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Chapter I

The Meaning of Culture in Online Education: Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Design

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Abstract

Individual online learning courses and even entire online degree programs are increasingly a part of the mainstream in higher education. Steadily-improving online delivery systems and an emphasis on globalization have encouraged more and more higher education institutions to try to reach diverse learners around the world. In light of the growing population of learners from various cultural backgrounds engaged in online education, there is an urgent need to understand how culture affects online education. This chapter presents a review of the literature regarding cultural dimensions in online education, and draws implications from this literature for design and research in this area.

Introduction

Online education has experienced dramatic growth in higher education around the globe, but especially in the United States of America (USA). Six years ago, Harasim (2000) proclaimed that online education was no longer peripheral or supplementary, and that it had become an integral part of mainstream higher education. In 2003, more than half of all institutions of higher education in the USA offered at least one fully-online or blended course (Sloan-C, 2004). College and university students in the USA increasingly view online components of their courses as commonplace as textbooks and other traditional resources.

The computers and networked technologies that enable online education do not simply represent a change of the medium for implementing traditional teaching and learning activities. Instead, these technologies, integrated with innovative pedagogical methods such as inquiry-based learning (Olson & Loucks-Horsley, 2000) and authentic tasks (Herrington, Reeves, Oliver, & Woo, 2004), provide instructors and their students with unprecedented opportunities to teach and learn in more powerful ways.

Online education has opened the way for educators to reach learners “beyond brick and mortar” campuses (McIsaac, 2002), including many people who would otherwise not have access to higher education. Potential participants in online higher education are not just from the USA; they can be from many other countries, via the Internet. Of course, the USA is by no means the only online education provider, as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries compete with the United States to be the provider of choice for English-language online courses and programs. One trend is clear: With the growth of globalization, the students enrolling in e-learning programs have become increasingly diverse with respect to culture.

A foundational principle underlying online education as an alternative instructional delivery system is that it can be designed in a manner such that the educational opportunities provided are responsive to the needs of different types of students, including special accommodations for the world in which diverse students work and live (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). For example, online education can be designed in such a way that learners can work at their own pace; those who need more time to complete a course or unit of instruction than a regular academic term (e.g., semester or quarter), perhaps because of work or family commitments, may take more time without penalty in some online education models. Alternatively, online education models may be tailored so that those learners who might wish to and are able to accelerate their learning may accomplish the goals of a particular course of study in a faster time than traditionally expected.

Given the increasingly heterogeneous nature of groups of learners in online education, we must give much more consideration to how we can accommodate learners from different cultural backgrounds. Although few would disagree that cultural factors are important in theory, there is surprisingly little published literature concerning the cultural aspects of online learning and teaching, and there are even fewer research-based studies (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003). The lack of research related to culture in online education can be partly explained by difficulties related to both identifying appropriate methodologies and finding adequate resources for this kind of research, but may also be

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