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Chapter XVIII

Multi-Cultural E-Learning Teamwork: Social and Cultural Characteristics and Influence

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Abstract

Virtual teamwork in the e-learning classroom has provided opportunities for merging social theory and learning theory, mixing technology, culture, identity, and community. Online learning teams have generated attention to the social and cultural characteristics that influence these global interactions. This chapter discusses the prevalence of eight traditional dimensions of culture occurring during online learning team interaction. A study with graduate students, who were experienced in virtual teamwork, provides quotes and examples of experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement to the multi-cultural, virtual team experience. The students' suggestions inform guidelines for e-learning faculty and students, while additional study results present understanding of the acculturation process, a process that occurs when diversified social and cultural characteristics come together and form a cultural hybrid to accomplish e-learning team goals.

Introduction

Our team contained a WASP, an Armenian émigré, and a Jewish British ex-Pat on the team. Without being able to be specific, we all brought our differing viewpoints to bear on the problem and each rejoiced in our different ways of looking at things.

For two of us, our diasporas commonalities also gave us strength in the team without being excluding to the third member. Our openness in expressing our differences celebrated and took advantage of our diversity and contributed to our genuine delight in each other and to the team's success. (Online graduate student, 2004)

The increased availability of e-learning has brought convenience and equitable learning possibilities to cross-cultural student populations. The online student classroom may contain diversified student identities: residents from several countries, those who are native to one country, but now living in the U.S., and English as second language learners. Reaching beyond traditional limits of geographical boundaries and time constraints, virtual classrooms provide diversified groups of students with opportunities for discussion, planning, and team projects (Cyrs, 1997; Ess, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Ko & Rossen, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rogers, 2002). The online classrooms merge social theory and learning theory, mixing technology, culture, identity, and community (Bandura, 2001; Collins & Berge, 1996; Khalsa & Hildreth, 2000; LaBelle, 2004; Preece, 2000; Wenger, 2004). Traditional team processes take on a new look, as online students are required to adapt and acculturate social and cultural characteristics during virtual teamwork (English-Lueck, Darrah, & Saveri, 2002).

The intentions of this chapter are to present e-learning faculty and students with a practical model for development and support of multi-cultural teamwork in the adult e-learning classroom. The study was designed to answer this question, "Which traditional social and cultural characteristics are important for multi-cultural e-learning team members?" Over a one-year period, 45 graduate students, who had been engaged in teamwork during their online classes, were surveyed and interviewed. The goal was to obtain opinions and suggestions about their general, online team experience, communication, challenges, social and cultural influences, and suggestions for improvement to the virtual team experience. Through description of influential social and cultural characteristics, graduate students provided their top priorities for faculty and fellow students, who will be involved with virtual learning teams. The student suggestions built a guiding framework, and are included in this chapter.

Background

E-learning can benefit from the creation and sharing of knowledge vs. merely long-established knowledge transfer and assimilation. Extending communication and knowledge through collaboration presents opportunities for a collective effort of understand-

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