Inequitable Whiteness in Online Learning

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Abstract: In this interview study, I study two graduate level online courses within their broader socio-historical context and analyze how Discourses of whiteness can reproduce inequity through identification and impression management. I investigate how socially accepted bodies of thoughts, beliefs, values, and feelings that gives meaning to individuals’ daily-practices may create inequitable learning context. The results indicate that the online learning context can be accepted as inequitable since those who are identified as White are accepted as intelligent and successful students while those who are identified as non-White have to demonstrate that they are as good, as intelligent, and as successful as Whites are believed to be.

Introduction

Socio-cultural learning theories argue that learning is simultaneously an individual and cultural process. It is a material, symbolic, and intellectual reconstruction of self; a process of discovering and articulating oneself in relation to others. In other words, it is a process of knowing the self through mediation between self and others (Holland, Lachicotte Jr, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). What mediates between the self and the others – between the personal and cultural – is referred to as identification (Hall, 1996). Thus, the process of education is the process of constructing and shaping individuals' identification. Much research has argued that identification plays an equally important role in online learning environments (Oztok, 2013). For example, identification can profoundly affect collaboration (Ares, 2008), participation (Suthers, 2006), knowledge (Tee & Karney, 2010), and meanings (Ke, Chávez, Causarano, & Causaran, 2011) in an online learning community.

While the documented benefits of identification may hold some truth, such perspectives do not consider the implicit ways in which online learning context may perpetuate inequitable learning experiences. A positive sense of community cannot be expected for every individual under every circumstance. Indeed, scholars have noted that when not implemented carefully, group work in learning communities may aggravate equity issues (Esmonde, 2009; Nasir & Cobb, 2007). That is, some individuals can feel that they are consistently or systematically marginalized, isolated, devalued, or even oppressed in a group work setting. This work is concerned with understanding how inequitable learning experiences may occur in online education.

Equity, Discourses, and Whiteness

Current research on equity argues for a distinction between equity and equality (Esmonde, 2009). While equity refers to justice or fairness, equality means "sameness" (Gutiérrez, 2007). In terms of education specifically, equity focuses on the qualitative judgment of the learning situation or the learning process while equality is concerned with the quantitative measurement of educational inputs, treatment, or outputs. Viewing equity as situated in cultural contexts and as involving relations between various social structures requires an examination of how Discourses' are implicated in the regeneration of inequities. A Discourse is a characteristic way of saying and doing (Gee, 2011). As a characteristic way of being in the world, it embodies one's thoughts,
goals, expectations, values, and actions and thus can be thought of as individuals’ comprehensive ways of looking at things in their daily lives. Since Discourses largely represent dominant perspectives, employing the concept of Discourse for exploring the reproduction of culture in a classroom setting serves to link between macro-level social structures and inequity at micro-level learning settings. But, what constitutes equity in digitally-mediated environments? What is the relationship between equitable learning practices and Discourses in online environments? More precisely, how is identification related to equity in online education?

One possible way to think about this issue is to analyze how Discourses of whiteness shapes identification. Discourses of whiteness refers to the set of societal privileges that Whites benefit from beyond those commonly experienced by non-Whites in the same social, political, cultural, educational, or economic spaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Giroux, 1997). The concept of whiteness denotes privileges that Whites have, which distinguishes Discourses of whiteness from obvious racial or ethnic bias or prejudice. Such privileges include greater social status, access to everyday goods (i.e. food, health protection, safer neighborhoods, police and fire protection), access to good education, and basic civil liberties (i.e. freedom to move, buy, work, play, and speak freely) (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; McIntosh, 2003). According to this understanding, whiteness is a property (intellectual, cultural, or legal) which has intrinsic value that must be protected (Harris, 1993, 1995). Thus the concept of whiteness is not a biological or phenotypical (i.e. skin color) category. Rather, it is a discursive construction.

This research, therefore, analyzes the ways in which Discourses of whiteness affect identification and create inequitable learning context for those who are identified as non-White.

**Methods and Data Sources**

In this interview study, data are collected from two graduate level online courses, offered at a public research university at Canada. Typically, these courses have students from diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, from different geographical locations, and of various ages and professions. The first course took place in Fall 2012 and the second in Winter 2013. Both courses were taught by the same instructor, and used the same institutional online learning environment. Online discussion occurred asynchronously; the environment does allow synchronous communication through chat, but such activity was not mandatory in these courses. Each week, one or two students acted as moderators: they collaborated in advance to develop guiding questions for the week, facilitated discussion throughout the week, and finally offered a summary of the week's issues. Each student acted as moderator once during the course.

A total of 37 students (17 in the first course and 20 in the second) were enrolled, but with some overlap: the total number of distinct students was 28. I did not use purposeful sampling; instead, I invited every student in the two courses to participate in the study. Out of these 28 students, a total of 12 students (5 in the first course and 7 in the second) accepted to participate.

**Results**

In two online courses I studied, Discourses of whiteness manifest themselves through the process of impression management\(^{ii}\); particularly, through the negotiations of what constitutes a good student. By highlighting their achievements, traits, desires, hobbies, and qualities in their profile pages\(^{iii}\), the participants reproduce their online selves in line with the White norms of beauty and
intelligence. This does not mean that non-Whites are unintelligent or undesirable neither does it mean that non-Whites want to be seen as White. Rather, it means that by highlighting their achievements and success in line with the Discourses of whiteness, non-Whites try to claim their legitimacy, their right to be in the online course. Through impression management, those who are identified as non-White negotiate their status of belonging to their community. Here I present 3 instances (due to space limitations) of how Discourses of whiteness manifest themselves in impression management and reproduce inequitable online learning context.

