Chapter 50

Bridging the Social, Academic, and Cultural Divide for International Students:
Using Peer-to-Peer Support Strategies Online

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ABSTRACT

International learners face many unique challenges when studying in a U.S. based online program. These challenges include language barriers, social barriers, and psychological barriers. In this chapter, the authors propose the use of peer-to-peer support programs, combined with an increased focus on learning communities, to help these students succeed. The literature shows that isolation is a common experience for online learners, and in particular, international students. Researchers have also found that peer relationships and connections can improve this experience for students, which can lead to student satisfaction, success, and retention. Based in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, the purpose of this chapter is to share specific strategies with instructors, course designers, and larger institutions so they can create courses and a larger learning environment that are sensitive to the needs of diverse learners studying online.

INTRODUCTION

The autonomous nature of online learning can often lead to students feeling isolated and disconnected from their learning community. This has been found to be especially challenging for international learners. Besides language, communication, and cultural adjustment difficulties, studies show that international students perceive more academic and social isolation while learning online than learning on-campus (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010). It is reported that the lack of interaction with instructors and peers in the online learning community is a factor of student attrition (Yuan & Kim, 2014). Further, student engagement in the online classroom is important for satisfaction and a lack thereof can ultimately affect the ability for students to meet learning goals (Kushnir & Berry, 2014). For the international online learner, social disconnectedness (Irani, Barbour Wilson, Slough, & Rieger, 2014), and cross-cultural differences (Xiaoiiing, Shijuan, Sheung-hee, & Magiuka, 2010) coupled with having to persist through anxiety-ridden barrier courses (Bronstein, 2008) could easily equate to a frustrating student experience. A good start to bridging the social, academic, and cultural divide among online international students is connections via peer-to-peer supplemental instruction (Bronstein, 2008) such as tutoring and mentoring that occurs outside the rigor of a stressful classroom environment, as well as an overall focus on the larger learning community of the institution.

It has been said that students succeed in online classrooms when they feel like they are a part of a larger learning community (Sadera, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009). According to Yuan and Kim (2014), "the salient features of learning communities are trust, knowledge construction, information sharing, feeling of being connected, common goals, and a belief that learners' needs would be fulfilled" (p. 221). Studies show that building a sense of community within the online learning platform not only brings students together in a collaborative academic space but also provides a sense of social presence which is a motivator for student persistence (Yuan & Kim, 2014). In a learning community, students unify to share knowledge and develop their scholarship (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010). Learning communities also help to overcome cultural barriers (King & So, 2014) because no-matter the culture, students join for an overall purpose – to increase their academic success.

In this chapter, we will provide background information examining the literature on international student experiences in the online classroom, as well as peer-to-peer support and the development of learning communities. Our objective is to provide specific and realistic strategies for course designers, instructors, and institutions to design culturally sensitive learning communities that can support all students in the online classroom, including international students.

BACKGROUND

According to the 2016 Open Doors report of The Institute of International Education (IIE) there are over one million international students attending colleges and universities based in the United States, and this enrollment increased by 7.1% in 2015/2016. The report also showed that 40% of these students are enrolled at the undergraduate level, and 36% of these students are attending graduate school (IIE, 2016). The three most common areas of study are engineering, business and management, and math and computer science. The majority of international students originate from China (31.5%), followed by India at 15.9% (IIE, 2016). International students choose U.S. based institutions mainly to advance their

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