

Building Virtual Community in a Three-way Distance Learning Course on Race

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Abstract

This paper contributes to reframing how faculty view distance learning technologies by offering a case study of how diverse faculty from different institutions can utilize new technologies to advance their own pedagogical objectives. The authors discuss a three-way synchronous distance learning course on race, racism, and intersectionality, providing details so that the model can be replicated on other campuses. They discuss the challenges encountered, their goals for the course, and the direct benefits derived by the faculty members.

Keywords: Distance learning; Online technology; Race; Racism; Cross-racial teaching

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Building Community in a Three-way Distance Learning Course on Race

At colleges and universities across the country, the push for faculty to teach online, develop “hybrid” courses, and embrace other methods of incorporating new technologies into courses is a constant refrain. The sheer number of online programs and online course offerings has skyrocketed and continues to expand at a staggering pace. Indeed, many institutions argue that to compete in the future academic marketplace, embracing new technologies is essential. University budgets, convenience for students, and the future of higher education are the talking points with which we are often bombarded. According to Dahlstrom, De Boor, Grunwald, and Vockley (2011) “As the pace of change in the 21st century continues to increase, the world is becoming more interconnected and complex, and the knowledge economy is craving more innovation” (p. 19).

Faculty, however, often feel overburdened by these demands, which can take a considerable investment of time up front, as well as additional instructional hours during the course (Raffo, Brinthaup, Gardner, Fisher, & Lawanna, 2015). Further, faculty tend to receive lower student evaluation scores when they teach a course online. There is a clear need for institutions to provide more and better professional development for faculty learning online teaching technologies (Raffo et al., 2015). These are serious concerns that universities must address. Many faculty, however, continue to “reject these alternatives as pedagogically inferior and low quality” (Jaffee, 1997, p. 276). In an environment largely plagued by shrinking budgets, stagnant faculty salaries, and increasing

reliance upon non-tenure-track faculty, such requests for adopting new technologies from administrators may be met with resistance and—at best—ambivalence. As Rob Jenkins (2013) explains: “Proponents of online learning often use train metaphors to describe its growing impact on the educational landscape [and faculty are] encouraged, prodded, hectored, cajoled—and sometimes even ordered—to get on board. I sometimes feel as though I'm standing on the tracks, signaling ‘proceed with caution,’ while the online locomotive bears down on me, air horn reverberating.”

Jaffee (1997) argues that distance learning technology can “transform standard pedagogical practices” to “actually achieve some of our most widely desired learning objectives” (p. 276). A new report from the American Association of Colleges and Universities reiterates this point. The report argues that rather than focusing on new tools, increased access, issues of scale, improved assessment, or many of the other institutional issues that dominate many discussions, we should be examining how we can use the digital environment to transform liberal education. The report suggests that, rather than focusing on “How might we stay who we are *despite* what is happening to us and around us?” we should shift our perspective to ask a fundamental design question: “Who do we want to become?” And what possibilities for reinventing ourselves exist now, at this moment? We live and interact in a digital environment that has shaped every aspect of our lives and all social institutions. What could education look like in this context? Our focus in this paper is to contribute to this reframing by offering one concrete example of how faculty can take control over new technologies to advance their own

pedagogical objectives, while at the same time contributing to student learning outcomes. The investments that colleges and universities are making in new technologies open up a world of opportunities for faculty to take advantage of, many of which can transform face-to-face classroom settings as well. We hope to speak directly to faculty who may be wary of this pressure to infuse distance and online learning into their teaching and learning and who may opt to ignore the new media available. Instead, we will discuss some of the exciting, creative, innovative ways in which faculty members can take advantage of new technologies that are available on many campuses, yet remain frequently underused. Specifically, we will focus on our own collaborative work team-teaching a course that meets synchronously across great distances, and includes online components. However, the most significant and innovative use of technology in the course is our use of media systems that allow for face-to-face interaction, so that all three classrooms of students and faculty can see and interact with each other in real time.

