Chapter 120
Cross–Cultural Communication Differences in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses and evaluates research on cross-cultural communication differences in online learning at the university level. It starts out by discussing the growth of online education in recent years and the historical context of online education. The chapter then evaluates research on differences in cross-cultural online learning primarily between university students from the Western part of the world compared to students from the East. Barriers in cross-cultural online education cited in the literature include language, technology, and instructional design. Future research on Western-based online education should assess cross-cultural differences for students from other parts of the world including Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins by providing background information about the growth of online education at the university-level. It then discusses the successes and challenges of online education particularly cross-cultural communication barriers and research on what strategies for effective cross-cultural communication exists in higher education.

Chapter Objectives:

1. Understand and review data for the growth in online education at the university-level.
2. Understand the historical context of online learning to its current state.
3. Evaluate the research for the differences in cross-cultural online learning between university students from the Western part of the world compared to university students from the East.
4. Discuss and apply cross-cultural communication theories in online education.
5. Discuss effective cross-cultural communication strategies for online education.

6.   Discuss implications for teaching and learning and future research in cross-cultural online learning in higher education.

BACKGROUND

Globally, the demand for enrollment in university online courses is growing. As such, institutions of higher learning must design and implement courses for students from diverse backgrounds. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015, there were approximately 5.9 million students enrolled in online courses at degree granting universities in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015), and in Australia, over half of the universities offer fully online courses (Bell, Bush, Nicholson, O'Brien & Tran, 2002). Additionally, a recent publication by the Harvard Business Review found that 60% of enrollees in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC's) are from developed countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (Zhenghao et al., 2015). Online course platforms are a way of disseminating and sharing knowledge and increasing access to education worldwide. However, this method of technology-enhanced education that involves learners from different cultures can present unique challenges for students.

The historical context of online learning in higher education can be traced back to the correspondence degree offered through the University of London that helped to pioneer distance education. The correspondence degree gained prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries parallel to the post office increased presence. In such a scenario, a student would submit their paper or assignment to the university and the teacher would return the student's corrected paper or assignment via the post office. As such, students from all over the world who had limited access to education could obtain their degrees or at least take courses through such institutions. Today as people from all over the world gain access to technology, the higher education landscape is changing. Traditional universities in Britain, Canada, and other countries are integrating some form of online education in their curriculum, although some have been slower in doing so compared to the United States (U.S). Historically, for-profit institutions including the University of Phoenix were the primary leaders of online education in the U.S. In recent years, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC's) began to gain popularity at Ivy League institutions including Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Harnessing the opportunity and need to increase access to education for people from across the globe, MOOC's offer students an opportunity to gain industry skills and advance their career. To take it a step further many leading universities across the U.S offer credit-bearing courses via MOOC leading to professional certificates for workforce development or transfer credits (Massive Open Online Courses [MOOC], 2016).

As public universities realize the potential for increased enrollment from online students, a number of traditional colleges and universities are blending and infusing their curriculum with some type of web-based learning whether adding a few online courses to their traditional classroom-based curriculum or implementing fully online or dual programs (traditional campus-based learning that runs concurrently with a fully online program). Recent data from 2017 indicated that public universities account for the largest increase in distance education (67.8%) (Online Learning Consortium [OLC], 2018). However, despite this increase and growing trend in online education, a large portion of the world's population still does not have access to the internet despite its exponential growth in the last few years. For international students who do have access to the internet, they might live in remote parts of the world where access is limited. Most of the pedagogical teaching formats for online learning centers around asynchronous

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