Chapter 8
Learning in Cross-Cultural Online MBA Courses:
Perceptions of Chinese Students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid improvement in online communication technologies and the globalization of the economy have made offering transnational courses in online learning programs a popular trend. This chapter reports the findings of a case study that investigated the perceptions of international students regarding cultural challenges in their learning experiences during an online MBA program. The study revealed that international students faced cultural barriers, including time management, transition to different instruction styles, time zone differences, case-based learning, and academic integrity, which affected their engagement in online MBA courses. Recommendations are made at the end of the chapter on how to improve the quality of the international students' learning experiences in cross-cultural learning environments.

SITUATION BACKGROUND

Introduction

The advancement of Internet, computer-mediated communication and Web 2.0 technologies have made the world increasingly mutual and interconnected. These technologies have created an interactive learning environment, which allows students from multiple cultures to learn collaboratively and share knowledge. In his most recent book, Curt Bonk (2009) listed a variety of learning technologies that have helped to make the world of today a different educational environment than it was 10 or 20 years ago. These technologies include e-learning and blended learning, open

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source and free software, leveraged resources and open courseware, learning object repositories and portals, open information communities, electronic collaboration, alternate reality and real-time mobility and portability (Wadholm, 2009).

Business schools have been active leaders in online education. With the movement toward global education and increased competition in the domestic e-learning market, the delivery of blended or online international MBA programs has become a strategic mission for many business schools. Developing countries in East Asia, including China and India, have been the most attractive locations in which for many American schools to offer online degrees due to their rapid rise in economic development and enormous demands for higher education access.

Pinhey (1998) stated that the Internet has made possible a global education curriculum. However, institutions and instructors must be prepared to effectively deal with the demands of an international setting in order to be successful in their outreach to students abroad. Research has documented that students from different cultures may have varying levels of compatibility with certain learning styles, different social expectations of the instructor and student roles and different levels of cognitive abilities (Hofstede, 1984; Hannon, & D'Netto, 2007). Understanding and tolerance of cultural differences are needed in order to reach a successful learning outcome in a global learning environment (Lanham & Zhou, 2003; Hannon, & D'Netto, 2007).

Learning in a cross-cultural online environment is not without challenges. Shattuck (2005) observed that highly interactive learning environments cannot reduce online learners' feelings of "marginalization, or, sometimes even alienation" from the dominant American learner group (p. 186). Research suggests that cultural barriers affect the success of online students in distance education programs (Walker-Fernandez, 1999). For example, when pedagogical values in one culture are inappropriate in another, students may question knowledge or the merit of participation, may challenge the teacher's views and become disenfranchised in a learning process that does not fit their worldview (Australian Flexible Learning, 2004). As such, a distance education program needs to devise strategies by which to deal with these challenges in order to provide a satisfactory learning experience for global learners. However, due to limited published research "on the cultural aspects of online learning and teaching'' (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003, p. 770), online educators lack empirical evidence to guide their practices in delivering cross-cultural programs.

In this chapter, we will describe a case study that was used to investigate the perceptions of international students in an online MBA program regarding their transnational learning experiences. In particular, we explored and identified potential cultural barriers that may have affected the performance and satisfaction of the international student population. Two major questions were addressed in this study:

- What challenges do Chinese students perceive in a cross-cultural learning environment?
- What features do Chinese students recommend in order to design a culturally inclusive global course?

Cultural Challenges and Online Learning

Cultural discontinuity is defined as "a lack of [a] contextual match between the conditions of learning and a learner's socio-cultural experiences" (Wilson, 2001, p. 52). Jacobson (1996) recognized that learners experience cultural discontinuity when "outside of familiar meaning systems" and in "new" cultures, and, as such, "find themselves in situations where familiar ways of interpreting and acting are not reliable, yet others' ways of interpreting and acting are not fully accessible" (Jacobson, 1996, p. 16). Cultural discontinuity