

Cultural Diversity – Issues and Challenges in Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance education allows diverse individuals to pursue an education regardless of their age, gender, religion, ethnicity, or social status. With this large, broad-based approach, however, educational institutions and instructors face a new, dynamic challenge – the challenge to design learning in such a way as to meet the social and cultural diversity encountered by the increasing worldwide preference for distance education. While new technologies and access to “instant” media, files, data, and records have enabled universities and businesses to reach an audience far beyond local, city, state, and national borders – an emerging challenge is that the audience is now extending to international borders, where not only is English a second language, but cultural norms, mores, customs, and learning styles vary considerably. When designing and developing educational programs, should the course content, technologies, media, and instructors’ values, beliefs, and perspectives, be amended to meet this unique audience...or is business as usual acceptable? Online learning enables universities and businesses to provide students and employees with valuable educational and training experiences by securing a support system that enables them to pursue an education, or learn valuable job skills that can be critical to retaining a job or advancing in a chosen field. The authors theorize that cultural issues may affect how and what students learn, and believe that addressing these cultural differences can ensure a learners’ chance of success in the virtual learning environment.

Keywords: online courses, cultural differences, distance education, teaching methods, cultural influences, learning motivation, instructional design

Cultural Diversity – Issues and Challenges in Distance Education

Culture, as defined by Texas A&M's Associate Professor Ifte Choudhury (2010), is the “cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving” (Texas A&M University, Some Definitions, para. 1). Choudhury's definition explains how individuals adopt values imposed upon them by their society. Of great interest to distance education curriculum designers is how these values and beliefs transfer to the higher educational environment. Will these values aid in the learning process, or could become an obstruction to their success and achievement of learning goals?

Ground-breaking and innovative technologies continue to make education a possibility and realization for many individuals that would never envisioned receiving an education before, especially those that were unable to attend the traditional on-campus institution because of economic challenges, physical limitations, or geographical barriers. Distance education breaks down these challenges, limitations, and barriers, forming a collegial network surpassing local, state, and national borders. However, when crossing into international territories, not only is the distance great, but cultural differences are even greater.

Spronk (2004) describes four approaches to learning from the student's perspective, including hierarchy, style, orientation, and language. Most students are familiar with the hierarchical approach, where the teacher is the authority figure and the students “are taught to pay respect and attention to the teacher” (p. 171). An emphasis on learning style would consider the student's approach to learning, categorized as deep, surface, or strategic. For example, Spronk mentions that students in Japan displayed a surface learning style, where content, facts,

or tasks are completed without gaining more understanding or details (p. 172). With regard to orientation, students in the United States are clearly individualist – making their own decisions for their own benefit; while students in countries such as China or South Africa would be considered collectivist – where the group is the important element. Finally, language can be a major contributor, as students can favor visual-spatial intelligence or memorization, such as in Japan, in contrast to the United States which is more linguistic intelligence and active questioning oriented (p. 173). The authors assert that cultural diversity issues influence the learning process, and emphasize the importance of a solid learner support framework which accounts for cultural differences to ensure learners’ satisfaction and success in the distance education system.

Defining Culturally Diverse Learners

Cultural disparity can significantly affect a learners’ ability to succeed in the distance education system. Goold, Craig, and Coldwell (2007) categorize areas where cultural differences manifest, including:

- “Ethnicity
- Learning styles
- Age
- Educational background
- Social class
- Gender
- Language
- Level of study
- Generational background

- Degree of life experience
- Learning styles
- Religion
- Attitudes towards education
- Knowledge and familiarity with technology and technical processes
- Expectations and attitudes
- Capacity of understanding of non-explicit information (rules)
- Socio-economic status” (Culture, cultural difference and cultural influences, para. 29)

These dynamics influence the prism through which an individual learns. Cultural diversity can be categorized as anything within the learner population that makes a participant different, or unique; for instance, the lone female learner in a class of all males, or a non-English speaking learner might start out new to the current educational mores. Specific learning styles and attitudes toward education differ greatly and are influenced by how and where learners were educated in their past. Goold, Craig, and Coldwell (2007) assert “while each student has a cultural background which will have shaped their understandings and expectations, it must be acknowledged that students within a culture are different – they may be shaped by the culture, but they are still individuals” (Culture, cultural difference and cultural influences, para. 31). Consideration of cultural differences and individual differences is crucial to furthering learner satisfaction and success in a distance education system.

The influence that a learner’s culture has over their individual learning process manifests itself in many different ways. Extensive research has been conducted comparing the result of different cultures on learning behaviors. Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) highlight elemental differences between a Non-Western and a Western world viewpoint which clearly affect the way

an individual will experience learning. The Non-Western viewpoint is holistic in nature, socially-oriented, accepts affective expression, credits achievements with the group, sees time as relative, and emphasizes group cooperation. The Western viewpoint tends to be dualistic in nature, task-orientated, limits affective expression, credits achievements to the individual, adheres to strict time guidelines and schedules, and emphasizes individual competition (p. 5). A global distance education system that neglects to account for these differences will create a barrier for *someone* in that learner community. The global distance education system needs to be structured to move ALL learners to the center of the bell curve.

