

Chapter III

Cultural Issues in Global Collaborative Education¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses cultural differences in educational practices of the East and West. In East Asian countries, where Confucian philosophy has influenced its educational practices, values of respect for authority, harmony among a group, and diligence in the face of adversity are its overarching principles. Western countries emphasize Socratic principles which value open dialogue and advocate critical thinking among students. This chapter then discusses educational history and practices in Japan as a case study of education in the East. In this age of globalization, educational systems in one culture cannot exist in isolation, and we often have to look at ways to accommodate students from diverse cultural backgrounds in an educational program. Finally, the chapter examines the difficulties students from a Confucian culture will encounter when they enter educational systems in the West to pursue advanced degrees, and suggests the ways for educators to be inclusive of students of differing cultural backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

The walls of higher education have been breached so that it can no longer be seen as a sequestered bastion of higher education (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumpert, 1999). Universities can no longer remain isolated from societal change. A great

number of social and economic shifts, along with new technologies, have opened a number of gateways to the acquisition of various forms of education. The cultural differences in educational practice become crucial to identify and resolve in an age of globalisation as recent increases in transnational student mobility have occurred.

In other words, large numbers of students from non-English-speaking countries are arriving to study in English-speaking countries, due to the pervasiveness of English as the lingua franca in today's global society.

This phenomenon is exacerbated if you consider distance education through information and communications technologies (ICT). Students are enabled to access online classes offered by institutions abroad all without leaving their homes. Collaborative education had become a topic of discussion since computer conferencing or computer-mediated communication (CMC) was introduced into the learning environment, enabling students to build knowledge collaboratively and to learn from one another. Collaborative education is built upon the principle of the socioconstructivist perspective whereby knowledge is believed to be socially constructed. In this paradigm, teaching and learning cannot be understood without taking into account its sociocultural environment, especially the attendant cultures that participants bring in to the learning environment.

There exist considerable differences between the educational systems of Asian and Western countries. However, little attention has been paid to the significant difficulties that arise for students of Asian origin when classes are taken from a Western institution and they find that they are expected to be "Westernised" into the critical Socratic model. The central issue is usually their participation in classroom discourse, collaborative teams, and group projects. In the West, classroom participation is regarded as central to active learning and as contributing to higher thinking skills and heightened intellectual development (Bronwell & Eison, 1991; Lee, 2003).

In the East, classroom participation is discouraged especially in tertiary education, and writing assignments are evaluated mostly based on whether they are indicative of a solid foundation of knowledge, and not on whether they opine to indicate critical thinking in the Western sense.

In this context, it is imperative for academic teachers to re-examine their pedagogies to accommodate changes in student population. It does not require that there be fundamental changes in pedagogies, but nowadays, teachers need to make the pedagogical assumptions explicit to include those students who have not been exposed to Western norms. Pedagogic alternatives in this new borderless environment need to be understood in nonimperialistic ways, and cultural dimensions of learning should be addressed in designing and delivering instruction (McLoughlin, 1999; Kim and Bonk, 2002). There have been ongoing reflections about comparative pedagogy, with a focus on contrast between Confucian philosophic and the Socratic-dialectic principle. The former is seen as underlying much of the educational practice in Japan and other countries of East Asia, while the latter is established in educational practice in the UK and other Western countries. Though any such discussion of cultural differences oversimplifies and ignores diversity within, it is nevertheless useful to look at the broader picture of cultural differences.

EDUCATION IN THE EAST VS. THE WEST

Many academic teachers in multicultural classrooms the author has talked to in the past mention that students from different cultures exhibit differing patterns in their learning styles and in their interactions with their teachers and peers. However, it is often not discussed why such differences exist. As culture consists of "ideas, values, and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behaviours" (Brislin, 1993), we have to look at those underlying values which guide the specific behaviours of students.

In Western countries, including the UK, teachers value private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge, and encourage learners at

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