

Exploring Cultural Humility and Online Programs: Mid-Career Academics and Changing Times

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Abstract: This article will explore the evolution of two mid-career academics in their growth and understanding of online education. The perspectives are similar in that both contributors have over a decade of experience in academia. The authors explore the shared identity of mid-career academia while at the same time exploring the differences in this identity based on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. This reflection will trace the journey of two social work professors from their entry into higher education to the evolution of perspectives and letting go of preconceived biases and expectations regarding the future of social work education. Ultimately, the authors infuse the African tradition of *Sankofa* in exploring cultural humility and online learning. Through this lens, the authors affirm the importance of moving forward and looking back. The article provides fresh perspectives for other seasoned professors who are struggling to make meaning in an ever-changing world of technology.

Keywords: cultural humility, intersectionality, academia and change, online learning

The Genesis

We are two mid-career associate professors. We have a combined 40 years of social work practice and teaching experience. We were attracted to the profession because of our life journeys and the emphasis on equality, equity, diversity, and justice. We are both macro social workers who see social change as the core of who we are and what we do. *Unfaithful Angels* (Specht & Courtney, 1995), a work that challenges social workers to recommit to the mission of serving those most in need, is our doctrine. But there are differences. One of us is a white female from a privileged background in which both parents had graduate degrees and punishments came in the form of five-paragraph essays about whatever crime was committed and lessons learned. The other is a black male from a humble yet loving matriarchal upbringing in a small industrial city in the northeast region, where the population was diverse and people expressed tolerance if you worked hard and knew your place. We have come from different worlds, but we are united now in sharing our new journey in developing humility in a culture neither one of us was prepared for—the online learning culture and a new shift in social work education.

This is our story.

The Awakening

“You better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone / For the times they are a-changin’”
- Bob Dylan (1964)

My (first author) story began with parents who encouraged me to embrace diversity and challenge the rigid, biased values that surrounded me in the Deep South. Thus, while my

classmates went to Sunday school, took dance lessons, and vacationed at beach resorts, I played in ditches, cared for pet rats and frogs, and recited Bob Dylan. My parents would hold family meetings with the release of each new vinyl. We would sit around on the burnt-orange shag carpet of our wood-paneled den, listening to each new song and analyzing the lyrics as Dylan poured out his angst at an unjust world. The poetic words became ingrained in my persona from a very early age, and I lived by the calls for peace and social justice in his songs “Masters of War,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” and “Hurricane.” But “The Times They Are A-Changin’” always held a special place in my soul. I lived by the mantras of questioning authority, respecting the youth, and embracing social change. The lyrics spoke to me in a way that inspired me to honor the brothers and sisters who had come before me and to carry that torch of social justice forward. I vowed never to let go of my inner childlike wonder of the world and to never become stuck in my ways.

Then I met online education. Two years ago, my university, like so many universities throughout this nation, “drank the Kool-Aid” and set sail on a new journey in developing online programs. Furthermore, our university’s plan was to partner with a for-profit, corporate entity in undertaking this endeavor. To me, as a professor of social work for over 15 years, this felt like a betrayal of everything I stood for and everything I valued in teaching. Students needed to be in classrooms, I professed. Faculty needed to be in face-to-face communication with the future leaders of the world. A fundamental core value of our profession, I argued, was the importance of human relationships. We were giving in to “the man,” the evils of online education and corporate America.

It was a split vote. Those colleagues of mine who grew up in a world of card catalogs, manual pencil sharpeners, and *The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* were adamant in their opposition to online anything. We stood firm in our chalk-dusted blazers and ink-stained hands. But the newer faculty saw the benefits of online education, most of them coming of age with the World Wide Web and password-protected phones. These faculty, the next generation of leaders in social work education, argued that there was a place for online learning, that it was not all evil, and that it was even a social justice issue.

A social justice issue. Never before had I felt so passionately opposed to something that was being questioned in terms of its own relevancy to social justice. Never. I bowed up, adamant that my stance was the right stance and that the real social justice issue was taking away from the quality of on-the-ground learning. My crusade, I believed, was the right path in terms of equality and respect. In the end, I lost.

