

Chapter 7.5

Do the Philosophical Foundations of Online Learning Disadvantage Non-Western Students?

David Catterick

University of Dundee, Scotland

ABSTRACT

A product of its historical origins, online learning is firmly rooted in the educational values that dominate post-secondary education in Britain, Australasia, and North America. With the increasing numbers of international students studying degree programs online, this chapter asks whether students from diverse educational cultures are disadvantaged in their learning by the teaching approaches implemented within online teaching environments. Active learning, reflective practice, and collaborative learning are all based on a cognitive, constructivist tradition (Fox, 2001), one which is evidently not shared by much of the rest of the world (Kim & Bonk, 2002; Wright & Lander, 2003). Employing evidence from the field of cross-cultural psychology (Allik & McCrae, 2004) and taking Chinese students as

an example (Cheung, Leung, Zhang, Sun, Gan, Song, & Xie, 2001; Lin, 2004; Matthews, 2001), the author suggests that there may be some cause for concern within online instructional practices. The chapter concludes with three possible responses to the issue, two of which might go some way towards ensuring that international students find themselves on a more even playing field in their online degree program of study.

INTRODUCTION

The online delivery of degree programmes is a relatively new phenomenon in the field of higher education. Like so many technologies applied to the field of education, the arrival of the virtual learning environment (VLE) or learning management systems (LMS) seemed to precede the

underlying educational philosophy needed to give it both support and credibility within the academic community. This meant there was something of a need to play catch-up, and the result was what the author terms the “Magpie Effect,” a process of appropriating a variety of educational philosophies in order to justify the pedagogical value of the emerging technology. This is evidenced by the number of educational technologists who still post to discussion lists like the *Distance Education Online Symposium Listserv* (DEOS-L) asking the list for help in justifying the rationale of VLE use to university policy makers. This may seem like an overly cynical opening for a chapter on distance learning, but even if the reader views things in a slightly different way, there are two notions which would not seem so contentious:

1. It is higher education institutions in Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA) which have been at the forefront of online degree programme development and delivery.
2. The philosophical foundations of online distance learning have arisen out of Western (particularly BANA) educational paradigms.

In this chapter, the author argues (from a theoretical rather than an empirical perspective) that in spite of the supposed global reach of online distance learning, the Western philosophical “software” that runs on the technology might disadvantage students who do not share the same constituent values. In exploring this hypothesis, the example of ethnic Chinese international students studying within an online degree program will be used. This choice stems from a combination of the author’s six years’ experience of teaching in universities in the People’s Republic of China, his eight years’ experience of teaching Chinese students in UK higher education, and the fact that many Chinese students joining online distance

learning programs in BANA countries are of ethnic Chinese origin.

EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PREVAILING EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

By the time online learning became a feature of higher education in the mid-1990s, the landscape of educational philosophy had already long since been radically transformed as a consequence of the shift from behaviourist beliefs about the nature of learning to cognitivist ones (Mayer, 1996). Essentially, the change was the result of a growing conviction among educational philosophers and theorists that the mental processes which constitute learning and development are the product of symbolic activity within individual minds (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). Supported by breakthroughs in the study of memory and problem-solving, cognitivism quickly became the touchstone for educational research eventually giving rise to a theory of information processing (ibid, 1968). Over the intervening decades, different branches of cognitivism have developed, but the most influential, and arguably the most controversial (Fox, 2001; Liu & Matthews, 2005), is constructivism. Grounded in the philosophical writings of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and, later, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), constructivism portrays learning as a process in which the individual translates information from the people and world around them into a form that is intelligible to them at the personal level. With Vygotsky (1978) himself emphasising the role of social context on cognitive development, positing that “all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals” (1978, p. 57), and Piaget emphasising the role of environmental stimuli (Piaget, 1953), constructivism fundamentally rejected the knowledge transmission model of the behaviourist era. In constructivism, knowledge was portrayed not

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