heteronormative literacy, and the interconnections among rhetoric, identity, culture, and codes, students often bring in personal experiences to make sense of the theories that they read. The ability to apply course materials breaks down in-class and out-of class learning, and it also makes sure that students "take more personal experience for their learning." (Benson, 2005, p. 32).

Even though most students can apply knowledge acquired in the classroom and can understand the importance of being more accepting of all diversity in the classroom, some students experience difficulties when discussions turn to NCTE's (2007) resolution and to Kosciw et al.'s (2012) findings on LGBT student treatment in middle and high school. These students might have been open to concepts of being more inclusive with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, economically diverse student populations, or students with different religious or political affiliations; however, they are resistant—despite research on the importance of integrating LGBTQA students into the classroom (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Mayo, 2013; Murray, 2014)—to the need for accepting and integrating LGBTQA students in classroom learning activities.

Such resistance is often based on a student's religious beliefs that homosexuality is a sin, that it is deviant behavior, and that being gay is a choice and is something that can be changed and treated. Instead of following the guidelines set out for discussions, the following example shows how a student who sees homosexuality as deviant ignores the importance of analysis and inclusion of outside sources to support his argument. Comments, instead, focus on the individual's beliefs, pointing out that the readings try "to 'normalize' gayness in schools and society of which I disagree with first, on Biblical/Godly grounds, and second, that such behavior

is ‘unnatural.’” (Student 1, online discussion board, 2012). And, this student, former military and aspiring high school teacher, goes on to say that “everything that they [NCTE and GLSEN] stand for contradicts everything that I am and that I feel as people we ‘should be.’” (Student 1, online discussion board, 2012). He insists that including LGBT issues is not “a positive thing for students, grounded in solid values, morals, or principles” (Student 1 comment, 2012). He concludes “that my stance has nothing to do with intolerance, and everything to do with what is right, on the whole ‘good’, ‘righteous’ and morally acceptable for our *children*.” (Student 1, online discussion board, 2012).

Even though most of the other students discussed the need for tolerance in their posts, one student and current middle-school teacher chimed in and confirmed the problems with “normalizing gayness” based on her religious beliefs (Student 2, online discussion board, 2012). These homophobic comments, even though confined to two students, created several concerns for me. I needed to address the comments because the online classroom was no longer a safe learning environment for students. I needed to make it clear that I did not agree with the homophobic statements expressed by one student and applauded by another student. I needed to respond to students who were directly and indirectly impacted by these comments, and I needed to address the escalating hostilities that were apparent in the exchanges between students trying to argue against these homophobic comments and the student who considered it his right to express his homophobic views in an academic environment.

Teacher positionalities in online teaching environments are influenced not only by the pedagogical tenets we establish, the teacher persona we create through our introductions, course set-up, or comments in discussions and on papers, but they are also influenced by the modality in which we teach. Even though teachers can try to redirect a discussion in an online environment, we cannot control to whom students will respond, or whether they will continue a discussion that has run its course. Comments in online classes become more permanent than oral discussions in face-to-face classes. Additionally, online environments encourage partial anonymity, creating a community that only exists in virtual space, without having to look in anybody’s face, shake anybody’s hand, or see anybody’s expression to a comment that was made.

Such partial anonymity creates distance between the writer (one student) and the audience (19 other students and the teacher). Such distance has been seen as a largely positive asset to online interactions. As research has claimed, anonymity can increase participation in online discussions, especially helping women express their ideas on a topic more fully. (Sullivan, 2002). It can encourage discussions on taboo or politically charged topics because students feel free to express their opinions. As Kathryn Valentine (2001) points out, online interaction “is less immediate and potentially less threatening than face-to-face interaction; it offers distance from the face- to-face stimuli that can “heat-up” or “shut- down” discussion of highly charged issues.” (p. 49). A. Fiona Pearson (2010) concurs with Valentine’s (2001) findings and points out that students participated more fully in online discussions because of the “perceived freedom afforded by their anonymity,” which helped them to feel more “comfortable presenting minority standpoints on issues that might have otherwise gone unacknowledged.” (p. 212).

What, however, happens, when such comfort causes strife among the students, leads to unacceptable interactive patterns, and creates an unsafe learning environment? The teacher’s role in online discussion environments can include that of authority, initiator, and facilitator. In many cases, however, the role of the teacher is subsumed by the many other voices participating in the discussion, encouraging many aspects of learner-centered classroom interactions (Weimer, 2013), but also making it especially difficult to address problems quickly and efficiently. My concerns

about how to address the homophobic comments were exacerbated by the lack of research in the field. I had not come across studies that provided guidelines for addressing racism, sexism, and homophobia in online teaching environments where asynchronous discussions can lead to delay in the response expected by students and by the teacher. Even though my course description includes an explicit code of conduct, the student still felt free to express his homophobia in the classroom. And even though the right of everybody to learn in an environment free of discrimination was clearly stated, it did not change the student's conduct. I had not been able to create an environment where students' control over their own learning was successful.

