Cross–Cultural Issues in Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of technological change and development in the world has given those working in the field of online and distance education great opportunities to extend the reach of their programs across national boarders and cultural boundaries (Albritton, 2006; Rogers, 2006). Examples of educational initiatives that aim globally include projects such as MIT's OpenCourseWare project (ocw.mit.edu); corporate initiatives like Cisco, already delivering academic curriculum to hundreds of thousands of students in 150 countries (Dennis, Bichelmeyer, Henry, Cakir, Korkmaz, Watson, Bunnage, 2005); and even private universities such as Global University, based in Springfield Missouri, offering courses to students in over a hundred different countries and languages (Rogers and Howell, 2004). And the size and scope of cross-cultural online learning is growing.

Challenges associated with any cross-cultural interaction, such as the misunderstandings that arise from the assumptions we unknowingly make (Hall, 1976), also influence teaching and learning. John Dewey (1916) observed almost a century ago that deep and sustainable learning is dependent on the relevance of the curriculum to one's life-situation. Relevance itself is individually interpreted and culturally influenced. Berger and Luckmann (1966) point to the fact that relevance is relative to cultural context saying that "questions of 'reality' and 'knowledge' [are] thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity. What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman. The 'knowledge' of the criminal differs from the 'knowledge' of the criminologist" (p. 2). In addition, learners' cultural attributes affect how they perceive an online learning setting and how they present themselves online, cognitively, socially, and emotively (Wang & Kang, 2006; Wang, 2007). Therefore, it is essential that cross-cultural issues in online learning be more critically examined (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007). With the increasing global outreach of online programs and courses, there is a great need to design and deliver online learning that can be engaging to a culturally diverse audience. This article outlines what difficulties exist in understanding culture and developing cultural competence, explains why culture matters in education, and gives an overview of the existing questions and concerns regarding culture in the arena of online learning.

BACKGROUND

Culture and Cultural Competence

Definitions of culture vary (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), but the essence of the definitions is that culture provides a framework for shared expectations and values, identifying accepted ways which people live and operate in a shared context with others. There are larger national cultures and smaller sub-cultures. The variety of cultures and sub-cultural groups we participate in (e.g. gender, age, religion, socio-demographic status, etc), combined with the choices we make, contribute to making each of us unique (Arredondo, et. al., 1996). Bruner (1996) has eloquently captured this dynamic between the individual and culture, nature and nurture, in his assertion that "Nothing is 'culture free,' but neither are individuals simply mirrors of their culture" (p. 14).

One of the first great challenges in cross-cultural interactions, also evident in online learning, is that many of our expectations are implicit, below our level of consciousness and invisible to us. It is usually only when we are in direct contact with another way of doing things, and when that way of doing things does not meet our implicit expectations that we can begin to unravel what our original expectations were and how

they might differ from alternative ways of knowing and being.

As an example, Spindler (1963) argues that there is a normative national American culture which might be invisible to most Americans because they assume everyone in the world shares the same assumptions. He argued that the traditional values that make up the core of the Anglo-American pattern encompass the following five characteristics: (1) a Puritan morality, particularly regarding the establishment of a family and sexual fidelity of spouses, (2) a belief that hard work will lead to success, (3) a premium placed on individualism, (4) an orientation of one's efforts towards socially and financially rewarding achievements, and (5) a future-time orientation--that is, seeing one's present activities and situations in terms of their future yield, almost as if the present were an ongoing investment in the future (pp. 134-136).

It is in deep and meaningful interactions with others that Americans begin to realize that everyone does not hold these same assumptions. Many of the world's people have social-psychological characteristics that tend to differ from these to one degree or another. Nisbett (2003) categorizes societies as relatively independent and relatively interdependent, which are different in the following four dimensions:

1.   Insistence on freedom of individual action vs. a preference for collective action
2.   Desire for individual distinctiveness vs. preference for blending harmoniously with the group
3.   A preference for egalitarianism and achieved status vs. acceptance of hierarchy and ascribed status
4.   A belief that the rules governing proper behavior should be universal vs. a preference for particularistic approaches that take into account the context and the nature of the relationship involved (p. 61-62).

Geert Hofstede (2001) dissected national cultures along five different dimensions: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), and Long Term Orientation (LTO). Rapaille (2006) traced differences in national cultural patterns to various perceived early survival needs in their respective societies.

Following the recognition of cultural differences, the next great challenge is to avoid the ethnocentrism of automatically assuming that your particular way of doing things is better (Bennett, 1993), while at the same time not becoming too relativistic (i.e. thinking all approaches to truth are equal and should never be questioned). Another common tendency is to make overgeneralizations and stereotypes (for instance, using Hofstede's national level dimensions on an individual level) that do not take into account sub-cultures and individual distinctiveness. Culturally sensitive people acknowledge how much cultures (as well as individuals) can change and evolve over time. In other words, it is a challenge to "learn to address cultural differences without either minimizing them or stereotyping people" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 119).

Overcoming these challenges is a process often described as developing cultural (or intercultural) competence. Unfortunately, this process takes much longer than most people expect. Milton J. Bennett (1993), for instance, identified six stages people go through in developing this competence: Denial, Defensiveness, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration. Some of the process that individuals experience in developing cultural competence has also been visible in the evolving literature on cultural issues in the online learning context as a whole. This process includes progressing through and hopefully past ignorance, ethnocentrism, and stereotyping.

To assist in the learning process, Tyler (1975) identified five questions that are vital to intercultural communication.

5.   What *message*, or *experience,* do you – or he/she/they – want to *communicate* or *receive*?
6.   How *important* or *relevant* is the message or experience – to *you* and the "other" person(s)?
7.   What *conditions, customs, concerns, attitudes,* and/or *values* (yours and theirs) hinder or help communication of the *message* or *experience*?
8.   What specific *interpersonal* or *media* communication *methods*, or *patterns,* succeed *most* and succeed *least*? Why?
9.   How do you *and* they determine message *effectiveness* and the possible *need* for further communication experience?

In other words, developing cultural competence is about identifying what "differences really make a difference?" and what "similarities really are significant?" (Tyler, 1975).

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