The accelerating pace of technological change means that there is quite a bit of diversity among faculty in terms of their comfort levels with various forms of instructional technology. While not strictly a generational difference, this is one important factor. The three of us are all experienced enough that we grew up without online learning and advanced instructional technologies, and were trained at a time when contemporary forms of classroom technology were not even discussed. However, the millennial students of today are highly connected to multiple forms of social media. “Most students come to campus with multiple technology devices—a majority of students own about a dozen” (Dahlstrom et al., 2011, p. 4). Research finds that undergraduate students believe that

“technology could be used much more strategically to engage students in academic life” (Dahlstrom et al., 2011, p. 4).

The potential academic benefits to students from incorporating instructional technology into a course are many. According to a major report by Educause in 2016, of all students in the study:

1. 71% believe technology helps them to engage in courses.
2. 65% believe it helps them to engage in class activities.
3. 78% believe technology helps them to successfully complete their courses.
4. 46% report being more actively involved in courses using technology.

Interestingly, the study also found that while all students benefit, women and first-generation college students benefit the most. Previously, Educause reported that approximately one-third of students “strongly agree” that the “distinct benefits of technology for academic success” are that it “makes coursework/lectures more engaging; Elevates the level of teaching; Gives me access to experts in the field; Makes me feel connected to professors and other college/university staff; Makes me feel connected to other students; Makes classes more relevant to real life” (Dahlstrom et al., 2011, p. 12). These reflect our own goals of creating a course where students feel involved, engaged, and connected.

We argue that these same benefits accrue to faculty as well. Our collaborative model connects us to each other and to other experts in the field, raises the caliber of the in-class exchange of ideas and dialogue, and makes our courses more engaging and exciting. We interact with students across

institutional contexts in ways that are of mutual benefit as rooted in our unique perspectives regarding race and the course readings. Our three-way distance learning course creates a larger sense of community among the students and faculty on all three campuses. In this paper, we examine the development and structure of our course and the benefits and challenges of a variety of specific components, so that this model can be replicated by other faculty.

Designing a Collaborative Distance Learning Course

Beginning in the spring of 2009, a cooperative arrangement was developed between Professors Donald Cunnigen at the University of Rhode Island (URI) and Bruce Wade at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia (Spelman), to offer an innovative distance learning course on race and racism.¹ Due to scheduling conflicts, the joint class arrangement was modified so that Cunnigen's class met monthly with Spelman students, who volunteered to participate in sessions for extra credit as part of his Comparative Race and Ethnicity course. During these joint sessions, each class met on their respective campuses, in a media classroom set up with video conferencing capabilities. The agreed-upon arrangement included featured guest lectures by each professor on previously agreed-upon topics. The successful arrangement was repeated in

2010. In 2011, an entirely new dimension was added to the format with the inclusion of a third institutional site. Professor Cunnigen invited Professor Ferber, at the University of Colorado—Colorado Springs (UCCS), to become an integral part of the course. The vision of two fully integrated courses was realized, and Professor Ferber scheduled her Perspectives on Race and Ethnic Relations course to meet on the same day and time as Cunnigen's Institutional Racism course. UCCS and URI students met, via video conferencing, for weekly sessions of two hours and forty-five minutes. This model was offered again in 2013. In both years, the two classes continued to be joined by the students in the Spelman course on a monthly basis. The Spelman course was offered at a time that overlapped (one hour) with the course offered at the other institutions.

In this discussion we focus on the fully integrated courses of 2011 and 2013. Since the UCCS and URI students met on a weekly basis, it was necessary to jointly design a syllabus and required reading list for the two classes. As a result, the professors designed a syllabus that combined their intellectual interests as well as the key topics related to the course. After a discussion of the books we used in the past, as well as new texts we wanted to consider, a joint decision was made regarding an acceptable final list of required

¹ The idea of the distance learning course originated from Professor Cunnigen's previous experience with a colleague. Previously, he taught a topics course on race that included distance learning links with

historically Black universities, South Carolina State University (2000) and Tennessee State University (2002).