Two years later, I found myself face to face with Annie, my third-party instructional designer. “Instructional designer” was not even a part of my vernacular. This complete stranger was going to show me, a veteran of over 15 years in the classroom, how to develop my course. I hated her. I hated her before she even walked in the door. Annie represented everything evil. Annie represented corporate America. Annie represented a partnership that I was vehemently opposed to. Annie represented “the man.” I had fought against Annie my entire life and now she was sitting on my late grandmother’s vintage loveseat in my southwestern-orange office with pictures of Obama, maps from my Peace Corps days, and a “No Parking” sign from Kennedy’s

inauguration.

Annie told me that she loved the loveseat. She told me about her upcoming bike ride to raise money for cancer. She told me about her brother who had worked in Latin America. The more that Annie talked, the harder it became for me to hate her. And I really wanted to hate her. Instead, my first face-to-face meeting with Annie was filled mostly with chitchat about all sorts of shared interests and goals and life experiences. We were even of the same generation. Annie grew up on manual typewriters, also, and was now working for a major partner in online education. My world was spinning.

Over the next few months, I would meet with Annie, mostly virtually, on a weekly basis. “Virtually” for Annie meant a computer equipped with a webcam, headset, and all the bells and whistles of sophisticated technology. “Virtually” for me meant sitting in my living room, logging into my computer, hunting around for the volume control, and half-heartedly listening while at the same time playing fetch with my dog. Over time, however, I spent less time playing fetch and more time actually listening to what Annie had to say. I even learned that I had a built-in webcam on my laptop.

Annie helped me see that a course that I had taught several times—and that I thought I had taught well—had strayed far, far away from the course description. She helped me see that my assignments, taken from a litany of ideas I had used and reused dozens of times, were not measuring much of anything associated with the expected competencies. She taught me how to develop rubrics that were way clearer and more useful than anything I had used beforehand. She saw my syllabus from a fresh perspective and empowered me to reconsider the way I taught and delivered information. Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) define cultural humility as the process of moving away from adherence on knowledge and toward a paradigm of self-reflection and willingness to open one’s self to other ways of being. My working relationship with Annie was a process of letting go of my own need to be right and to be the expert and to open myself up to the possibility of other models of classroom culture. She taught me cultural humility.

I liked Annie. I liked Annie so much that I began to look forward to our weekly meetings. I liked Annie so much that I was excited to see her when she came with a massive and elaborate crew for filming. I liked Annie so much that I looked forward to sharing a beer with her after hours and hours of filming. I even liked Annie so much that I suggested we submit a joint presentation about university partnerships and online learning.

So now I am nearing the midpoint of my first course in our online program. I am meeting with students virtually. I am learning about my students’ backgrounds. I am observing my students engage with one another both formally in discussion board posts but also informally in the virtual “student lounge.” I am finding that many of their discussions are at a level that is equal to, if not outweighs, the quality of discussions that I foster in my on-the-ground course. And I am using all the lessons that I am learning in ways to revise and improve my campus-based teaching.

I have come full circle. My like-minded colleagues who joined me in the fight against online

learning have since retired or moved on. In fact, I am currently the sole tenured faculty member in my department and only remaining naysayer from the “Operation No Online” era. My old compadres and I still keep in touch, and they ask me how I am surviving the descent into virtual learning. And I tell them the truth. I tell them that I have learned to practice what I teach. I tell them that there is more than one way to develop social work education. I tell them that my long-standing battle against online educational culture ended in a hard self-reflection on my need to embrace humility. And I tell them that, at the end of the day, “the times they are a-changin’” (Dylan, 1964).

The Transformation

I (second author) also grew up in changing times, but my paradigm was shaped by *Sankofa*. *Sankofa*, a word rooted in Ghanaian culture, means that as we move forward, we must not lose sight of where we came from (Temple, 2010). As a black male, my life has been a constant push-pull between moving forward and looking back. My transformation as a black male in academia encompasses the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in a predominantly white world.

