

Chapter 2

Cross–Cultural Transformative Learning: Three Case Studies of Sino–American Distance Learning Communities

Charles Townley

New Mexico State University, USA

Dana Christman

New Mexico State University, USA

Barbara Coppola

Coppola & Associates, USA & Lesley University, USA

Qian Geng

Beijing Normal University, PRC

Jiayong Li

Beijing Normal University, PRC

ABSTRACT

Drawing from several transformative models for learning, three cases of online, cross-cultural learning in graduate-level classes were analyzed in terms of how effectively they developed into learning communities, what type of learning activities and what level of effort help transform student learning, and what types of distance education technologies and pedagogies are useful in supporting cross-cultural learning communities. Comparisons were made between an assignment, a complex assignment, and an entire course in terms of transforming student learning, student knowledge and beliefs about how they learn, and how students interact with the pedagogy and with cross-cultural peers.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural transformative learning is an essential skill for the development of global society.

Educational leaders worldwide must be able to respond to the needs of increasingly diverse local populations. When these leaders possess cross-cultural transformative learning skills, they can more accurately identify learning needs in their communities and are more likely to develop pro-

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grams that effectively respond to diverse needs. By practicing cross-cultural transformative learning, educational leaders will assure that schools succeed in supporting our global society.

As individuals who prepare educational leaders, we believe that it is important for students to develop cross-cultural transformative learning skills while in graduate school. When we use distance learning technologies to establish learning communities across national borders, we create laboratories for cross-cultural transformative learning, places where students can master cross-cultural skills in a work-like environment.

The mission of this chapter is to present what we have learned about the teaching, cognitive, and social presences (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) that contribute to learning in a cross-cultural transformative learning community. This research addresses the following questions:

1. How do cross-cultural groups operate transformative learning communities?
2. Is one learning activity or assignment more effective than another in a cross-cultural transformative learning community?
3. Which distance education pedagogies provide useful support to a cross-cultural transformative learning community?
4. Are there minimum levels of effort (in terms of percentage of course effort) necessary for an effective cross-national transformative learning community to form?

The research concerns will be addressed by comparing the results of three Sino-American case studies which use similar pedagogies and technologies, but different levels of effort to create cross-cultural transformative learning communities between American and Chinese graduate students. We will present our theoretical constructs, our instructional pedagogies, our distance technologies, and our levels of effort in an effort to understand how to create an effective cross-cultural transformative learning community.

Our findings and recommendations will be useful to scholars in education and other disciplines who are committed to generating transformative learning across cultures, societies, and national borders.

BACKGROUND

Four areas of transformative scholarship are germane to this paper: online learning communities; problem based learning for adults; online pedagogy and educational technology; and cross-cultural online learning. These areas are inter-related and are often addressed concurrently. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) provide a comprehensive meta-analysis of 76 research publications on online teaching published in English. They divide the studies into three topical areas – course environment, learners' outcomes, and learners' characteristics – and provide a very useful tabular summary. In their discussion of course environment, Tallent-Runnels et al. discuss the use of scaffolding and other techniques to structure online learning experiences. Interaction systems, methods by which knowledge is exchanged and built in online communities, are discussed at length, as are success factors and evaluation systems. In their discussion of learner outcomes, Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) analyze research on cognitive and affective learning in online courses. They discuss learning styles of online students, social interaction online, and demographics, all highly important topics in this study. Further, they recommend that future research investigate the design and management of online discussion in learning communities; the effectiveness of various learning theories to guide online course design; and which pedagogies and formats provide the “highest level of interaction and the most effective learning experiences for various kinds of students” (p.117).

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