texts. This process was followed by painstakingly designing a syllabus that developed course sections flowing in sequence. The professors discussed their areas of expertise and offered suggestions on how to include each of their skills and knowledge base. Professor Wade provided lectures on Social Darwinism, eugenics ideology, genetic determinism, and institutionalized racism within the health care delivery system and highlighted the work of Troy Duster (2003), *Backdoor to Eugenics*. Professor Cunnigen provided a series of lectures introducing key concepts related to race and systemic and institutionalized racism, and also focused historically on Ira Katznelson's (2005) work, *When Affirmative Action Was White*. Professor Ferber brought a focus on privilege and intersectionality to the course. Additionally, to complement Cunnigen's and Wade's style of lecture, she led a series of interactive sessions that encouraged students to reflect on and discuss the readings and to examine the everyday racism they witness. Thus, both content and pedagogy varied from the way each of them had taught the course previously.

The professors collaborated on the selection of texts and assignments, wording of the syllabus, redesigning of class ground rules, Internet etiquette, examination topics and format, assigned reading schedule, and guest speaker schedule. Along with the lectures and activities, the course incorporated numerous outside guest speakers to highlight certain course themes. Together we had a wider range of guest speakers to draw upon from the two cities.

To continue the cross-campus dialogue that occurred in class each week, another innovation was the establishment of online chat rooms that included a mixture of students from each campus. Weekly chat

room questions were provided for students as guidelines for generating group discussions, and students were required to post comments, reflections, and questions three to five times between class sessions.

Another key aspect of course preparation involved mastering the technology we would be using. We organized "dry runs" with the media technology specialists from each of the three campuses prior to the first class session to work out potential glitches. The technology staff from each campus communicated directly prior to the beginning of the course and between classes when necessary.

After a successful experience in 2011, we realized that we could repeat the format while also introducing modifications that would allow each faculty member to assign some different readings and requirements to best meet the needs of each class. In 2013, Ferber's course was offered as a hybrid course that met every other week online. Therefore, the joint class sessions occurred biweekly, while the students still interacted in their chat rooms each week. We found that the collaborative model could be flexible and easily modified to meet each faculty member's specific institutional constraints and objectives.

Requirements and Challenges

To establish a multi-institution course, each participating school must have the necessary and compatible technological equipment that allows video-conferencing and direct calls to each other. URI utilized Polycom HDX 8000, Spelman College used Tandberg, and UCCS used Cisco TelePresence technology. There are other manufacturers of such systems as well. The key is that each system must be compliant with the H.323 standard that allows for

interoperability between systems made by other manufacturers. To involve more than two campuses, one of the schools must have a "bridge" that allows another site to be included. In our case, URI was the only campus at the time with a bridge. All of these details must be discussed with campus media technology staff persons before embarking upon course implementation. In our case, the media technologists worked together to make the collaboration work. We, as teaching faculty, were not required to understand all of the technological details, allowing us to focus more of our energies on the course, pedagogy, and instructional concerns.

Each class also had to reserve a conference-call-compatible classroom equipped with a large screen or several small screens, microphones, and one or more cameras. Due to the intensive use of technology, a teaching assistant or graduate student assistant/volunteer was needed at each site to operate the cameras, sound, and to assist if the link was broken or the call dropped (which occurred periodically). The media assistant had to attend a training session with media technology staff. These assistants played a vital role in the success of the course. Through their efforts, the general flow of discussions was managed effectively, and students at one site could see the person talking at another site or the entire class. We also had to instruct students in the use of microphones so that when they participated in dialogue, students at the other campuses could hear them. Another challenge we faced was the slightly different time blocks that our courses were scheduled to meet, as well as coordinating across two time zones. We were fortunate that our departments allowed us the flexibility to select the days and times the courses would meet. However, our universities' time blocks did not overlap precisely. The UCCS

course started about 15 minutes prior to the URI class, which ran a little longer. We used this time to address questions our students had regarding logistics, requirements, events on campus, etc., as well as to follow up on topics we felt our students might need a little more time discussing that perhaps the other class did not. For example, all of the students in the Spelman College course were Black women and the majority of students in the URI course were students of Color (representing several ethnic and nationality groups). The majority of students at UCCS were White.

