

Email Usage in South Pacific Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of cultural diversity on group interactions through technology is an active research area. Current research has found that a student's culture appears to influence online interactions with teachers and other students (Freedman & Liu, 1996). Students from Asian and Western cultures have different Web-based learning styles (Liang & McQueen, 1999), and Scandinavian students demonstrate a more restrained online presence compared to their more expressive American counterparts (Bannon, 1995). Differences were also found across cultures in online compared to face-to-face discussions (Warschauer, 1996). Student engagement, discourse, and interaction are valued highly in "western" universities. With growing internationalization of western campuses, increasing use of educational technology both on and off campus, and rising distance learning enrollments, inter-cultural frictions are bound to increase.

This research adds to the body of knowledge by evaluating e-mail effectiveness as a communication medium in facilitating meaningful class participation in two distance education institutions. This work investigates online student interaction in the South Pacific region. The scattered geography of the South Pacific has produced immense variations in culture among a relatively low population base. For example, in the tiny island group of Vanuatu with a population of less than 200,000, over 110 different languages are spoken (Myers & Tan, 2002). This makes the South Pacific an ideal laboratory in which to explore the impact of cultural differences on online learning, as the region contains a broad representation of the cultural characteristics found throughout the world.

Subjects were drawn from business information systems and computer information technology classes at the University of the South Pacific and Central Queensland University. Three research questions were addressed:

- Does cultural background affect the extent to which distance education students use e-mail to commu-

nicate with educators and other students for academic and social reasons?

- Does cultural background affect the academic content of e-mail messages from distance education students?
- Does cultural background influence distance education students' preference to ask questions or provide answers using e-mail instead of face-to-face communication?

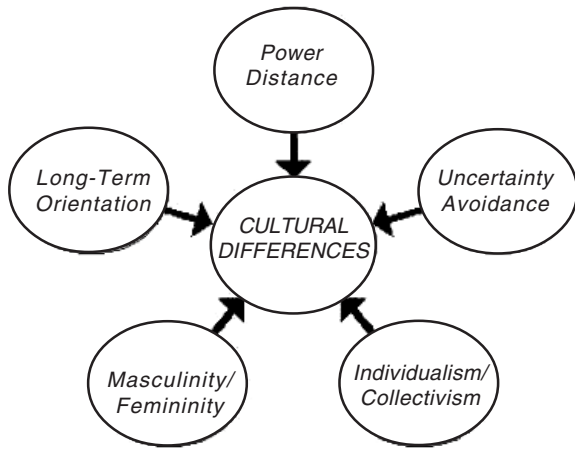
BACKGROUND

There have been a number of papers that have examined the impact of cultural diversity and group interaction in computer-mediated communication environments (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). Hofstede's (1991) well-known model categorizes different cultures according to five pairs of dimensions (Figure 1)

Although not exhaustive, Hofstede's model has been widely used, and it provides a useful starting point for exploring the influence of cultural backgrounds (Holden, 2002; Myers & Tan, 2002). For this research the focus was on the dimensions of individualism versus collectivism, and high power distance versus low power distance. These two dimensions were considered to have the most impact on learning style, the individualism/collectivism dimension will affect the way students interact with their peers, and the power distance dimension will influence the way they interact with their professor.

Hofstede's work indicated that there was a strong correlation between a country's national wealth and the degree of individualism in its culture. Richer countries tend to have an individualistic style, whereas poorer countries are more collectivist. As a poorer country becomes wealthier, it tends to move towards an individualistic pattern. Additionally, people from a rural background tend to be more collectivist than those from an urban background. Countries which fall into the low power distance, individualist category are Australia, New

Figure 1. Hofstede's model of cultural differences



Zealand, North America, England, and Scandinavia; countries in Asia, India, and South America would be considered high power distance and collectivist (Hofstede, 1991).

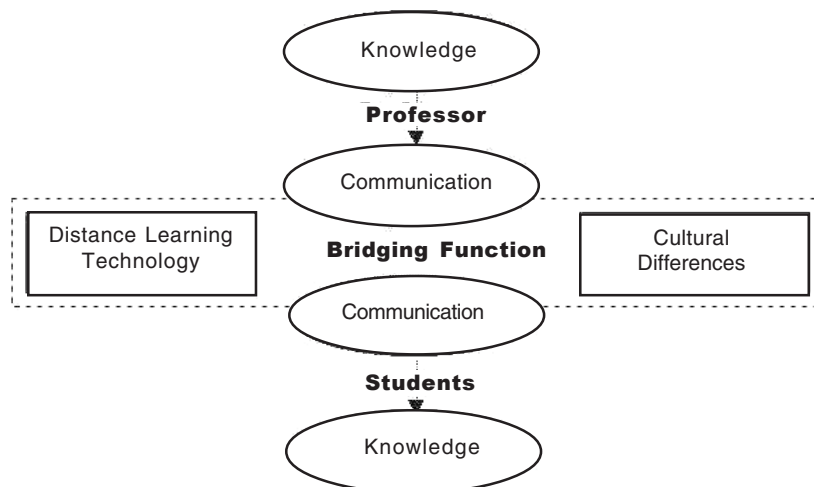
If a country is collectivist, it is also likely to exhibit characteristics of a high power distance country, where the views of senior people tend not to be questioned. Pacific Island people are in the high power distance category with their system of chiefs and their tradition of not questioning the chief's decision. South Pacific society is also collectivist with the custom of "Kere Kere" or not being able to refuse a favor that is asked of you by a member of your own in-group.

There have been a number of recent publications reviewing aspects of the development of IT in the South Pacific (Davis, McMaster & Nowak, 2002; Olutimayin, 2002; Purcell & Toland, 2004), however no research has yet been published that maps Hofstede's model on the many South Pacific cultures. Lynch, Szorengi, and Lodhia (2002) have explored Hofstede's framework with respect to Fiji, hypothesizing where the indigenous Fijian population and the Indo Fijian population would fit into the framework, however they are still in the process of collecting empirical evidence to validate their theories. This research forms a useful starting point to locate South Pacific cultures on the dimensions of individualism, collectivism, and power distance.

Most research on the effect of cultural differences has focused on traditional face-to-face teaching, rather than distance education. The literature has often cited difficulties in motivating students from collectivist (as opposed to individualistic) cultures to "speak up" in a face-to-face learning situation. Students from a collectivist culture prefer to listen, reflect, and discuss material with their peers, before preparing a written response. In common with many other collectivist cultures, it would be considered undesirable for students to speak up in class, as communication is mostly teacher centered. In Fiji, lecturers have widely commented on the "quietness" of their students (Handel, 1998). Additionally, in some Pacific cultural norms, student silence is seen as a sign of respect for teachers (Matthewson et al., 1998).

More research is needed to understand fully the cultural contexts in which distance education programs are situated and how distance students process materials, especially in a second language (Guy, 1991). One study

Figure 2. Container model of knowledge transfer



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