Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

Know Your Online Learner to Support Academic Success

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Abstract

The global pandemic forced educational institutions to provide accessible online classrooms for their students, which rapidly altered the notions of classroom instruction, student engagement, collaborative learning, and fair assessment. This discourse will consider the experiences of students and parents who have been participating in online learning in virtual classrooms during the past year. To help teachers to promote academic success in the online classroom, this summary will identify and describe practical tips that use a socially just approach to providing online instruction to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These findings are a compilation of success strategies shared from a teacher interview and the personal experiences amalgamated during first-hand remote classroom teacher and student experiences. The main takeaway purports that the critical need to create a culturally inclusive classroom in the distance learning environment is perhaps even more important than in the bricks and mortar setting. This suggests that when designing lessons, educators must ensure that ample time is built in throughout the course for the sustainable development of an inclusive, equitable and safe, online, community learning space where differentiated learning and fair assessments can still take place.

Key Terms: asynchronous, digital literacy, L1, L2, assessment, ELLs, home supervisors.

Introduction

Learning Objectives

This study will identify key areas of focus for educators as they aim (1) to engage students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and (2) to effectively facilitate learning in an online environment. The findings are primarily from my own international teaching and online classroom experiences. Increasing the awareness of English-language learner needs will be an important part of the discourse, given the international makeup of the distance-learning classroom. The areas where teachers can support students and their parents/guardians at home will be identified. Success strategies will be shared on how best to develop online skills, with the goal to use technology to support student engagement in the virtual classroom.

Relevance

The findings from this research are currently relevant, as distance learning earns a permanent place on the list of viable schooling options that are available to students globally. But, for any virtual classroom to be a place where effective learning can occur, it is imperative that the teacher is confident that ALL students have access to technology, know how to use it, and know where they can reach out to get help to overcome the inevitable IT challenges. As it pertains to students in the primary grades, the findings underscore the need for the teacher to identify if the schoolwork 'supervisor' at home has a working knowledge and basic level of digital literacy with which to support their child's online learning. This helps to position students for success, even if there is a deficit in digital knowledge, as the teacher can customize the support and share resources that parents require. This study seeks to acknowledge the increased complexity that arises with remote learning when educators must equitably support English-language learners and students in different time zones. Practical strategies will be detailed, which can be used to support and position students with linguistic and cultural differences to achieve success in the virtual classroom.

Discussion Framework

The discussion and findings will be grouped by the focal areas of language, culture and technology.

Literature Review

Much of the literature surrounding online learning and the barriers that exist to student success are based on very recent studies and current virtual classroom results. It behooves educators to note that "while most parents have been helpless in how to keep their children engaged, many have tried to befriend technology and grapple with online learning" (Bhamani, p. 22). It is worthy to pause and acknowledge that in the arena of education, educators and parents are the unsung heroes in this war against COVID-19. They have worked diligently as a team to learn and develop their own digital skills to help their students to continue learning from a distance.

But, what about those parents who are willing, but simply unable to support their students with online learning? Perhaps they are working from home themselves; they are not digitally literate or have no access to the technology required. They might be occupied with taking care of siblings or elderly

relatives, or maybe they are unfamiliar with the language of instruction. However, meritorious the reason, the consequence is a student base that is ill-equipped to succeed in the virtual classroom without the addition of supports from educators and academic institutions. The literature identifies this situation as being quite prevalent, and while the recent public health crisis mandated that families embrace technology and virtual learning, general scholarship suggests that "the advice provided is often insufficient" (Tour, p. 587) for parents to support their children sufficiently.

Further, it points to how these limitations are even more pernicious for 'migrant families,' where English is not the main language spoken at home, and where there are many socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and educational differences that make parents even more "uncertain about the ways in which they can support learning in digital spaces" (Tour, p. 588).

This literature supports the scholarship that creating a culturally inclusive classroom in the online learning environment is as critically important as it is in a bricks-and-mortar setting. This means that when lesson planning, educators must ensure that ample time is built in throughout the course for the sustainable development of an accessible, inclusive, and equitable online, community learning space. Before a single lesson is taught, teachers must collect pertinent details about the students in their class. This critical check-in can include assessing the (1) English language proficiency, (2) cultural education norms and expectations, (3) level of digital literacy, (4) level of at home support and (5) student motivation and maturity.

The aim is to build a classroom profile with individual student details to identify where differentiated instruction, possible accommodation, and lesson and assessment modification may be required. This will allow for the creation of an equitable learning space that promotes collaborative learning and a true sense of community. This is of critical importance, for it is only when students feel a sense of belonging in the remote classroom that academic success will be possible.

Consider that teachers hold many roles in the classroom including: "…counselor, mentor, team member, researcher, and professional" (Murray, p. 50), which are all impacted by the cultural norms within the society. In the humanistic learning approach, teachers encourage students to take ownership of their learning goals and adopt the role of "mentors and counselors," to offer support as they strive to fulfil their objectives. This model is popular in Canadian education, as is "play-based learning," as proposed by Vygotsky and featured in the JK, SK, and Grade 1 ministry-curriculum guidelines.