One of the greatest challenges we faced was managing students' expectations regarding the technology. "At the most basic level of pedagogical effectiveness, students want technology to work and for instructors to know how to use it" (Dahlstrom et. al., 2011, p. 30). One semester we lost the link in the middle of every class, and it took the media technologists time to restore it. It also took them many weeks to figure out the source of the problem.

When requiring students to participate in online chat rooms together, we had to select one school's online platform/course management system to use. There are many online platforms, including Blackboard, Sakai, WebCT, and Moodle. Cunnigen added the UCCS students (who were using Blackboard) to his discussion groups on Sakai, and gave them access to participate in the discussions. He provided students access to SAKAI via URI (students were provided login information for access to course materials). It took some time and experimentation to combine the students from two campuses into combined chat rooms. Students were frustrated with this and expected all of the technology to work seamlessly each week. Including direct discussion of problems that might arise

during the first week of class helped to manage these expectations somewhat. Nevertheless, we learned that we had to be prepared for disruptions and potential errors with every technological aspect of the course. Based on our experience, these challenges were well worth the benefits of the course design.

Goals and Benefits

We each had a number of similar objectives in creating this collaborative model. Yet they were shaped by our own local contexts (see Appendix A). The overarching context was that this was a sociology course on race and racism, a subject that is extremely difficult to teach effectively due to the often strong emotions and resistance it can evoke in students—especially with regards to perceptions and constructions of “race” and racism. For example, students expressed very different race-based perceptions and encounters with police, and it benefitted many White students to hear about the experiences of students of Color. One White student at URI revealed an encounter with local police officers where he was in a car with Black males that he interpreted as racist in nature. Another example was where a Spelman student revealed that her grandmother had been medically sterilized, without her knowledge or consent, in South Carolina.

In addition, our students are constantly exposed to neoconservative discourses on race, which makes some resistant to open discussions of racism, White privilege, and “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins, 1990). While students of Color often enter our classes painfully aware of racism on a daily basis, many of our White students have been taught that they should be to be “color-blind.” The issues faced by ethnic groups in

the United States are frequently marginalized within this social discourse.

Meeting the needs of all students, while negotiating highly emotional classroom dynamics, can be challenging (Case, 2013; Chin, Berheide, & Rome, 2002; Fox, 2009; Haltinner, 2014). This is especially the case when students are separated not only by their learned identities, but also by virtual space. Thus, we were each driven by the goal of implementing innovative pedagogical methods that could further student dialogue and learning and create a more diverse, inclusive, and collaborative learning community for students and faculty alike.

For Cunnigen, the impetus for seeking to develop a broader learning community for both himself and his classes derived from experiences on the URI campus in which blatant and subtle forms of racism were exhibited by students, faculty, administrators, and staff; as well as hearing the repeated recounting of horrible cases experienced by students of Color on (and off) campus and inside the classroom. He wanted students to acquire knowledge of the different perspectives of others (not merely native Rhode Islanders' perspectives) regarding race/racism, and to be exposed to a wider range of outside speakers and experts who could share challenging and engaging ideas.

For Wade, the primary goal was to provide his students with an opportunity to connect with others outside of the relatively homogenous environment at Spelman College—a historically Black college founded for African American women in the southeast. He felt that one of the greatest benefits for students who talk about race, feminism, and privilege continually would be providing them with opportunities to

interact with students with identities, experiences, and views different from their own and to share their perspectives with a diverse audience. Most of his students come from secondary educational backgrounds where they were in the racial/ethnic minority. In such contexts, they were frequently expected to speak for their "race" or were expected to perform color-blindness. Once matriculated at Spelman, they feel more secure speaking out against the "isms," but at the same time they may not feel comfortable expressing certain views that some viewed as "politically correct" concerning race within the campus culture. This course offered them another structured opportunity to connect and discourse with students representing different racial, ethnic, and gendered groups.

