

Chapter 5.12

Teaching, Learning, Negotiating: The World Wide Web as a Model for Successful Cross-Cultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

New technologies and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general seem inherently suited to result in constructive cross-cultural communication. Yet researchers note that students and teachers, both of whom are instructional planners, lack the skills necessary to function in environments where they are “collaborative designers, rather than transmitters of knowledge” (Campbell, 2004b). As a result, the new possibilities for cross-cultural teaching and learning through dialogue and negotiation in the online environment compel us to reconceptualize the traditional role of the instructor and to ask, what does it mean to teach collaboratively, interactively, open-endedly? This chapter examines several central questions related to this situation as well as provides an overview of the dialogue-enabling properties of the Internet

environment and its potential to support multiple learning styles.

INTRODUCTION

New technologies and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general seem inherently suited to result in constructive cross-cultural communication due to their potential to encourage collaboration in an environment of diverse users with multiple perspectives. However, researchers note that students, but more importantly teachers, who are instructional planners, lack the skills necessary to function in environments where they are “collaborative designers, rather than transmitters of knowledge” (Campbell, 2004b), which is how their role has been defined traditionally. The increasing number of virtual universities, online

training with a global reach, and international degree programs offered online by many traditional universities around the world indicates that the opportunities and demands for successful cross-cultural communication expand exponentially. The new possibilities for cross-cultural teaching and learning through dialogue and negotiation in the online environment compel us to reconceptualize the traditional role of the instructor and to ask, what does it mean to teach collaboratively, interactively, open-endedly?

In this chapter I will attempt several preliminary answers to this question. First I will provide a brief overview of the dialogue-enabling properties of the Internet environment and its potential to support multiple learning styles, some of which may be culturally determined. I will outline the World Wide Web's inherent affinity with recent social theories of learning. I will also compare the old instructional model according to which knowledge is seen in static terms, as a transfer of facts from specialist to learner, to the new model emphasizing knowledge as negotiation. Then I will interpret the differences between the two models in practical terms and in their significance for successful cross-cultural communication in the context of distance education. My purpose will be to demonstrate that the role of the instructor in the new model encouraged by the online environment needs to be defined in terms of mentorship and facilitation rather than authority in the traditional sense. In many cases in cross-cultural teaching and learning, students may possess knowledge that the instructor does not. I will suggest a number of practical approaches that can help with designing an interactive online learning unit. In the chapter I will also show that the open-ended and interactive nature of the World Wide Web, where multiple perspectives coexist, can serve as a conceptual model to help both teachers and students overcome common challenges in cross-cultural communication.

BACKGROUND

We live in an age when advances in information and communication technologies are significantly changing attitudes toward teaching and learning. Large investments have been made across educational sectors to provide more flexible curricula and extend the use of e-learning beyond pockets of innovation. The diversity of the student body, only intensified by the number of distance education programs offered worldwide, places new demands on educators' knowledge and skills. However, researchers have pointed out that educational sectors aiming toward increased flexibility have yet to develop a work ethos that will promote the development of new pedagogies (Wiles & Littlejohn, 2003; Campbell 2004). Scholars note that there is still a major gap between theory and practice that continually burdens the progress of education for an increasingly diverse student population (Bruch, Jehangir, Jacobs, & Ghore, 2004).

Due to the global reach of distance education and the cross-cultural interaction that is a component of today's education, instructional paradigms are shifting. Educational practices invented when higher education served only the few, and in a monocultural context, are increasingly seen as disconnected from contemporary realities and the needs of contemporary students (cf. Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002, p. viii). Especially, there has been a growing demand for change in learning technologies and the way education is delivered online: from environments in which highly structured information is presented electronically and in a linear way, to environments in which the learner is supported in the making of meaning and knowledge construction. No doubt, there is a big difference between the earlier and current forms of online learning. The earlier type, computer-based instruction, focused on the interaction between the student and computer drills, tutorials, or simulations. Today, the prevailing paradigm is computer-mediated communication, "where the primary form of

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