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Mirror, Mirror . . .

No doubt you have heard the question “If a tree falls in the middle of the woods and no one is around to hear it, does it still make noise?” *Empirically*, we know it does, but *experientially*, who cares? It would be strange if the noises of trees falling in solitude impacted our lives at all.

Now for another question: “If I teach online and cannot see the race/ethnicity of my students, do they still represent potentially diverse populations?”

Pause to contemplate this.

Empirically we know our students are diverse, just like we know they are married or single, parents or not, traditional or nontraditional, tall or short, and so forth. We know it like we know all falling trees make noise. Yet whether our students’ diversity informs our experience — or practice — is dubious at best. It simply is human nature that what we cannot see, touch, taste, or hear might as well not exist at all. The result of this mentality for online courses is that we treat them as colorless. After all, who has time to do all the work it takes to translate complex course content digitally *and* think about our students’ racial/ethnic identities?

I suggest such a mentality sells us short. As one who has taught well over one hundred semester-long online courses — that’s one hundred, not a typo — in accredited religious studies departments (or courses with religious components) to diverse populations, I have concluded that focusing solely on content while ignoring identity is to settle for the good rather than to pursue the best. The real-life diversity of our students on the other side of the screen must impact our practice if maximum effectiveness is the goal. In this article I hope to sketch a useful framework that leverages diversity for richer online learning experiences. This begins with understanding the concept of “monitor as mirror,” so we can take action to shatter it.

During the course of each semester, I have noted a particular tendency within myself to allow the computer monitor to become a de facto mirror. A male, White, divorced and remarried father of (so far) three children, endurance athlete, and not-yet-forty Gen-X professor who corresponds with hundreds of students across multiple online courses annually, it is easy to fall into a mindless, Procrustean rhythm that subconsciously assumes the students are little more than carbon copies of me. It is easy to teach how I would want to be taught, to imagine their struggles and strengths are identical to mine, and to treat them, quite literally and not just morally, as I would want to be treated.

I suspect I am not alone in this. Computer screens easily become mirrors so that everything on the screen — from what we post and read to the names and identities of our students — are subconsciously filtered as an extension of our own racial/ethnic self. I am reminded here of the scene “Malkovich Inside Malkovich” from the film *Being John Malkovich* (available on www.movieline.com)

In this bizarre film, Malkovich takes a brief and disturbing tour of his own head and finds that everyone — men, women, and children — look exactly like him due to his own latent narcissism.

As one whose research interests include higher education pedagogy, I argue this “mirror, mirror” syndrome poses a problem for teaching all courses online, from religion to mathematics. However, I argue that it is a special problem for online religion courses since our content affords us the opportunity to create additional layers of meaning if we use the right tactics to involve our students at the level of identity. Consequently, we need a framework to help *shatter the mirror* so we can see through to the students on the other side.

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