Ferber was excited about the opportunity for her students to learn from two Black male professors. At UCCS there were no U.S. Black male faculty, and most of her students had never had a Black teacher in their entire lives. At the same time, she was interested in leveraging her own White identity to talk to White students about White privilege (Goodman, 2011). Given the unfortunate reality that students' trust and treatment of faculty on specific topics is often influenced by the professors' race, we felt a multiracial and mixed-gender teaching team would provide optimal opportunities for student learning (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Fox, 2009). We also hoped to be able to expand our own repertoires regarding knowledge specialization and methods for teaching and talking about the issues of race/racism in modern society by working with other colleagues who have long studied and taught these courses.

Results

The aforementioned objectives were met based on data from the classes (see below); practically all of the students expressed that they appreciated the unique opportunity to engage across intellectual, racial, gender, and spatial boundaries. They also appreciated the use of digital technologies. They especially liked hearing from other students and professors. They enjoyed being heard and given the opportunity to share insights gained from their experiences in their respective schools and communities to a range of students across three distinct regions of the country. Cunnigen's courses had numerous international students, who had experiences that the students at UCCS and Spelman appreciated learning about, especially comparative race relations.

The experience also provided each of us with tremendous professional development, as well as a sense of community. The experience allowed each of us to gain knowledge of new techniques for engaging students, including chat rooms and cross-campus dialogues between students. It was also an important learning opportunity for students to hear multiple perspectives from faculty members in response to faculty lectures or student comments. We held weekly phone debriefing sessions that gave us an opportunity to review our pedagogical practices, discuss critical events that occurred in the classroom, examine the quality of our discussions, and plan for future classes. We had experienced no other teaching situation that provided such rich and real-time feedback, personal engagement, and intellectual camaraderie. It also provided each of us with an opportunity to acquire new knowledge about literature and themes in the field of race relations and to observe different groups of students dealing with the concepts of race and racism. When strong emotions and

resistance arose in the classroom, being able to debrief incidents with each other, after having all witnessed the same experience, provided both support, emotional release, and opportunities for learning. Further, we each had the opportunity to speak more freely about our own campus climate and racial dynamics, a subject that may be difficult to discuss with colleagues on one's own campus.

We have not yet systematically studied the impact of this learning environment on students. However, a survey administered to UCCS students focusing specifically on the three-way course design revealed that 20 out of 21 students would recommend the class to others. In an open-ended question, 17 out of 21 said that the greatest strength of the course was getting to hear diverse/alternative perspectives (with 7 specifically identifying regional and geographic differences). Other strengths identified by multiple respondents were learning from diverse faculty as well as international students at URI. In the following section, we will examine a number of concrete examples of the benefits this class configuration provided in terms of our own pedagogical goals.

Selective Data from the Class

Student Resistance

Our weekly debriefs often included discussion of specific questions or comments students offered that expressed subtle or overt resistance to the subject of the course. Talking together allowed us to process these incidents and prepare our responses for future sessions. In 2011, UCCS had one very resistant student who expressed subtle racist views in each class. In one particular session, she began interrogating Cunnigen directly, and asked

him to represent and speak for all Black people regarding issues such as crime and drug use in the African American community. Her starkly different treatment of Ferber and Cunnigen was evident to other students in the class. Having both a Black and a White professor provided the rest of the students with a very clear example of how faculty are often treated differently based upon their race. Many students commented upon this in their chat rooms and journals. On the other hand, the benefits of having the course team taught were also very clear. Most of the time, faculty of Color have no allies in the classroom when they are treated disrespectfully. Even worse, they are often left to wonder about what happened, and why, and how to respond on their own. In this case, Ferber was able to demonstrate her White privilege by making visible the inappropriateness of this student's interrogation of Cunnigen in that moment. We were able to debrief the incident together after class, and come up with a plan for next steps. After Ferber met with the student, she ended up dropping the class, a resolution made possible by the student's trust in Ferber, whom she saw as a more objective observer of racial dynamics. When faculty of Color face similar experiences alone, they often escalate as students continue to challenge their legitimacy, knowledge, and expertise in the subject (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Fox, 2009).

