Chapter 19
Pedagogical Issues and Challenges for Cross-Cultural Online Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Due to the increasingly multicultural nature of online learning environments, it is crucial that instructors and instructional designers be aware of the importance of cultural factors in online teaching and learning. This chapter examines current educational and strategic studies of cross-cultural distance learning based on a review of scholarly publications, and helps readers develop an up-to-date understanding of the issues as well as challenges pertinent to cross-cultural online teaching and learning. In addition to reviewing the notion of cultural differences, the chapter seeks to provide instructional strategies that incorporate multicultural experience in designing online teaching or training. The chapter can help extend readers' knowledge and understanding of cross-cultural perspectives, influence of cultural differences on learning, and implications for designing cross-cultural distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

With advances in technology, one of the major educational changes in the past decades is the rapid growth of distance education (Fluegge, 2010; Natriello, 2005). As distance education continues to grow, learners become more and more diverse (Al-Harthi, 2010). To better promote online learning and communication, different frameworks and guidelines have been introduced into online teaching practices with a focus on building online learning communities (e.g., Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Laurillard, 2002) or engaging students in collaborative work (e.g., Dunn et al., 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2005). However, little has ad-

dressed intercultural issues that arise in online instruction (Jung-Ivannikova, 2016); multiple cultural contexts involved in online instruction have not yet been represented or even fully understood (Al-Harthi, 2010). Due to the increasingly multicultural nature of online learning environments, it is crucial that instructors and instructional designers be aware of the importance of cultural factors in online teaching and learning in order to better serve students and deliver culturally adaptive instruction (Gomez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernandez-Navarro, 2016).

As online education has been growing phenomenally, it becomes more and more important to support students from around the world while providing opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and learning experience (Jung-Ivannikova, 2016). How can we better prepare our students to work and learn in settings that encompass multiple cultures? How can we better help them to understand the implications of multicultural experience for learning processes? This chapter, in addition to an overview of cultural issues in distance learning, examines current educational and strategic studies based on a review of scholarly publications, and develops an up-to-date understanding of the issues as well as challenges pertinent to cross-cultural online teaching and learning. The chapter also seeks to provide instructional strategies to incorporate multicultural experience in designing online teaching and learning. This chapter can help extend readers' knowledge and understanding of cross-cultural perspectives, influence of cultural differences on learning, and implications for designing cross-cultural distance learning.

DIVERSE DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

Although culture is a complex and difficult concept to define in a formal sense (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003), many definitions of culture can be found in literature. For example, Matsumoto (1996) defined culture as "the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next" (p. 16). According to Branch (1997), "Culture is regarded as the epistemology, philosophy, observed traditions, and patterns of action by individuals and human groups" (p. 38). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) explained that the essence of culture is not what is visible on the surface, and Hall (1998) added that "culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants" (p. 59). Culture could be also described as "a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts" (Moran, 2001, p. 24). Because different definitions reflect different theories for describing, understanding, explaining or valuing human thought, activity, discourse and subjective experience (Vatrapu & Suthers, 2007), there is not a universal definition that can satisfy every situation. As a result, defining culture is a problem that cannot be solved because the values underlying any specific definition are closely bound up with the dynamics of cultural ambivalence (Nuckolls, 1998).

Since culture has been defined in different perspectives by different researchers, Danesi and Perron (1999) sought to generalize a broad consensus on two emerging points: "1) culture is a way of life based on some system of shared meanings, and 2) culture is passed on from generation to generation through this very system" (p. 22). After compiling more than 200 different definitions of culture, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (as cited in Vatrapu, 2011) categorized different definitions of cultures into six groups: *descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural,* and *genetic*. Mucciardi and De Santis (2017) concluded, "culture is frequently the basis on which to form allegedly homogeneous subgroups (usually,

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