Chapter 3
Culturally Significant Signs, Symbols, and Philosophical Belief Systems within E-Learning Environments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Semiotic components, that of culturally representative signs and symbols, when thoughtfully included in the design of electronic learning (e-learning) environments could directly impact the viability of the e-learning environment and student success in that environment. In fact, when the instructor's and instructional designer's philosophies and model choices are embedded with cultural and historical symbolic representations, stories, and tools, including new technologies, there can be a positive impact upon the students in the semiotic e-learning environment (Del Rio & Alvarez, 1995; Dillon, 1996; Gallini, Seaman, & Terry, 1995; Gannon-Cook & Crawford, 2001; Salomon, 1997; Verene, 1993).Within an electronic learning environment, the semiotic and philosophical imperatives can culturally charge the students' impressions, communications, and interactions with a strong positive impact. The learner's consciousness, because of the subconscious comfort level with the embedded semiotic course elements, is then more open to the new content material. The cultural and social elements thus minimize cognitive load and positively impact electronic learning, not only in courses, but in other environments where semiotics is thoughtfully embedded, such as video and gaming environments. These case studies help provide a chronicle of the lessons learned from the ongoing research on embedded semiotics in e-learning.

To more appropriately frame the book chapter discussion, it is appropriate to offer a short overview of the discussion. The crux of the problem, at least in part, seemed to reside in a number of students' inability to succeed in taking an online course, in learning how to navigate the course, and in getting used to the isolation of online courses. The goal of the study was to see if the inclusion of semiotic tools, signs, symbols, stories, and tools, could help students to feel more comfortable and whether that comfort could help them to persist in completing assignments and finishing the course.

The contextual backdrop of the problem and goal of the study are based within the framework that the researchers wanted to be sure that the courses were unique in their appropriateness to their respective cultures; but they also wanted to see if the course adaptations provided cultural values and perspectives that were fairly consistent and appropriate across cultures and nations. The methodology is qualitative in nature, specifically focused upon development design research and narrative inquiry. The findings suggest that there were several levels of concern: learner concerns; instructional design or teaching concerns; management and organizational concerns; and, technology concerns. This study has addressed the question "what lessons could be learned from semiotic and philosophical instructional imperatives inclusion within e-learning environments?" As such, the interpretation of the findings of the study shed light on the importance of simple mediation tools, such as signs, symbols, and stories. The implications of the findings indicate that more research could shed light on how to help students feel comfortable enough to follow through and complete their e-learning courses. In viewing best practices for e-learning, students' existent knowledge can be bridged with what they need to know by using a variety of the semiotic tools discussed in this study.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The two universities that were the focus of this study significantly differ in size, and situation, but with similar missions with respect to their commitment to student success. Each has also committed to the success of their electronic learning (e-learning) programs. The priorities within each of the organizations are the design, development and implementation of the e-learning environments and the successful integration of the subject matter for the learner. One of the aspects also considered critical to the program's success was the impact of the underlying philosophical belief systems of the instructional designers, the instructors, and the universities. All of these factors needed to congeal into cohesive interactive e-learning environments and the researchers discovered that this seemed to occur more readily when there was a concerted effort to integrate semiotic representations, specifically the metaphorical representations meant to frame and support the learner's conceptual framework of understanding within the e-learning environment.

The first university (University A) is a smaller regional public university in the southwestern area of the United States of America. The primary focus of University A, at this point in time, is primarily upon graduate studies. Its mission is noted as being:

… an upper-level educational institution with a distinct identity, whose primary role is to provide fair and equitable learning opportunities to graduate and undergraduate students. The University serves a diverse student population from the state, the nation and abroad… by offering programs on and off campus.

The University's faculty, staff, and administrators are committed to providing a humane, responsive, and intellectually stimulating environ-

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