Community

Throughout the semester, we found evidence of students learning from the students at the other campuses. This was frequently evident when we invited guest speakers. One of the greatest benefits of the course was our ability to expose ourselves and our students to a broad range of subject experts in the field. Additionally, the class sessions with guest speakers were

transformed by the audience of students from more than one campus, and ended up being far more successful due to this enlarged community. Each time the course was offered, each of us invited a number of local guest speakers. One of the speakers, Dr. Eddie Portillos, another professor of sociology at UCCS, discussed his research on “Criminalization of Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/os” and focused on racial disparities in the criminal justice system. The students at URI especially benefited from this exposure because the class was composed of a significant number of Latino/Latina students, and the department consists of a large number of criminal justice students. Given Portillos’s background and focus on Latinos in the criminal justice system, his presentation peaked the curiosity of URI students. They were interested particularly in a short video he shared regarding racial/ethnic harassment. Numerous students commented about the video in the chat room. The following is a representative journal entry quote:

Last week’s class offered a very enlightening and interesting video on Professor Eddie Portillos’s research on the “Criminalization of Chicanas/os and Mexicana/os.” The video focused on the San Jose Police Department and the disproportionate amount of Latinos that they arrest for “public drunkenness” or a “657F.” In addition to that, the video served as a great tool and offered some real life situations and areas of the country where many of this (sic) institutionalized racism takes place. This class offered a different perspective and focus than we have had in past classes. In earlier classes we have maintained a focus on Black and White, indirectly

leaving out Latinos. Coming from a biracial background, I believe it is essentially (sic) for me to understand how racism, specifically institutional racism, affects both the African American community as well the Hispanic community. ... I walked away from last week’s class with a wider and more complete view of how Latinos have been targeted, or criminalization (sic) of Latinos.

Another speaker, Silaphone Nhongvongsouthy, Laotian Community Center vice president in Smithfield, Rhode Island, presented a lecture on the Asian American community within the state. She provided a Power Point presentation featuring a historical overview of Asian populations in the United States, specific details about the Laotian community, and a display of Laotian attire. The lecture was followed by a question-and-answer session. While of interest and relevance to the whole class, in this case, UCCS students were able to learn about a specific ethnic community they did not encounter in Colorado.

Professor Stephany Rose of UCCS presented a lecture on “Recovering from White Supremacy: Notes from a Black Woman on the Frontlines of Anti-Racist Work.” It focused on her experiences as an African American woman in academia. In this lecture, she highlighted student evaluations that focused on her appearance, such as her choice of clothing colors and hairstyle, rather than on the substantive content of her teaching. During this session, the Spelman students responded energetically to her presentation, and most of the questions and discussion came from them. The Spelman students were the only ones to pose critical questions and actively engage in dialogue with the speaker. Given Rose’s research and her background

working in and attending historically Black colleges and universities, as well as her African American female identity, it is understandable that the Spelman students would have the greatest interest in the topic because they could easily identify with the speaker. However, the UCCS and URI students directly benefitted from the opportunity to experience and reflect upon this interchange. A number of students commented on how much they learned from listening to this dialogue among a group of Black women about their daily experiences of racism and sexism. One UCCS student highlighted in her journal that the Spelman students raised fascinating questions that she never would have thought of as a White woman. In this class session, the URI and UCCS students appreciated learning from the women at Spelman. In addition, they realized that the experiences shared by Rose were not just the experiences of one individual or subject expert (a common pretext used to dismiss the experiences of a person of Color), but faced by many Black women on a regular basis in diverse geographic and social contexts.

Another benefit of the collaborative class arrangement is that it provided a much larger audience for these guest speakers who were willing to share their time with us (none were compensated). In 2013, all of the students found the presentation of Onna Moniz John on Black Memorabilia and her discussion of her life growing up as a Black Cape Verdean in Providence, Rhode Island, quite fascinating. They peppered her with questions regarding the artifacts she displayed and her analysis. The dialogue allowed the URI students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to discuss their own racial experiences in New England, which UCCS and Spelman students found fascinating. Interestingly, one of the more animated exchanges during her presentation

occurred between a White male student who had been challenging the reality of racism, who happened to live in her neighborhood. The speaker mentioned that she had challenged an Arab American shopkeeper in the neighborhood who refused to remove racially offensive items on display in his place of business. Despite the student's denials regarding twenty-first-century racism, the exchange provided a vehicle not only for a personal reality check for the student but a vehicle for a broader discussion of the perpetuation of racist stereotypes, racial ideologies, and post-racial mythologies in the contemporary United States. The UCCS students found it memorable and powerful, as evidenced in these two samples of their written commentary:

