

Chapter XV

Cyberspace and Online Education: The Influences of Global Cyberculture on International Students

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ABSTRACT

Friedman (2005) argues that the rapid growth of Internet technology is fundamentally changing human life in modern societies. This Internet revolution is also having an impact on higher education in the United States. More than half of all institutions of higher education in the U.S. now offer entirely online or blended courses. The issue becomes more complex when the learners are international students who come from extremely different cultural backgrounds. This chapter explores the nature of cyberculture, and describes how cyberculture affects the online learning experiences of international students. Through the exploration of cyberculture and online education, this chapter reveals what increased global online access is beginning to mean for participants in online education.

INTRODUCTION

Friedman (2005) argues that the rapid growth of Internet technology is fundamentally changing human life in modern societies. Companies in wealthy nations such as Japan and the USA are

sending their call centers, document processing operations, computer programming, and other forms of knowledge work to countries where labor is much cheaper such as China and India. People with health problems such as cancer or AIDS seek advice and comfort online from other

people facing the same illnesses as well as expert guidance from health professionals. The economic benefits and efficiencies of Internet technology have motivated people to become increasingly engaged in a more wired society (Tapscott, 1998). With the advantages of the Internet, people are creating virtual communities in cyberspace without geographical boundaries (Rheingold, 1993a). These virtual communities, like other human societies, have their own characteristics, and have even come to have their own cultures, which are usually referred to as cybercultures (Bell, 2001).

This Internet revolution is also having an impact on higher education in the United States. More than half of all institutions of higher education in the U.S. now offer entirely online or blended courses (Sloan-C, 2004). Some institutions offer entire degree programs online for a global market (Pittinsky, 2003). One interesting question raised by these developments is how cultural differences are accommodated (or ignored) in online learning and teaching environments. The question becomes more complex when the learners are international students who come from extremely different cultural backgrounds. How does the cyberculture that evolves in cyberspace interact with international students' cultural backgrounds? Is cyberculture a more important factor than students' local (national or indigenous) culture to explain success or failure in international online education?

This chapter explores the nature of cyberculture and describes how cyberculture affects the online learning experiences of international students. Through the exploration of cyberculture and online education, this chapter reveals what increased global online access is becoming to mean for participants in online education. In addition, this chapter identifies future research directions that need to be taken to support instructors and instructional designers faced with designing effective online courses for international students.

BACKGROUND

To begin, a definition of online education is required to clarify the scope of this area. Online education in this chapter is defined as *one form of learning and teaching which uses computer-mediated communication via the Internet to achieve the learning objectives within an educational organization*. This chapter does not distinguish the computer-mediated communication by time (synchronous or asynchronous) or tools (such as online forums or interactive Web sites). Rather, this chapter adopts a general and broad perspective of online education for purposes of investigating cyberculture and exploring the cultural issues that affect international students. Popular and emerging terms such as e-learning, online learning, Web-based learning, and Internet-based learning are included in our conception of online education. It should also be noted that people often view online education and distance education as synonymous (Moore & Anderson, 2003).

While rapidly evolving Internet technology has helped higher education proponents of online education break away from the brick-and-mortar campus and reach a wider range of learners around the world, the challenge of accommodating learners from different cultural backgrounds in online learning environments has not been addressed sufficiently (Collis, 1999; Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Wang, 2004). Taking cultural factors into account in online education would seem to be an obviously important issue, but there is a surprising lack of research focused on this issue (Gunawardena et al., 2003). As noted by Macfadyen, Roche, Doff, Reeder, and Chase (2004), some research topics related to culture and online education that have been addressed include the:

1. Interactions in online courses which involve culturally diverse adult learners
2. Access to the Internet among different groups seeking access to online education

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