Chapter 6
Cultural Implications of E–Learning Access (& Divides):
Teaching an Intercultural Communication Course Online

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents a case study of developing and teaching an intercultural communication (IC) course online, within the context of a department in a large research University in the U.S. In so doing, the authors discuss a broadened and recursive model of cultural access and divides in E-learning. Expanding on van Dijk's (2005) framework, the authors present several ways in which their IC course attempts to address multiple pathways of E-learning access, including motivational, material, skills and usage access. They describe both the successes and challenges of meeting the goals of e-learning access with specific examples of the content, activities, assignments, pedagogical strategies, and student assessment in this online course. Finally, they identify challenges of this e-learning at the micro and macro level context—in the course, university writ large and in the communication discipline.

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING E-LEARNING ACCESS

Increasing numbers of students are enrolling in online courses in institutions worldwide (Allen & Seaman, 2007). The internationalization of higher education and popularity of applying a global approach to education is increasingly facilitated by the use of communication technologies in E-learning

(Burbules, 2000). An important topic in new media use is the issue of access, related to the 'digital divide' or the technological chasm between information haves and have-nots which is of concern among policy makers and educators both in the United States and abroad (Warschauer, 2003). As van Djik (2005) and others suggest, the digital divide is more than just a question of access to computer software, but rather includes technocapital on many levels including: mental, material, skills, and usage.

Furthermore, in many places in the world, technocapital is in competition with basic necessities of life (Olaniran & Agnello, 2008).

There is a research gap in considering the cultural implications of E-learning access and (on the flip side, divides). In particular, there are cultural aspects of socio-technical divides that tend to be overlooked in E-learning (Ess & Sudweeks, 2005; Schwartzman, 2007). E-learning technologies should not be considered *fait accompli* but recursively constructed and defined by a host of psychological, social and political influences and actors (Dutton, Cheong & Park, 2004a). In this paper, we present a case study of developing and teaching an intercultural communication (IC) course online, within the context of a department (subsequently referred to as 'the department') in a large research University ('the University') in the U.S. In doing so, we discuss a broadened and recursive model of cultural access in E-learning, to encompass access to communication technologies, information, people and services associated with online pedagogy. This paper has theoretical and practical implications for educators' curricula design and implementation of E-learning courses.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING THE STAGE

We begin by first discussing the backdrop and circumstances leading to this IC course development. The online course was first delivered as a face-to-face course (Elements of Intercultural Communication), an integral part of the department's offerings - a popular major choice among undergraduates. The course is designed "as an introduction to the basic concepts, principles, and skills for improving communication across racial, ethnic and cultural differences." The course has been offered each semester since Fall 2006. The course is always enrolled to the maximum capacity (30 students) and there is usually a waiting list of students. While the course is designed as an introductory level course, most of the students are juniors and seniors, a few sophomores and occasionally one or two freshmen. This is due to the fact that courses in this department are impacted in general and students are not able to enroll in required courses until late in their college career. The students in this online course have a variety of majors. Most are business or pre-business majors, a few communication students and the remainder represent a range of majors including pre civil engineering, anthropology, music, art, biotechnology. The cultural backgrounds of the student usually reflect the make up of the University (approximately 65% white, 35% international students, and ethnic and racial minorities)—the largest minority group is Latino and the smallest American Indian.

Spurred by the following factors, this course was first developed in 2004 and offered Fall semester 2006. At the time of the course's inception, the University was undergoing a period of rapid expansion and growth, and the leadership was promoting a philosophy of "access, excellence and impact". Like many academic institutions, the University saw potential income in online courses. The department had been at the forefront of online courses, offering a very successful course since 1996 and was eager to expand its offerings. Consonant with its mission, from 2000-2005 the University provided monetary incentives and technology assistance to faculty interested in developing new online courses. The initial proposal to put the existing IC course online included the following rationale: "Our undergraduate students will benefit as we will be able to expand our offerings of IC to students who are not traditional students, who may be off campus students. Secondly, our graduate students and faculty who teach this course will benefit by having a competitive edge in this aspect of curriculum delivery. Finally, from a scholarly point of view, gaining expertise in this new area of communication research will enhance our visibility in the field." In this light, this online course can be seen to be part of the

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