

Chapter XVIII

The Impact of Sociocultural Factors in Multicultural Communication Environments: A Case Example from an Australian University's Provision of Distance Education in the Global Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Changes in the availability and quality of communication technology have revolutionized, and fundamentally altered, learning environments. As citizens of the "Information Age," the breadth and impact of global communication are triggering unprecedented transformation of social structures and institutions. This chapter explores the impact of commodification on education when institutions of higher education sell knowledge as a commercial good. The contemporary phenomenon of distance education is increasingly offered and purchased by an international market which experiences heightened pressure for standardization from the global citizens it serves. It is argued here that technological changes necessitate reevaluation of communication processes, discursive practices, and organizational policies. To stay competitive and produce quality products for increasingly international audiences, institutions must create well-articulated policies. By providing insight on the impact multiple sociocultural and communicative norms have on virtual communication, this research uses qualitative discursive analysis of case examples to examine how variance in the structure and delivery of virtual communication environments at a leading distance education university in Australia affects student satisfaction, perception, and learning outcomes. Whereas previous research fails to include a theoretical or conceptual framework, this work draws upon interdisciplinary work from the fields of sociology, education, and science and

technology studies. How “cyberspace” changes interaction rituals, masks cultural norms, and alters entrenched social expectations by creating new sensitivities is discussed, along with the ramifications of variation in technological availability, competence, and expectations in global classrooms. In sum, ideas for informing change in policy, administration, and the delivery of distance education and virtual communication in global environments are discussed to equip leaders and participants with skills to foster effective communicative and interaction strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Analyzing the “Australian experience” with distance education¹ (DE), this chapter uses qualitative data to show how the type and design of virtual learning environments influence both the process and purpose of communication outcomes in global learning environments. DE is a global phenomenon with “over 130 countries developing or offering distance courses, many of them based on new information and communication technologies (ICTs)” (Shields, Gil-Egui, & Stewart, 2004, p. 120). However, the “global marketplace for e-learning products and services” varies widely among and within countries, courses offered, and technologies (Bowles, 2004). As multiple sectors (education, corporate, government) are involved in its development and delivery, inclusion of culture as a primary foci of analysis remains limited (Bowles, 2004; Monolescu, Schifter, & Greenwood, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Brooks, Nolan, & Gallagher, 2001). Failing to prioritize cultural analysis may be costly and ineffective in communicative environments with multinational participants. Applying secondary data analysis techniques using a sociological and science and technology studies (STS) lens, this chapter informs existing literature not only by prioritizing culture, but moreover overcomes the methodological challenge facing international studies (Au-Yeung, Ha, & Au, 2004; Hawkey, 2004) of isolating “pure e-learning” (Bowles, 2004) environments in higher education to study virtual interaction without the added presence of face-to-face interaction. Ac-

cording to situated learning theory, knowledge cannot be removed from learning context and environment. Hence, not only are local norms set within a larger, global community, but a host of interaction-based, communicative norms are called into question as participants negotiate the boundaries of electronic communication dynamics.

Critical analysis of such dynamics provides insight into the symbiotic relationship between culture and technology in affecting communication. As such, the principal objective of this chapter is to enable better-informed decision making and the refinement of virtual communication (VC), in learning and other environments, by offering in-depth examples of how cultural norms and interactions can, and do, impact VC. By exploring how structure impacts virtual dialogue, the chapter asks how normative assumptions affect the negotiation of communication rituals based on situational meanings. Anticipated to be of particular interest to academic researchers, teachers, managers, and administrators of cross-cultural online learning environments, as well as business leaders working in international VC environments, this chapter uses case examples to demonstrate the strategic value of effective management; offers pragmatic steps that managers, teachers, and participants can take to maximize the virtual communicative experience; and asks all to reflect upon how sociocultural experiences interact with technologies to affect successful VC delivery.

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