The Digital Divide and Langston Hughes: Bridging the Gap through the Virtual Harlem Project

Brenda Eatman Aghahowa

Much has been written about the "digital divide" between typically lower-income minority students with limited access to computer technology and their more prosperous white counterparts who have access to computers both at home and at school. Educators and others fear that inequities in access will widen what is already a chasm in preparation for college and, ultimately, for high-salaried, white-collar and managerial jobs.

Let us imagine for a moment that adequate funding magically has appeared from foundations and other sources to bridge the digital divide, and now every American student, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, has unlimited access to e-mail, the Internet, and other electronic environments, such as virtual reality caves. Would minority students who previously had not had access to these technologies then be more interested in the content of their courses? In the age of MTV, when youngsters watch their music, in an age of ubiquitous video stimulation that makes reading seem out of fashion and academic reading especially a chore and a bore, would access to computer technology as a supplemental resource to traditional course materials make a difference in the motivation of minority students to study and to retain complex academic content of various disciplines?

Upon reflection, it seems that the answer must be both yes and no: yes, if the course content intentionally reflects the culture of these students in an affirming way, and no if it does not. A project like Virtual Harlem at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), which uses sophisticated computer technology to highlight the cultural contributions of African Americans during a specific period of American history, goes a long way toward helping students to enjoy the acquisition of academic knowledge while also gaining exposure to the latest innovations in computer technology. Permit me to share a bit of my own personal history in order to support my implicit point that the cultural richness that minority students bring with them to the classroom must be respected and valued and their interests somehow incorporated into course content if they are to be successful in their academic and professional pursuits.

Recently, I delivered a keynote address to members of the

National Educational Opportunity Centers Association (NEOCA) at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Chicago. Funded by the U. S. Department of Education, the 70 plus EOCs around the country provide support services for first-generation and nontraditional students seeking college admissions. Many, if not most of those helped, are ethnic minority students. As I addressed the group's theme, "Unlocking Doors to Brighter Futures," I suggested among other things that NEOC staff must do more than simply help with completion of the maze of forms related to college admission and financial aid. In addition, they must make concerted efforts to serve as mentors who continually affirm what these students *can* accomplish rather than what they *cannot*. Without feeling whole and affirmed in this way, the other efforts mean little and won't do very much to help reduce the high attrition rate of minority college students.

Generally, the personhood of these students, I noted, often has taken a severe beating in a variety of settings before they arrive at college. For instance, for most of their lives, these students have lived with negative images of persons of color proliferated by the news media and the film industry. Minority persons still often are portrayed as criminals, as lazy persons living off the public dole, and as dysfunctional individuals in their family lives–as those, in short, who need a great deal of social service intervention. For most of their academic careers, these students have been taught from textbooks that either misrepresent or entirely ignore the significant contributions of minorities to the development of this nation.

Speaking from my own experience as a child of the turbulent 1960s and as one who made a very rocky transition from an all-black, public, inner-city junior high school in Cleveland, Ohio to a mostly white, college preparatory private school in affluent Shaker Heights, I remarked that I did not see my people nor my culture positively reflected in any aspect of my educational life at the suburban school in question for the entire three years I attended. There was no Romare Bearden artwork adorning the walls, no Gwendolyn Brooks poetry considered in literature classes, nor any mention in math classes of the mathematical genius of Benjamin Banneker in helping to design the nation's capital city.

There was no familiar cuisine among the bland fare offered in the cafeteria, no foot-stomping gospel numbers among the eurocentric hymns sung at required chapel services. Indeed, music appreciation classes included no discussions of the significance of the blues as the foundation for much of America's indigenous music, including jazz, rock and roll, pop, and rhythm and blues styles. Western European classical music was the focus of such classes, and no other music was deemed worthy of study.

The culture shock of this first experience as one of a few blacks in a mostly white setting was tremendous. Worse, though, than the *absence* of affirmation was the continual *presence* of the subtle and not-so-subtle suggestions that various aspects of my culture were or are inferior. For instance, the African-American Vernacular

English that everyone spoke at home and in my community was considered "bad English" and "sloppy speech." Years later in linguistics classes and during participation in various conferences related to language, Black writers and Black literature, I would learn that, from the perspective of professional linguists, this cultural speech is a rule-governed language system heavily infused with West African speech patterns, and it is a language system that is on par with any other in the world. But I did not know all of that back then. It was many years before I discovered the full richness of my own cultural background, and the value of my own love-filled upbringing by largely uneducated parents. In short, there was nothing, nothing, nothing at the white suburban prep school that mirrored who I was in a positive way. It was an excellent school, and the study habits, course content, and leadership skills I gained during those three years well prepared me for the academic rigor of college and for the challenges of professional life that followed. The learnings, though, both personal and textual, were often quite painful and often not enjoyed.