I also knew, because of discussions with teachers and research I conducted about racist comments in the face-to-face classroom, that some of my colleagues were against interfering in student discussions that they considered as legitimate expressions of opinions. As they saw it, students' civil liberties included the right to free speech. However, this perspective is clearly undermined by Gerald Uelman's (1992) comments on the price of free speech where he clearly distinguishes between freedom of speech (civil liberties) and freedom from harmful stigma and humiliation (civil rights). As he points out, "The verbal attack [of discriminatory harassment] is a symptom of an oppressive history of discrimination and subjugation that plagues the harmed student and hinders his or her ability to compete fairly in the academic arena." (n.p.). He goes on to argue that "when a white student directs an epithet toward a black student or a Jewish student, an overt history of subjugation intensifies the verbal attack that humiliates and strikes institutional fear in the victim. History shows that words of hatred are amplified when they come from those in power and abridged when spoken by the powerless." (n.p.). Uelman's (1992) discussion of civil liberties and civil rights, and my chair's support to address the student's comments, helped me to formulate the following response.

I've noticed over the last few weeks, that some of the discussions in this class have moved to personal, opinion-based comments... In academic discussions, especially in graduate school, we gain professional authority by backing up the statements we are making with scholarly research that is acknowledged in the field. All of you are trying to acquire professional authority since otherwise you wouldn't be taking this class. We all have our preconceived ideas about topics that we discuss in class, but if you want to learn, want to gain more knowledge, you are responsible to seek this knowledge by engaging with ideas in a professional way worthy of a graduate student.

Every field of study has a body of scholarly work that is considered important by the members of the field. If you join this field, you are expected to engage with this body of scholarly work. If you are interested in the field, and if you are interested in acquiring analytic and critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, then you need to engage with the texts and with each other on a professional level. Any class at NAU attempts to create a safe environment for all the students in the class. To make sure we adhere to that, please refrain from making opinion-based statements that are not backed up by theory valued in the field and validated by scholars in the field. Please refrain from making irrelevant value judgments and instead use theory and authoritative work from the field to substantiate the claims you make.

In addition to a general email post, I also responded to individual students who perpetuated homophobic stereotypes, and to those who had commented on the posts in the discussion forum and to me individually. My comments were focused on academic integrity and creating a safe learning and working environment for all students based on Uelman's (1992) discussions of civil liberties and civil rights.

My decision to move from the emotional to the academic, and my decision to re-establish my authority as the teacher, moves against accepted online pedagogies of creating a de-centered classroom space for students where teaching is de-emphasized and learning is foregrounded. Although I strongly support a learning-centered environment, I also support students' right to a safe learning environment that, from my experiences, is a right that needs to be emphasized throughout any course. Unfortunately, when I considered how to prevent homophobic behavior, I wasn't able to develop a system that would ensure appropriate academic behavior for all students. I realized that informing students of their civil liberties and the limits to those liberties would not prevent prejudiced responses to topics that are contentious. Even though students know that they can be held accountable for overstepping the limits because rights are not unfettered, my student showed that emotional responses often prevent rational consideration of consequences.

The Dawn of Multiple Stories: Reconsidering Online Teaching

Online teachers, similar to face-to-face teachers, try their best to create a learner-friendly environment for their students. Teaching both online and face-to-face, I often compare notes from my own experiences working in these modalities, and I have many discussions with my colleagues on whether students can learn as much online as they can face-to-face. We debate whether our university's graduate college mission—"to promote student achievement, research, scholarship, global learning, strategic partnerships, and engagement in discovery and practice" (Graduate College, 2014)—translates to our learning outcomes. We want to make sure that we create a community of scholars, and a community of engaged global citizens in our online graduate program. We know that we attempt to teach "lifelong learning skills, such as writing, reading, working well with others, accepting and giving feedback and criticism" (Doyle, p. 37), but we are not always able to show that we were successful. When I struggle with contentious situations as the ones I just discussed, I become less convinced that we can provide students with the assets that will help them to participate in a global community. My questions become focused on the immediate, especially when the problems center on racism in online comments, homophobia in responses to classmates, or sexist discourse in the formal online discussions.

Then I am concerned to find out how we can prevent such incidents in online teaching. However, this question—how do we ensure that students will not engage in racist, homophobic, or sexist discourse in online classes—doesn't acknowledge that we cannot prevent students from being racist, homophobic, or sexist. Instead, the question has to be reframed to shift the focus from prevention to action. We can ask how we can ensure learning opportunities in online environments for all students, and we can try and find out what we can do when students engage in racist, homophobic, or sexist discourse. Is it enough to do what Weimer (2013) shows us to do in her argument for creating learner-centered teaching approaches? As she tells us:

You don't go to a classroom or online with a carefully prepared lecture--one with all the examples, transitions, questions (maybe even answers), links to previous material, sample problems ready to go on visually impressive PowerPoint slides. You go well prepared with a repertoire of material at your disposal--you have a carefully packed tool box, and, like any expert working on location, you know what you'll need most of the time. Even so, chances are that some days you won't have everything you need. In this case, you trust your experience with the content, with learning, and with students. Something else from the tool box may work or you'll be able to make do until you can get what you need. (p. 13).

I did not have everything I needed, and I am not certain that I was able to make do with an alternative plan. Prevention, I realized, was only possible in a totalitarian system, theocracy, or dictatorship where total control is practiced throughout the system. Given that this is not the American way, we need to decide how we can best respond when the single story of the successful online classroom falls apart. If we accept multiple stories, and if we accept that “there is never a single story about any place,” (Adichie, 2009) we might see more discussions in research papers about the diversity of online teaching experiences, and the steps that others have taken when “things fall apart.” This knowledge might help us be less despondent when our experiences expose the raw emotions of racism, sexism and homophobia, and it might help us with our responses to all students, reaffirming the right to a safe teaching and learning environment for all.

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