However, if we don an equity lens, we must consider the literature that notes, "the physical separation of teacher and student often creates a feeling of separation for students who are not accustomed to directing their own learning" (Barbour, McLaren & Zhang, p. 22). Consequently, in some cultures, if a teacher tries to "relinquish the role of coach" (Murray, p. 50) to allow students more autonomy with their learning, they do not know how to respond to a non-authoritative teacher who has taken on the role of team member, and their inaction can be erroneously viewed as non-participation.

These scholarly reviews collectively align with our research findings and will be further examined.

Methods

Most of these findings resulted from practical experiences in the virtual classroom. The discourse on technological barriers was enriched with feedback from an actual teacher who was working in a virtual environment since January 2021, and was also teaching online during the first wave of the pandemic in March 2020. Much of what was shared validated my online experiences, both as a student and as an educator, with similar implications and conclusions drawn. The central theme of the discussion was whether there was a correlation between the level of at home technical support and students' online success. The strategies that were effectively used to increase technical literacy for

home supervisors to support and advance their child's chances of academic success with distance learning were also discussed.

Results

Observations and findings

Level of English-language proficiency varies: Given the high likelihood of linguistic diversity in the online classroom, it is imperative that educators are mindful of the unique needs of their English-language learners. Because it is common to erroneously use fluency in the dominant language, English, as an indicator of intelligence, educators must be aware of a student's proficiency in L1 and L2, to avoid this pernicious misstep.

Identify cultural norms in education: Educators need to understand the role of the teacher through the lens of the international student. Is the norm to be more didactic with instruction or to have learning that is student-centred? What does active class participation look like? What cultural norms exist for verbal and non-verbal elements of communication? Are students accustomed to working in groups? Are assessments heavily weighted in a final exam, or does evaluation take place throughout the course? Having an early understanding of the students' perspectives surrounding these aspects of learning will help educators to better structure lessons and projects that will allow students an equitable opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter.

Level of digital literacy varies: It should not be assumed that all students are computer savvy, nor that all students know how to navigate through the virtual classroom platforms. As it pertains to access and usage of technology, the main idea that came out of the interview was the importance of maintaining early, clear, and ongoing communication with parents. This was seen to alleviate the high levels of stress and anxiety that often resulted when the inevitable IT challenges were faced in the distance learning environment.

Support at home varies: The age of the students was of relevance here, noting that the primary grades needed much more support than those in the junior grades. Consider that with online learning, parents who are at home are likely working and taking care of other siblings, so they may not have the time nor the technical skills to help their children with IT challenges. This final sentiment exemplified the need for educators to always be patient, and to maintain a high-level of empathy when communicating with parents and guardians.

Maturity and motivation matter: Experience and research confirm that primary students will require more support and different types of activities to keep them engaged, than those in the junior grades who are more mature. Student attention span and motivation both influence chances for online-learning success. Teachers can ensure that they provide ample talk time opportunities to mitigate restlessness or screen fatigue, and intersperse lessons with 5-minute movement breaks as needed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The KEY Takeaway: Create a welcoming classroom community: The goal is to ensure that students feel safe in their learning environment, without any threat of being bullied. They need to know that they have access to equitable opportunities to participate in their learning through a range of differentiated access points to suit their individual needs. For example, introverted students can use the chat feature to engage in discussion, and extroverted students can raise their hands and then vocalize their points of view. In creating this safe space, it is also important for international students to see themselves represented in the material and the learning resources being used during class. Educators should use every opportunity to invite the world into the classroom, and can consider starting or ending each class session with a tell-us-about segment, where voluntary, but scheduled, exchanges between international students can be showcased.

The importance of connecting with students and building authentic relationships remains a priority, and teachers are reminded that their goal is to create a safe and culturally inclusive online-learning space which appeals to linguistically diverse students. Wherever possible, students should be provided with options on how they prefer to demonstrate their learning, as well as equitable opportunities to use their ”voice” during class discussions, in group presentations, and for impromptu, but relevant, sharing.

Summary of Key Findings

As educators begin their online classes, they must first collect basic student details to know more about their languages, their cultures and their comfort with using technology. The intention is to better understand the students' backgrounds so that realistic learning expectations, as well as equitable and fair assessments, can be created.

The level of English language proficiency varies: While English is accepted as the lingua franca, teachers should avoid assuming students' English-language proficiency. They must ascertain the literacy level for each student, and identify if, at home, English is L2 or L1, naming the other language. They should also be mindful that the strategic use of the home language, up to 15%, can support the overall level of learning for ELL students. Such an approach will help to create lessons and assessments with the required level of built-in supports needed to promote success.

Inclusive Teacher Talk: In terms of teaching instruction, educators should use inclusive language, avoiding idioms that would only be understood by those within the dominant culture. Another important element to consider is the pace or speed at which instructions are delivered, ensuring that it allows those who are still learning English to understand and follow along. Becoming aware of the common types of errors that ELLs make,–like metathesis, where two letters in the word are inversed, like, ”aks,” or deletion, where one letter is completed removed like, ”pogram”– can also help to ensure that assessments are equitable.