Al-Harhi (2010) studied the cultural differences of two samples of Arab and American distance learners with regard to self-regulation, a necessary variable for success in any distance education system. Al-Harhi found significant disparity between Arab and American distance learners in the areas of group interdependence and future orientation. While both Arab and American learners recognize the significance of self-regulation, Americans reported significantly higher use of it in their distance education programs than Arabs. “Arab students are still at the low end of the continuum trying to learn how to adapt to the distance education system; American students seem to be much further in the continuum of independent learning” (Al-Harhi, 2010, p.146)

Goold, Craig, and Coldwell (2007) state “Australian students are more active, reactive and positive in class; while on the whole the international student cohort, particularly those from Asian backgrounds, are less confident about their ability to communicate and to interact with the teacher and the rest of the class in an online environment” (Culture, cultural difference and cultural influences, para. 31,).

What can be done to advance both the Non-Western and Western learner in a distance education system? What can be done to encourage those learners that are less independent, or less confident? Answers to these questions can be found in effective learner support.

The Importance of Learner Support

In a distance education system, support begins with creating an opportunity for the learner to succeed. Learners' needs should be central to the purpose of every course. This is especially true for the culturally diverse learner. Multiplicity exists within forms of civilization and customs of people. Identifying with the socio-cultural framework is crucial to cultivating proper support systems for distance learners (Usun, 2006, p 58).

An effective learner support model accounts for various elements, and places the learner at the heart of the distance education system. According to Ryan (2004):

Online learning support essentially involves the provision of those services and support mechanisms that distance educators know improve retention and achievement, those services that any successful learning environment provides: adequate information about the program and its outcomes to enable realistic choices by students; robust administrative and technical systems; clear academic expectations and guidance; the provision of adequate learning resources; and access to counseling and study skills assistance (p.126).

“All learners need support. The form and extent of the support depends on the individual students: on their learning styles, their prior knowledge, their occupational background, their goals, and their social obligations” (Zawacki-Richter, 2004, p. 59). Analyzing the cultural climate of learners upfront will help to ensure that the distance education system will account for the needs of each individual learner. For example, Usun (2006, p.63) discusses how Turkish

students are better supported by a course design and learner support model that accounts for two elements that are engrained in the Turkish culture: oral tradition and patronage. Know your audience: this tenant is obvious to all who design learning. It is crucial to sustaining a learning environment that supports effective learning transfer, and breaks down the barriers that some culturally diverse learners face. In this way, learners are truly supported.

Pedagogy

Approaches to learning can differ greatly from culture to culture. Is behaviorism, cognitivism, or constructivism a better approach? Taking a cultural inventory of the learning audience will help answer that question; however, in general, most research maintains that a constructivist pedagogy is best suited to support all learners.

Kirschner (2004, p. 24-38) asserts that learning transfer occurs when learners are exposed to a course which has been designed with a constructivist approach. In support of learners' needs, Kirschner's design framework takes into account: the importance of technology and using that technology appropriately; the importance of social interaction – learner to learner; learner to tutor; learner to material; the importance of the use of sound distance education pedagogy; the importance of a supportive, collaborative learning environment; and, the importance of learner autonomy, as well as an encouraging interdependent relationship among the participants in a group. He calls to action the need for a new way to approach instructional design, which is supportive and learner-centric. Once the cultural climate of the audience has been inventoried, the culturally diverse learner will benefit from a pedagogical approach that encourages a level playing field where all learners can emerge victorious.

Gunawardena et al. (2006) developed WisCom, a specific instructional design strategy to foster a “community-centered” online learning environment (p. 219). This model is grounded in

well established socio-constructivist and socio-cultural theories of practice. WisCom provides not only a pedagogical model for teaching that fosters the intrinsic capability of networked communication to support the growth and intellectual development of communities of practice, but also a model of learning where learners engage in the process of academic investigation that supports both individual and collective learning (Gunawardena et al., 2006, p. 217). The researchers assert that their new approach “fosters reflection, sharing, knowledge innovation, and transformational learning” (Gunawardena et al., 2006, p. 229). When designing successful online courses, appropriate pedagogy should be used to address the needs of all cultures, and to understand, account for, and honor the differences that exist in cultural diversity as part of the educational process (Gunawardena, 1998; Lamontage, 2006; Murchú & Sorensen, 2004; Sanchez).

Instructional Design Considerations

To be effective, distance education instructors must design courses that are interactive and motivating, ensuring students have the ability and technology to learn in the distance learning environment, while interacting with students from different cultures. When designing courses, designers and instructors should consider content and media that are applicable to multicultural learners (Moore, n.d., para. 1). Design considerations need to take into account *how* and within *what* context students would be interacting with the instructor and each other. For example, in Arab (and other) cultures, there is a reluctance to confront others, and the “lack of physical presence in the online environment was seen as a positive feature...it provided a reduced risk of social embarrassment” (Moore, n.d., para. 4).

