

Representation matters in asynchronous, scripted online learning environment

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More schools in the U.S. are asking teachers to use scripted curriculum, an instructional method that outlines exactly what educators should say and what actions they need to take at each step in their lesson.

Using scripted curriculum may seem like a good solution for schools struggling to improve students' academic achievement or facing a shortage of qualified, experienced teachers. But it doesn't offer educators as much opportunity to incorporate their teaching experiences and their students' specific needs into their lessons.

Assistant Professor Jennifer Darling-Aduana and instructional technology doctoral [student](#) Kristin Hemingway co-authored a [study](#) in *Teachers College Record* on using scripted curriculum in an online, asynchronous setting, where students complete a course at their own pace.

Rather than studying lesson content, Darling-Aduana and Hemingway were interested in how students' performance was impacted by teachers' racial/ethnic identities and "discretionary acts," or the small ways that teachers can use their professional judgment and their own teaching skills in delivering the scripted material. This can include the language and grammar they used or whether teachers added in questions for their students to reflect on.

The researchers transcribed 40 scripted, online lessons from [high school](#) English language arts and U.S. history classes in one school district. Teachers pre-recorded their lessons and students primarily completed their work in their schools' computer labs during the school day. Seven Black teachers, one Hispanic [teacher](#) and 11 White teachers' lessons were included in this study; 70% of their student body was Black and 20% was Hispanic, and 80% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

Darling-Aduana and Hemingway found that teachers spent 91% of each lesson delivering the content and had few opportunities to incorporate their own discretionary acts into the scripted curriculum.

About 40% of lessons were delivered almost exactly as directed, with teachers making little to no changes to the script provided to them. Black teachers were 43% more likely to follow this method compared to their white counterparts—a finding that's consistent with previous research in this area.

White teachers were more likely to use the limited discretion available to them. The researchers explained that as members of a dominant racial/ethnic group, white teachers "operate with a greater sense of ease and freedom, because they are not constrained by dissonant expectations and perceptions regarding fit and belonging in the same way as teachers who belong to minoritized groups."

But their efforts to do so—by sharing their opinions and using encouraging language, among others—were sometimes seen as surface-level attempts to connect with students and "were unlikely to demonstrate [critical care](#) that is a precondition to the type of supportive student-teacher relationships associated with high expectations and achievement," the authors wrote.

The researchers looked at students' scores on the end-of-lesson quizzes and found that the teachers' racial identities did not have a statistically significant impact on students' achievement, but teachers' discretionary acts did.

The end-of-lesson quiz scores were 2% lower when teachers used surface-level friendly strategies in their teaching and 2% higher when teachers used "personalized strategies." This includes greeting students at the beginning of lessons, sharing relevant personal experiences and connecting the lesson content to their students' lives.

"These findings suggested that within the type of course structure we studied, the enactment of even small discretionary acts that acknowledge

the [teachers'](#) and/or students' humanity and foster real-world application might support improved learning," Darling-Aduana and Hemingway wrote.

More information: Jennifer Darling-Aduana et al, Representation Is Not Enough: Teacher Identity and Discretion in an Asynchronous, Scripted Online Learning Environment, *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/01614681221132384](#)

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