I went on to say in my speech to this group of national educators that, media and educational forces aside, in their personal lives, many first-generation and nontraditional African-American students have been involved in messy divorces, domestic violence, homelessness, and other difficult circumstances that have damaged self-esteem. In short, they need to see themselves and their abilities in a positive light if they are to have a less painful time emotionally as they move in and out of their culture of personal nurture and that of cold, sterile academia as they work to complete their degree programs. Indeed, it is my own view that the generally high attrition rate of minority college students often has very little to do with these students' academic abilities, and everything to do with their sense of cultural alienation and lack of emotional support as they work toward degree completion.

Again, the value of projects like Virtual Harlem in shoring up personal confidence and heightening interest in college-level course content is immeasurable and cannot be overstated. According to scholar Paul P. Reuben, the Harlem Renaissance is generally held to be that period from the end of World War I through the middle of the 1930s Depression during which a group of talented African-American writers produced a sizable body of literature in poetry, fiction, drama, and essay genres. The period also saw an explosion of creativity among blacks in music, particularly with respect to the development and performance of jazz, spirituals and blues, and in painting. Political activist Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement also saw its heyday during this time (Reuben). Thus, in one fell swoop, the Virtual Harlem project serves to excite African-American, indeed, *all* students about the literature, music, and sociopolitical history of the period of the Harlem Renaissance, while also exciting them about virtual electronic environments, film, art, architecture, and photography.

It is hard to describe the sense of pride and joy I experienced while serving as a "tour guide" for the Virtual Harlem presentation

during the special reception last year that served as its grand opening on UIC's campus. This was a gala event indeed. Wonderful catered food and live music heightened the enjoyment of animated and interesting conversations among some 300 students, faculty, and guests representing two usually unrelated departments–computer science engineering and English.

As a Ph.D. student in UIC's Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric (LLR) program, I had been invited by my academic advisor, Dr. James Sosnoski, to help with the tours. I never had experienced a virtual reality cave before, so I was not certain what to expect. Upon arriving, I was given a narration script by the project's director, Dr. Bryan Carter of Central Missouri State University, then stepped into the cave, a small, dimly lit "room" or box with three walls. I donned special three-dimensional glasses and, as I narrated, another student navigated the tour, using a sophisticated remote control device to direct the movement of the images along the three walls so that visitors were given the sensation of walking and/or riding down streets.

Once I got past the initial feeling of slight dizziness, I was totally astounded by images of Harlem's streets, rendered exactly as they had been in the 1920s and 1930s. The presentation, which I narrated roughly every 20 minutes for groups of eight or so persons over a two-hour period, allows persons to take a ride on a cable car or walk along Lenox Avenue and other well-known Harlem streets, and see many famous spots, such as the Apollo Theater, where countless notable African-American entertainers have gotten their start over the past eighty years. The images along the route are creatively accompanied by audio clips of music, poetry and speeches, as well as by video clips of cabaret performances.

For instance, one can get out of the cable car virtually and walk past places like the Hot-Cha Club, the bar where internationally-renowned jazz and blues song stylist Billie Holiday was discovered. Listening closely, one can hear her rehearsing. While walking, one also can "greet" Langston Hughes, who is holding a baby, and hear him recite his famous poem, "I, Too, Sing America." Of interest, Garvey also gives a speech outside the headquarters building of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

Another attraction along the tour route of famous landmarks is the Cotton Club. Once situated inside among the perspective dioramas, one sees black and white patrons sitting at elegantly appointed tables as they watch persons like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway perform on stage. Visitors to the project also will spy the Hobby Horse Bookstore, which was frequented by persons like Zora Neale Hurston, and was the first African-American oriented bookstore in Harlem.

I am only able to scratch the surface here with respect to a summary of the historical content of Virtual Harlem, but suffice it to say that with each narration I became more and more excited about this period of history and the positive contributions of African Americans in the fields of literature, entertainment, and politics. I imagined even being able to excite my own professional and tech-

nical writing students at Chicago State, many of them would-be print journalists, about the research process for such a project.

The Virtual Harlem project heightens both self-esteem and enjoyment of learning for African-American students, even as it provides important academic content from a variety of disciplines and generates interest in electronic environments for all students. My hope is that funding will be secured for the project to make it accessible to wider and wider audiences, including secondary education students. Director Carter says plans are in the works for the creation of a desktop version of the project that could be accessed on personal computers. This is good news.

It is hoped that this project will inspire the development of similar collaborative efforts on campuses across the country between departments of computer science engineering and other departments like history, sociology, and education, as examples, for the purpose of enhancing student learning in a variety of disciplines. In a society in which students are accustomed to a great deal of video stimulation, the most effective teaching with minority and other students will require supplementing traditional teaching methods and presentations with resources like the Virtual Harlem project, which affirm personhood and inform while using the latest technology.

WORK CITED

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 9: Harlem Renaissance–An Introduction." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature–A Research and Reference Guide*. URL: (October 5, 2001, date of login).

Related Projects