

Chapter XVI

Communication Barriers and Conflicts in Cross-Cultural E-Learning

Rita Zaltsman

International Center of Modern Education - Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

The present chapter assesses the key questions of communication barriers in distance learning virtual communities. To examine their cultural aspects, a Web-survey for distance learners has been conducted. The principal areas of interest were a cultural dichotomy of West/East; discrepancies in educational cultures (teacher-centered vs. learner-centered); mismatches in communication and educational traditions in different cultures; conflict paradigm and methods of conflict resolution. The findings of the survey are summarized and interpreted and some implications for further research are discussed.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AND CONFLICTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL E-LEARNING

Ignoring cultural factors inevitably leads to frustrating and ultimately ineffective learning experiences (Dunn & Marinetti, 2002).

Along with the stunning success, the most striking thing about cross-cultural e-learning is how many initiatives have failed. Dropout rates are as high as 80% (“sources estimate anywhere from a 60 to 80 percent dropout rate for online

courses”—Braley-Smith, 2004) resulting not only from terrible content (Dunn, 2003), inefficient instruction (Clay, 1999; Cook, 2001), technological barriers (Mayes, 2001), but also lack of students’ motivation (Harasim, 1990; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001), language barriers (Meierkord, 2000; Young, 2002), cognitive discrepancies (Coomey, Stephenson, 2001) and psychological difficulties (Suler, 2002).

A fundamental reason for this is a poor understanding of how e-learning actually works. The solutions offered to avoid communication

pitfalls (Berge, 1998; Mason, 2003) place the main responsibility on online tutors who do not encourage and facilitate collaborative work. The latter seem to be little effective as it is culturally absolutely insensitive (Dunn, et al 2002).

The last two years have produced a growing body of research that studies cultural and cross-cultural dimensions of e-learning (Cook, 2001; Dunn, 2003; Edmundson, 2003; Thorne, 2002) and provides case study analyses with instances of miscommunication between culturally-diverse e-students (Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder, & Röche, 2002; Macfadyen, Chase, Reeder, & Roche, 2003). The Internet is not “a culture-free zone” (Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, & Chase, 2004), and it influences the whole spectrum of communication on both interpersonal and group level. Accordingly, a conflict in the cyber environment differs greatly from its offline counterpart due to additional barriers such as text-based communication in the absence of visual and auditory cues, the new technology as well as anonymity and invisibility, and others. Still, the cause of most misunderstandings in cross-cultural education stems from differing cultural dimensions.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVE OF CHAPTER

In the present chapter, the analysis of cross-cultural communication pitfalls has been extrapolated into the area of distance learning virtual communities. To examine their cultural aspects, a WWW-survey for distance learners has been conducted. The principal areas of interest were the dichotomy of Western vs. Eastern cultures; discrepancies in learning cultures (teacher- vs. learner-centered); mismatches in communicational and educational traditions in different cultures; conflict paradigms and peculiarities of conflict resolution.

It should be noted that for the purpose of this research, the notions of *e-learning*, *online learning*, *distance learning*, and *distance education*

denoting the process of learning at a distance on the Internet without face-to-face communication between online students are used interchangeably.

BACKGROUND

“Culture is always a collective phenomenon ... it is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another...it is learned, not inherited” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). G. Hofstede’s classical definitions and his comparative cultural analyses remain the benchmark for discussion of national cultures. According to Hofstede, culturally-diverse groups have less similarity than monocultural groups due to different orientations to nature, environment, time, relationships, activities, and so forth. The adaptation of the cross-cultural teams to virtual learning is often accompanied by psychological discomfort, stress, frustration, the feeling of being isolated (Munro, 2002; Suler, 2002). Due to discrepancies in conflict management traditions in different cultures, their inter- and intra-communication sometimes result in intercultural conflicts.

In this chapter, intercultural conflict is defined as the perceived or actual incompatibility of values, norms, processes, or goals between a minimum of two cultural parties over content, identity, relational, and procedural issues. (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

To better understand the nature of communication pitfalls in learning communities, several dimensions for cultural comparison have been offered:

1. Power-distance; collectivism vs. individualism; femininity vs. masculinity; uncertainty avoidance (high vs. low); long-term vs. short-term orientation (Hofstede, 1997).
2. Universalism vs. particularism; achievement vs. ascription; individualism vs. commu-

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