When Ms. Onna Moniz-John spoke to the different classes, something just clicked. I knew that there were racist shows, cartoons, and images of minority groups (specifically that of African Americans) within the media, never had I realized how blatantly racist they truly were. Some of the historical pieces that she presented were shocking and saddening. It impacted my understanding of race in a way that I had never thought of before. Thoughts like: "How could this have been legal?" or, "How can this still be legal?" and, "How have I never heard of this before?" But Ms. Onna Moniz-John was just a starting point. ...

I found that my views on race have changed a lot and really opened up because in the beginning I did not even think about race on a daily basis and my views were pretty one sided based on my parents' views.

Even learning more about African Americans' past has come to make me realize that race is on three different levels; individual, institutional, and cultural. I loved when the Black Memorabilia lady talked about the history and present day racism. I found this to be my favorite memory of the class because of all the things I did not know made me really interested in the history of why and how all racism came about. And what surprised me a lot was that racism is not just focused in America. When other people from different (sic) shared their stories about how they viewed race in their country like Norway or other European countries ... made me realize that there were Blacks outside of America and Africa, which made me come to terms that I was still very closed minded....

As this student highlights, the benefit of having international students in the class was tremendous. A special class lecture was presented in 2013 by one of four foreign exchange students in that class, Nicoline Bjerge Schie.² Schie was one of the survivors of a racist attack against youth at a student retreat in Norway by Anders Behring Breivik. In the attack, 70 people were murdered in the shooting spree. Through a detailed Power Point presentation, she provided background on her native country as well as personal accounts of her own experiences on the day

of the attack. The presentation included an interview with her in a special documentary. Her classmates were impressed by her composure as she recounted the horrible details of the incident. They described their reactions in the following accounts:

The most interesting part of this week for me was the presentation by my fellow classmate. She is a Norwegian student and she is a survivor from a horrible attack on her country. Her presentation to the class was very informative for me because I never knew this had happened or that I was in class with someone who survived a horrible massacre. She was very descriptive in her presentation when discussing how brutal this killer was in Norway. He constructed a bombing in the city which was one of the biggest tragedies Norway has seen, and then an hour later the killer expands to an island where my fellow classmates (sic) was located and goes on a killing spree. This was an extremely devastating event for Norway and its culture. This Norwegian massacre was another example of the hate crimes that we face in our world just like what happened on September 11th and a recent bombing in Boston.

The past of [sic] couple of weeks in class we've been discussing and reading about an assortment of

² Name used with permission.

things including the violence of hate. The readings and lectures have also unfortunately taken place during a time where a terrorist attack occurred in Boston.³ ... In our class we saw further examples of White terrorism with the presentation on the attacks in Norway.... In this week's presentation we learned the Norwegian shooter had a political agenda and wanted to get rid of the students on the island who could eventually go on to be leaders of the political party he hated. Although most of his victims were White he was also very anti-Muslim and anyone who didn't represent how he felt Norway should be.... The Norwegian man saw the presence of Muslims and people who didn't think the way he did as a threat to his country.

Reading about hate crimes made me think about the terror attack that happened in Norway 22 of July 2011. After this event, several people with immigrant backgrounds in Norway were exposed to hate crimes and harassment before it became known that the attacker was White ethnic Norwegian and not a Muslim terrorist. I witnessed a lot of harassment and discrimination on social websites, such as Facebook

and Twitter. People immediately assumed that it was a Muslim group behind the attacks. I think it is scary how people and even the media are so quick at drawing conclusions, which are often based on stereotypes.