North American cultures tend to be more competitive in discussion, which many cultures find impolite. Additionally, where most students in North America feel comfortable interacting

and communicating with their instructor, in Asian and Arab cultures, communication is *only* initiated by the instructor (Moore, n.d., para. 4). Bates (1999) states that individuals from different cultures vary in their eagerness and interest to participate in online discussions. Instructors and designers should be aware of this fact when designing discussion forums, online conferences, and study groups, as participation may be more of a challenge for some learners. In addition, since students are often graded by their participation and contribution to online discussions and group work – how would culture impact a student’s grade? Should an instructor be flexible in their grading process? Is that fair to other students? (Culture and the Internet, para. 2-3).

Media/Technology Considerations

Web-based materials are convenient for distance education students, as they are available in a variety of multimedia and easy to access at the student’s convenience. Coldwell, Craig, Paterson, and Mustard (2008) claim that students from diverse cultures have different preferences, styles, and approaches to their learning. Students from Western cultures are “more confident in using web-based materials, while Asian students recorded fewer accesses to the web-based materials” (p. 22). In addition, Western students appear to be able to navigate through on-line course materials with ease compared to Asian students, who seemed to have challenges with various technological aspects of online learning.

Imperative to receiving a distance education, however, is having access to the Internet to access not only the course, but various course materials in numerous formats. Many believe the technology gap between developed and developing countries makes it more convenient for the rich to learn online, leaving those in the developing countries behind. Although Bates (1999) asserts there are many ways to access the Internet – through computers at partner institutions,

employers, and even in public cybercafés – not all of these opportunities may exist in developing nations. However, as Internet access continues to extend to developing regions of the world, in the future more international students will be provided with educational opportunities (Internet access, para. 1-3).

Recommendations for Best Practices

Bates (1999) suggests the use of franchise arrangements or joint programs where one institution designs the program and another institution delivers the program. Obviously this cannot be used in all establishments, but it does have one major advantage – “the franchise institution can provide cultural adaptation at both the development and delivery stage of the program” (Franchise arrangements section, para. 2). If a franchise arrangement is not used, what essential ingredients are recommendations?

Globalized distance education is increasingly abundant, and, because of that growth the development of culturally responsive online learning environments is taking on increased significance. “Online education provides new opportunities for learners from different cultural backgrounds to come together, learn, expand their knowledge, share ideas, and develop passion for their vocation” (Lamontage, 2005, p.1). There are specific ways that designers and facilitators of distance education systems can foster equity for, encourage and support the culturally diverse learner (Al-Harhi, 2010; Edmundson, 2003; Goold, Craig and Coldwell, 2007). Key provisions include:

- Conduct an assessment that accounts for the cultural diversity of learners, support differences in learning, and communication styles.
- Design for one learning community; make everyone feel included.
- Recognize different cultural cohorts and learning styles when designing the curriculum.

- Send an introductory email (aside from the online environment) that introduces and humanizes the facilitator.
- Be clear about the rules of conduct within the online environment.
- Provide an “online social club” for learners to connect outside of the area of study.
- Encourage learners to be social with each other, share anecdotes, family photos, etc.
- Unambiguously articulate the rules for behavioral expectations such as turn taking in discussions, and show consideration for silence.
- Provide a clear outline of the course responsibilities and the roles of all participants, learners, and any staff.
- Be clear about time lines, feedback, and assignments.
- Be present; participate with learners during online discussions.
- Incorporate self-regulation processes by encouraging learner autonomy as well inter-group relationships.
- Use authentic examples and learning activities that highlight the various cultures in the learning audience.
- Plan activities so that the use of technology and information literacy become part of learner’s study habits and encourage lifelong learning strategies.
- When assigning group work, blend learners in groups to cultivate diversity.
- Provide adequate time for reflection and understanding.

Conclusion

Supporting all learners is at the core of any effective distance education system. No value is more important in the rapidly expanding reliance on distance education in developing countries than regard for the culturally diverse learner. To prosper, distance learning must be culturally accessible, ensuring all learners are able to achieve the same learning outcomes, regardless of their culture of origin. The truly global distance education system embraces different cultural values, styles, preferences, and characteristics. Ignoring cultural analysis or failing to recognize cultural differences can jeopardize the success of culturally diverse learners (Edmundson, 2009, Cultural analysis, para. 28-32). With appropriate pedagogy, effective instructional design techniques, and the necessary technological media in place, the culturally diverse learner will be supported by a myriad of instructor created scaffoldings, and a foundation for success.

From the onset, courses need to be planned with an international perspective. The design team, which can consist of several contributors, must be sensitive to the entire community of learners. Course design should be open and inclusive in order to allow each student an opportunity to receive a quality distance education that is not frustrating by cultural isolation, but supportive. When course designers, instructors, and institutions embrace the cultural differences of its learners...everyone benefits because everyone has an equal opportunity to learn.

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