From my early years as a youth, I never felt oppressed because I chose to look at life from what I could become (with a little luck), to carry the right mindset, and to seize opportunities. The friends and associates of diverse ethnic enclaves served me well in my journey through adolescence. I learned from these mentors how to navigate the different shades of the community with both personality and posturing. The uniquely black experience was never my natural experience growing up until I was forced into harmful real-life situations that were exacerbated due to my skin color and gender. It was then that I faced the truth that being a black male is a risk factor, if not a safety issue, to American democracy. At 13 years old, did it hurt? Yes. Would it define me? No. I understood people and believed in the spirit of humanity. With arriving at this epiphany, I knew I would always be okay with whatever I became and wherever I landed.

Without my father present in my home, I struggled with abandonment and attachment issues. This led me to find guidance from coaches and older males in my community, both negative and positive. Research supports that children raised in households lacking a father experience psychosocial problems with greater frequency than children with a father in the home (Allen & Daly, 2007; Brockenbrough, 2018; Fitzsimons & Villadsen, 2019). However, I was driven to get out of my household and be something different. I learned early as an adolescent that I carried personable traits and was equipped to interact with all types of individuals regardless of their backgrounds. I believe I was strengths-based way before I knew I was. I knew upon high school graduation that my hoop dreams were nil due to injury, and I was looking at the end of a tunnel. And, although it was dark, I could see a light into my future. That’s when I decided to not be a statistic and do what no one else in my family was able to do—go to college. Since this college expedition was new to me and my family tree, I knew I needed to share this vision proudly and loudly in order to receive the guidance of others. This help came in the form of teachers and coaches. I quickly realized the valuable lesson that if you show you want to be something in life, there are people willing to help you in all shades and colors. You just have to take the first steps.

As a first-generation college student, I arrived at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Virginia where I felt pride, empowerment, and a sense of community—something I never had. It was during this undergraduate experience that I knew acquiring this college degree was bigger than me. This degree was connected to my family, my community, my people, and my legacy. In addition, my HBCU experience taught me about the rich history of Black Americans and our fight for equality, education, and democracy. This epiphany of self-understanding about my history was pivotal in me wanting to go to graduate school and pursue my PhD.

A Different Type of World

Graduate school at a Primarily White Institution offered a much different learning culture than the HBCU. I believe this is a similar experience to students coming from a traditional face-to-face classroom setting into an online learning community. My graduate school days were filled with heartache, disappointment, resiliency, and victory. I would tell any graduate student of color to be prepared that higher education is a microcosm of society. The reality is that oppression, stereotypes, discrimination, and microaggressions are real and exist. My undergraduate experience didn't prepare me for that.

The experiences of my graduate programs over 20 years ago provided me with invaluable insights that may help current graduate students of color. For black male graduate students, I recommend you go in with your eyes open and know discrimination practices and microaggressions are normal in academia. This is often actualized with who and what gets funded, who and what gets published and where, who gets hired and tenured, who gets admitted, and who graduates. In an awkward way, it feels like you are in a double-bind dilemma as a black student or black scholar choosing between advancing your career or advancing your community. Although the feeling of “onlyness” may be burdensome at times, I knew I couldn't give up because this academic achievement was bigger than me. Knowing the adaptability of socialization is the process by which a PhD student comes to learn and understand the values, norms, rules, and rewards of academia, or in other words, the *rules of the game* (Austin, 2002; Patterson, 2016).

This dynamic may show some similarities between traditional in-seat students, who can just focus on school responsibilities, and online students, who are often working adult learners with full-time jobs and families pursuing an advanced degree. Whatever you do, remember that graduate school is a means to an end. It is not the rest of your life.

After earning a PhD, I knew I had accomplished something bigger than myself from the joy it brought to my immediate family to the pride it gave to my extended community. I was the first on many levels warranting an obligation to the past, present, and future. Simply put, this degree didn't just belong to me. It was connected to something greater that will never be erased.

Over the past 20 years since acquiring this doctorate, I have experienced many things about higher education. One is regularly being selective of the stands I take, the steps I make, and the words I say when adversity or a microaggression surfaces. Oftentimes, I make a choice to go

there or not. How I make these selections and cope with them can lead to lingering racial battle fatigue that can adversely impact physical and mental health.

