

**Developing an Online Community Site to Incorporate Diversity
Awareness into a First-Year Enrichment Program: Successes and
Challenges**

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ABSTRACT

As part of a First-Year Enrichment (FYE) course, an online community site was developed where video clips related to race/ethnicity, gender, and hearing status differences were posted. Each clip was accompanied by questions designed to initiate online discussion. During the ten-week FYE course, students engaged in voluntary online discussion of the video clips, monitored by instructors. Instructor and student feedback regarding the successes and challenges of this project are discussed.

NEED

The curriculum of the First-year Enrichment (FYE) program at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) lacked a systematic plan to engage instructors and students in an examination of issues related to diversity, even though one of its stated goals for the FYE program is “to foster a community that appreciates the viewpoints of diverse personal experiences and prepares students to succeed professionally in an increasingly global society.”

SOLUTION

We undertook this project to infuse diversity into the FYE program by creating a framework that would engage the 40 FYE instructors and over 2000 first-year students in a meaningful dialogue regarding issues related to race/ethnicity, gender, and hearing status. We chose hearing status differences as a topic because the National Technical Institute for the Deaf is one of the colleges of RIT and approximately 8% of students (about 1400) on the RIT college campus are deaf and hard-of-hearing students engaged in curricular and co-curricular activities with hearing students. The project comprised two major activities: 1) creation of a *Living and Learning in a Global Society Workshop* for instructors in the FYE program, which covered various issues related to differences in hearing status, gender and race/ethnicity, and 2) creation of an electronic network community where first-year students posted discussion on specific topics related to diversity.

INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

Panel Discussion

We provided a panel discussion, *Living and Learning in a Global Society*, by experts in deafness, women’s studies, and sociology that addressed “hot topics” and some strategies to approach difficult dialogues related to differences in race/ethnicity, gender, and hearing status. This panel discussion was presented during the FYE Instructor Training Day in which 40 FYE instructors participated. The director of the FYE program described the project in detail during the general meeting in the morning, and the panel discussion was presented in the afternoon. This event provided a rare opportunity for the instructors to discuss as a group their experiences in the classroom in dealing with issues related to diversity and to get an expert’s perspective on how to deal with “hot topics” sensitively and what the current issues are in each field.

Success: The feedback from the participants about the panel discussion was positive. The instructors found the discussion insightful and they especially appreciated the interactive nature of the panel discussion.

Challenge: Only 25% of the instructors (about 10) participated in the panel discussion because attending the panel discussion was voluntary and other sessions were also offered in the same

time slot. Freeing up time for group discussion in which the FYE instructors can interact with each other is a challenge that needs to be met for successful implementation of this project.

An Online Community Site

We designed an online community website, which was accessible to more than 2000 FYE students across all colleges of RIT who were enrolled in Winter Quarter FYE course sections, plus their instructors. Seven video clips (excerpted from published DVDs or found on YouTube) related to race/ethnicity, gender, and hearing status were posted on the website along with a few questions to initiate discussion.

These video clips were short in duration (less than 5 minutes), conveyed their message clearly without requiring supporting classroom activities or discussion, and were captioned to be accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing students. We went through several dozen DVDs and videotapes to find appropriate segments that could stand alone and clearly present a topic within 5 minutes.

Students participated in a voluntary online discussion related to the video clips. Every week a different team of FYE instructors monitored the online discussion and wrote responses when appropriate.

Success: The website functioned well despite initial concerns about its efficiency in showing streaming video clips. The instructor teams assigned to monitor discussion each week enjoyed reading the comments. They summarized the discussion and shared it with other instructors in their weekly meetings or through email.

The video clips and the related questions generated in-depth discussion among many FYE students. The students posted thoughtful comments and the instructors sometimes joined the discussion. In total, 244 messages were posted.

Here are some examples from the discussion of video clips related to hearing status, gender, and race/ethnicity, respectively:

“I was very surprised to learn about the differences between hearing and deaf culture. It never occurred to me that we would have behavioral differences as well as language differences.” (S.S., 1/8/2008)

“The roles that are expected of males and females in this society are somewhat ridiculous. I don’t think that all men should have to be strong or violent. I don’t think that all women are weak and need to be protected. Each person is an individual and they should be able to have their own role in society based upon their personality and needs.” (E.B., 1/23/2008)

“This video was quite surprising to me that the black children still favor the white dolls, because I believe, or at least did believe before watching this video, that things have changed in American culture since the test was first conducted many years ago, and that African-American culture has become more prevalent and accepted by the mainstream.” (B.T., 1/28/2008)

Challenge: Although 244 messages were posted, this number was smaller than expected, given that 2016 students were enrolled in FYE courses. Because participation was voluntary as per the recommendation of our Institution Review Board, it was difficult to motivate students to take on this extra task.

ASSESSMENT

The instructor feedback regarding the community site was collected mid-quarter and at the end of the quarter. It showed that the video clips and the accompanying questions were considered to be good resource material for future FYE courses, but that the stand-alone online discussion format did not appeal to some instructors. A few instructors watched video clips as a class activity and a few assigned students to small groups to discuss the video clips. These instructors thought that the students were engaged and interested in those activities. Feedback from the students regarding the community site was obtained as a part of their overall FYE course evaluation. It showed that most students either did not use the website or were not aware of it because their instructors did not assign it as homework.

CONCLUSION

This project was successful in creating an interdisciplinary collaboration among different colleges of RIT, facilitating group discussion among FYE instructors about topics related to diversity, and engaging many FYE students in a thoughtful online discussion about diversity. It did not draw a large number of students to this electronic community, perhaps because participation was voluntary. In total, 244 messages were posted. Discussing diversity-related issues is sometimes difficult in the classroom given the time constraints and the reluctance of some students to present their views in a group situation. Our project indicated that our website materials led to a surprisingly open online discussion that was rich in content, and allowed the participants to explore different directions in discussing the topic in question. Our online community website holds significant promise for engaging first-year students in sharing their perspectives and learning from each other about their diverse personal experiences. Such interaction can help increase their awareness and acceptance of diversity in society and help them appreciate the pluralistic and inclusive nature of the RIT community.

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