In Gulsum's impression management, being accepted as an equal participant is at stake. Gulsum, an Egyptian born Canadian who identifies herself as Middle-Eastern, believes that she is not accepted as intelligent; therefore, she is worried that her peers do not want to work with her:

You want to, um … um, you want people to know who you are. You are trying to put the positive side [of yourself] and even though you might put negative things, you just rephrase them, um, you … you sugarcoat them, in a sense. And, um, you want to put the achievements so that, um, … you want to put your achievements but not limited to academic life but also professional life, your working life. By reading my achievements, um, … so, like people say, um, 'ok, I can work with you for group projects'. So, my aim was to … to make people know the good side [of me]; so that my achievements can overshadow any judgment that they might make [of me]. Like, anything to help them … like … um, for instance, you know because of my name, I am not from here. So, when you see [my profile], my achievements can overshadow that fact that some of my peers might be biased [against me]. So you want to represent yourself in a way that [it] intrigues people to know more about you.

Gulsum thinks it is necessary for her to represent herself as competent and rigorous because she believes people have biases against her just because she is not White. For Gulsum, impression management is a matter of inclusion or exclusion, a process of survival.

Caught in the White interpretive filter, those who are identified as non-White believe that they have to demonstrate that they can be as beautiful, intelligent, and desirable as Whites are believed to be. For example, Nalini, a second generation Canadian who identifies herself as Indian-Canadian, uses impression management to convey that she is as good as her peers. She says “my name was there, right? So, [my peers] guess … um, they assume that I am Brown and I have a different name, so I am not Canadian or White”. Later, Nalini continues:

I was trying to put in some stuff that will make people think that I am a good student because I wanted people to consider me for homeworks and for the final project. I wanted to attract people so they would … so that they would consider working with me. I wanted my online profile to be intelligent because this is the only chance that I can explain … that I can make sure that I am taken as intelligent. Because I am as intelligent as [my peers] are.

Nalini articulates that it is necessary for her to represent herself as intelligent and successful because she believes that her name reveals that she is not White; thus, she has to necessarily convey such impression.

For Devran, impression management is a chance to prove her academic success. Devran is a PhD student from Turkey and she received her previous degrees from a Turkish university. She posits
that “because [she] didn't get [her] degrees from a Canadian or an American institution, [her] success might not be fully understood”, adding that “even though [her] university is one of the top universities in Turkey”. In order to convey an impression that she is a successful student, Devran says that she explained how her accomplishments would look like in Canadian context. Indeed, in her profile page, she writes: “Before I came to Canada, I worked as a research and teaching assistant in my university. I had responsibilities of teaching courses and grading students. It is like being a lecturer here in [departments name]”.

Identified as non-White, Gulsum, Nalini, and Devran believe that their intelligence and success are devalued. Devaluation of non-Whites' perspectives, values, and qualities are how Discourses of whiteness operate (Kincheloe, 2010). Since the normative standards of beauty or intelligence rely on cultural difference between Whites and non-Whites, Discourses of Whiteness create a hierarchy that non-Whites cannot overcome.

**Conclusion**

Individuals negotiate their identifications and try to impress each other in order to portray themselves as good students. Yet, what it means to be a good student is not an open-ended task but is determined by the Discourses of whiteness. In socio-political terms, impression management can be seen as means to negotiate who has rights, responsibilities, power, and control over others. While there is no direct or material domination between Whites and non-Whites, data presented here suggest that those who are identified as non-White are dominated by White people's perspectives through the Discourses of whiteness. Political aspects can be seen as the process of legitimizing who can speak with what authority. As data in this chapter shows, non-White participants try to claim their legitimacy by conveying impressions that they are as good, as successful, and as desirable as Whites are. Through the impression management, people claim their rights to be in the environment and their rights to be included in the community.

In order to link Discourses of whiteness with identification, I analyzed how people manage their impressions in a digitally-mediated context. I addressed identification as a discursive practice to illustrate how individuals identify themselves and others in relation to Discourses of whiteness. Taken together, data presented here suggest that online learning context may provide inequitable learning experiences for those identified as non-White. In particular, the context can be accepted as inequitable since those who are identified as White are accepted as intelligent and successful students while those who are identified as non-White have to demonstrate that they are as good, as intelligent, and as successful as Whites are believed to be. In other words, while those who are identified are accepted as legitimate participant by default, those who are identified as non-White have to negotiate their legitimacy.
Gee (2011) uses “big D” Discourses to distinguish it from “little d” discourses; while the first one refers to combination and integration of “language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (p. 30), the latter one refers to “language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)” (p. 34).

Goffman (1959) presented impression management dramaturgically, explaining the motivations behind complex human performances within a social setting based on a play metaphor. In order to make a good impression, people look around, observe how others are behaving, and enact their performances accordingly. While Goffman developed his notion in face-to-face contexts, impression management in digitally-mediated environments is no exception (boyd, 2008). Tightly connected to the context in which impression management takes place, people create better selves (Turkle, 2011) and manage their impressions.

Profile pages (biography pages) allow students to represent themselves and create their existence online by introducing themselves along with their picture or avatar. Profile pages resemble the process of identification in face-to-face contexts: they convey social cues about individuals by which one can be positioned within a social context.

References