I first thought that by getting a doctorate, I had *arrived* and would now be removed from the microaggressions, subtle and stunning racial slights, and insensitive critiques about being a black male faculty member in higher education. But I was quickly reminded that the academy, with all its democracy and freedoms, was still a microcosm of society, where I had to be mindful of my collective efforts as a teacher, scholar, colleague, and role model. My faculty commitment denotes that although the halls may change, the underpinnings remain the same: be authentically impactful, embrace the moment, and contribute in a manner which brings merit and value to the profession. One key affirmation in pressing forward toward perseverance and excellence is knowing that I am not alone. It seems magically felt and understood when I see a reflection of myself on my campus, in my profession, or at campuses and conferences across the country. It's a powerful feeling that can't be explained, operationalized, or measured, but it is real and resounding. I can only imagine that this is the same for other faculty of color or difference.

A New World

Now I face a new challenge. After earning a PhD and navigating the waters of academia, I am faced with a different kind of cultural humility—being effective and meaningful as an online teacher. The growing pains of reaching this goal for me include, for one, not seeing the attentiveness of the students and the climate of the physical classroom in gauging if I need to strengthen the velocity of content or throttle it back. My years of teaching in brick-and-mortar classrooms have helped me develop an acute sense in determining that. Now I must learn how to effectively convey not only teacher presence, but also cultural presence as an African American male advocating for sensitivity and awareness with diverse populations. In front of a classroom is not a problem, but behind a computer screen not so much. Lastly, I challenge myself as an online teacher to not overlook or underestimate the students, their lives, and what it took for them to arrive in my course. There is a reason they are getting their education online. Life just may be one variable of many. It will be my charge to keep that in front of my mind as I evolve as an online teacher.

Cultural Humility and *Sankofa*

In the spirit of *Sankofa*, we now return to the beginning. We see our evolution in navigating a new culture in online education as a representation of *Sankofa*—with feet forward but head circling back.

With feet forward we bravely enter into an online culture that is different from anything we experienced in school. Part of our charge as professors is to maintain a level of social presence in an online culture that is familiar to us. The intersection of cultural humility and social presence in online education refers to the level or degree of personal connectedness of students in the classes (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The dimensions of social presence are impacted by five factors. They are social respect, social sharing, open-mindedness, social identity, and intimacy (Soper & Ukot, 2016; Sung & Mayer, 2012). The more professors who create a culture in which students

have the ability to receive timely feedback, share information, share their own beliefs, express positive responses, have an identity, share personal experiences, and know their professor, the more effective the learning experience. This makes students feel socially secure and paves the way for an environment in which the students feel safe to express their ideas.

Part of our charge is this: how do we help our online students develop cultural humility in their interactions with other students? The removal of face-to-face interaction through an online platform does not mean that the intersectionality of issues such as race, class, gender, and age disappear. In fact, it may be that as instructors we have a heightened responsibility to encourage our students, including students of color and first-generation students, to reflect upon their own experiences in power, privilege, and oppression through the context of virtual learning. While we, as newcomers to online academia, do not have all the answers, we understand through *Sankofa* that there is an opportunity for significant growth while maintaining our own roots and values.

We come together, representing diverse backgrounds, but with a shared challenge of how to infuse our cultural presence into online learning. As a tool, we embrace the concept of *Sankofa* as a way for us to hold onto our roots while learning to fly. We would add to this an overarching element of cultural humility that informs our cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence. Cultural humility affirms our willingness to accept that we do not have all the answers. The letting go of the need to be experts guides our journey forward in online education. We want to model for our students the value of embracing our experiences while at the same time exhibiting an openness to learning more about our broader world.

Our new face is the face of *Sankofa* through the lens of cultural humility. We will continue to draw on our own unique backgrounds and find creative ways to infuse those into online learning. We recognize that adult learners, in particular, need to see reasons behind what they are being asked to do and how it aligns with their learning goals. We hope that by being mindful of our own cultural humility in online education, we will foster an environment in which students become empowered. These efforts will draw on lessons learned in this new virtual reality as, together, we evolve as both teachers and learners in a world so different from what is familiar. The reality is that we do not know it all. We never will. But perhaps our collective experience in navigating unfamiliar waters will help guide us to a better place in which we embody the wisdom of *Sankofa* by moving forward in changing times while holding onto the wisdom of those who came before us.

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