Identify cultural norms in education: Donning a global lens, professors should encourage students to enter the classroom as representatives of their countries, providing them with opportunities to describe culturally-accepted teaching approaches, their expectations of the teacher, and the role that they play in supporting student learning.

The level of at home support: As it pertains to access and use of technology, the main theme that came out of the interview was that there was a wide range of digital literacy for students, and that no assumptions about student-skill levels should be made. It was also clear that educators should not assume that there is an at-home supervisor on site to assist. It was recommended that early and two-way communication with parents and students should be established by: (1) sending emails to parents and students, (2) asking for confirmation of receipt, (3) following up with telephone calls, considering time differences and (4) scheduling virtual meetings to offer one-on-one support. Strategies that were helpful included making short videos to explain the technology used in detail: (1) what platform students would be using for their learning, (2) where and when they could access the relevant links, (3) how they should enter meetings and (4) how they should submit assignments.

The level of digital literacy varies: To overcome possible barriers with virtual learning, teachers need to confirm each student's digital-literacy level and familiarity with the selected classroom platform. Co-creating a list of frequently used technical terms, like, "breakout rooms" or "synchronous learning," will also help to minimize any knowledge gaps. In addition, educators need to know what types of devices will be used, so as to customize the lessons' designs, given the range of screen size formats for electronic-type (E) or mobile-type (M) learning.

Assess digital literacy: To reiterate, teachers should take the time at the beginning of the class to do a digital literacy check-in to clearly determine their students' prior knowledge for the different online platforms being used. Standard netiquette rules should be discussed, modelling respectful and inclusive synchronous and asynchronous behaviour, as well as good digital citizenship traits. Co-creating guidelines on how to use the chat, pose questions, engage in discussions, and ensure original content (non-plagiarised and correctly cited) will all be helpful as types of shared, online, group-communication contracts. Once a skills' gap analysis has been completed, small group or one-on-one custom tutorial sessions can be arranged for times that suit international student schedules, as well as those of the educator.

Confirm Access to Hardware: From an equity stance, educators need to ensure that students have devices with reliable Internet. It is also important to determine if students have functioning cameras, microphones, headsets, and printers.

Teacher Digital Tasks: Teachers must be skilled at using the classroom platform and be able to post individual assignments, make announcements, add grades/points to projects, and provide private comments and feedback. Furthermore, teachers should be comfortable with the video-conferencing tool selected for the virtual classroom. If using Zoom, it is helpful to use the annotate feature and breakout rooms for discussions. If using Google Meet, especially for the primary age group, it is very useful to know how to close the chat feature and how to mute participants. If using Microsoft Teams, being able to share the screen, as well as the computer sound, are skills that will be of great use.

Increased Engagement Benefits: The increased level of student engagement that comes from structured gamification is a huge advantage that the virtual classroom offers educators.   In order to mitigate online fatigue, it is recommended that teachers should master 2-3 tools which promote engagement, like the G-Suite for Education, which offers many options, including slides, jamboards, forms, and sheets. However, without too much additional skill or time invested, the sites suggested below can be used to help students to interact at an even deeper level with the subject matter. The best

part is that these sites are all free and in the "community" section of each site. There are a wide range of activities already created with assessments included.

Accessible and Complimentary Websites: The following sites are recommended, based on my own experience and positive feedback from parents and students: Kahoot, Flipgrid, Padlet, Mentimeter, Pear Deck, Nearpod, Wordwall, Bamboozle, and Boomcards. Still, within the area of increased engagement, online teachers can benefit from spending the time to design their own virtual cartoon avatar, using either the Bitmoji or AR Emoji apps which can then be used as the teacher's instructional voice in all lesson plans.

Adapting In-Class Routines to the Virtual Classroom: Educators will also benefit from finding ways to transfer in-person processes into the online classroom, including journal writing, field trips, reading aloud, peer sharing, and show-and-tell times. Consider too, that using separate break-out meeting rooms can help teachers to differentiate assessment through observation, scribing responses, and the use of word translation tools. Lastly, while online grading can be time consuming, once mastered, authentic feedback can be easily shared using the "comment" feature available in most of the school platforms and through the recording of short audio notes.

Recommendations for Future Research

There was an underlying theme throughout the research and distance learning experiences, which suggested that the learning expectations for students in the virtual classroom were somewhat unrealistic. This is likely, because in-person assessments had to be quickly adapted to suit online learning. This is one topic that warrants further exploration, as it seems evident that applying in-person learning expectations and subsequent assessments to virtual classrooms is unfair. Further, it does not account for the wide range of digital skills and other unmeasured, and yet unknown, learning that is taking place in the online classroom, for which students should be given tremendous credit.

Conclusion

As Bill Gates reminds us, "Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids to work together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important [factor]" (Oxford University Press, 2016). Ultimately, teachers are encouraged to remember that they are their own greatest resources, as they are adding value to the learning experience. Educators are the ones who are making a real impact on students' learning in the virtual classroom, through the scaffolded presentation of the subject matter, the inclusive interpretation of the information, and the facilitation of engaging consolidation activities.

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