In sum, hearing the narratives of numerous guest speakers, as well as fellow students from a broader cross-national, and even global context, seemed to play a central role in decreasing student resistance to acknowledging (or at least hearing) the realities associated with race and racism. This larger, more diverse, learning community made the issues students were reading about literally come to life. We witnessed personal connections to the material being forged and we saw our own pedagogical goals being met.

Conclusion

In conclusion, students benefitted from a collaborative teaching and learning environment that was enhanced by a racially and gender diverse faculty and student body supplemented by instructional and distance learning technologies. Our experiences have confirmed that students “value the connections to instructors, and to experts in their field, that technology makes possible” (Brown, 2011, p. 30). Additionally students prefer blended course environments that

³ On April 15, 2013, two young Eastern European émigrés exploded a pressure

cooker bomb during the Boston Marathon that injured over 200 and killed 3 people.

incorporate face-to-face interaction, online interchange, and a combination of technological components (Chaney, Chaney, & Eddy, 2010; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004).

One of the final recommendations of the 2011 Educause report is that faculty “use technology in more transformative ways. Such as participatory and collaborative interactions, and for higher-level teaching and learning that is engaging and relevant to students’ lives and future plans. Use technology more to extend learning beyond the classroom” (Dahlstrom et al., 2011, p. 32). The unique three-way distance learning course we have developed addresses all of these best-practice recommendations. However, student learning was not our only goal. This course design decreased our isolation, advanced our own sense of community as faculty colleagues, enhanced

our own repertoires of teaching skills and strategies, and contributed to our own professional development.

Based on recent research, Jenkins (2013) concludes that the push for using “innovative” technology, and especially online teaching, is driven almost entirely by budgets. He argues that it is neither students, faculty, nor employers that are behind these demands, but administrators and politicians driven by budgetary concerns. From our experiences over the years, this may be true, however, it does not prevent faculty from co-opting these technologies to advance our own pedagogical goals and the quality of work life. We support Jaffee’s (1997) conclusion that “now is the time for genuine pedagogical reflection, exploration and experimentation” (p. 277). We encourage faculty to consider how new technologies can be used to meet *our own needs*.

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Appendix A

Table 1	
<i>Student Demographics by College</i>	
University of Rhode Island	
<u>Sociology</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Undergraduate enrollment	13,354
<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
White	68
African American	5
Hispanic	9
American Indian	.2
Asian	3
Pacific Islander / Native Hawaiian	.04
Two / more races	2.3
Unknown	11
Non-resident aliens	1.6
University of Colorado Colorado Springs	
<u>Sociology</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Undergraduate enrollment	8,882*
<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
White	68
African American	3.7
Hispanic	14
American Indian	.6
Asian	3.3
Pacific Islander	.3
Two / more races	5.9
Unknown	2.9
Non-resident aliens	.78
Spelman College**	
<u>Sociology</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Undergraduate enrollment	2,177
<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
White	2
African American	87.74
Hispanic	.14

American Indian	2.09
Asian / Pacific Islander	.09
Two / more races / Unknown	11.35
<i>Note: *Course is cross-listed between sociology and WEST. **Private, four-year Liberal Arts College for Women</i>	

Table 2
Departmental Demographics by College

University of Rhode Island			
<u>Sociology</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Faculty	8	Faculty	4.25
Majors	414	Majors	41
Ethnicity		Ethnicity	
White	6	White	1.25**
African American	1	African American	1
Native American/White	1	Hispanic	1
		Native American/White	1
		Asian	1
University of Colorado Colorado Springs			
<u>Sociology</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Faculty	9.5	Faculty	4.25
Majors		Majors	41
Ethnicity		Ethnicity	
White	3.5	White	1.25**
African American	1	African American	1
Hispanic	2	Hispanic	1
Native American/White	2	Native American/White	1
Asian	1		
Spelman College			
<u>Sociology</u>	<u>Frequency</u>		
Faculty	7		
Majors	61		
Ethnicity			
White	2		
African American	5		
<i>Note: *Sociology and Anthropology combined. **Includes 2 faculty with .5 appointments in WEST and 1 with a .25 appointment.</i>			