Chapter 65

Understanding Online Cultural Learning Styles and Academic Performance of Management Students in an Ethnic Context

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes Structural Equation Modeling with maximum likelihood discrepancy function to examine the relationship among various cultural dimensions and multicultural learning styles, and subsequently the impact thereof on student academic performance. 210 MBA students who enrolled in an online class were examined. The hypothetical model integrated proven learning styles and cultural theories. While Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) version 3.1 captured attributes of learning style preferences, the Cultural Dimensions of Learning Framework questionnaire developed by Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) captured cultural preferences. Three structural models (epistemological beliefs, social beliefs, and temporal perceptions dimension of culture) were analyzed. It was found that epistemological beliefs and temporal perceptions dimensions of culture exhibited a positive relationship with multicultural learning styles; the social relationship dimension showed negative relationship, while total effect on student academic performance across was relatively similar across all models.

INTRODUCTION

In the academic world, we must admit that the criteria for judging 'success' of a student is primarily through the grading system. Universities all over the world strive constantly to impart quality education by using optimal level of pedagogical methods, employing outstanding faculty, modern technological aids, as well as providing conducive to learning environment. For students, achieving exceptional

scores on standardized tests and maintaining high grades throughout their academic career predictably guarantees success of enrollment into prestigious institutions throughout the world. With the advent of information technology era, online learning has become a common discussion topic among academia, with a variety of learning platforms available through the use of Internet. This has provided opportunity to universities across the globe to increase student enrollment by offering competitive as well as variety of degree programs taught by professors using online methodology. Unlike western countries, Pakistan, a rich diverse country with various multilingual ethnic groups, utilizes Matriculation Education System for the masses, and learning occurs by means of rote memorization while studying out of context textbooks written by foreign authors. While majority students have the ability to memorize large texts, they develop several shortcomings in field of public speaking, command over English language, and non-existent reading culture further adds to the dilemma. With an introverted and teacher centered style of learning, and ever increasing academic standards, commercial training centers preparing students for standardized tests and English language skills are rampant throughout the country. Likewise, students pursuing their MBA degree are no exception as they pass through the same rigmarole while pursuing their management studies. According to Pakistan Education Statistics compiled by (Nmemis - Aepam, 2011) team, reveal that the country has 135 colleges/universities, and 76 (56%) serve the public sector, whereas 59 (44%) cater to private sector having male and female student enrolment of 0.586 million (67%) and 0.521 million (33%), respectively. Major ethnic groups are Punjabi, Sindhi, Pukhtun, and Balochi, and according to (Shah & Amjad, 2011), Punjabi is the largest group representing nearly half (44.15%) of the population of Pakistan. The given multilingual ethnic learning environment crafts many challenges for the online learner, as universities offering online courses and degrees are not geared up to the mark to cater for the ethnic based variations in learning preferences, especially in ascertaining cultural impact on learning and student academic performance.

Among several theories on learning styles, (D. Kolb, 1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), makes use of a scientific approach to understanding learning styles. The notion of cultural learning styles stems from the learning styles theory. The cultural learning styles concept incorporates several elements such as cultural upbringing, background, environment, and personality development, in determining student's learning style. (Hofstede, 1991) developed a cultural model which has been widely cited by researchers in numerous cross cultural studies. (Chang, 2011), for instance, argued that the focal point of cross-cultural research in the past five decades has revolved around Eastern and Western cultures and effect of physical environment on learning. Similarly, (Joy & Kolb, 2009) iterated that employees working in various cultural environments exhibit unique ways while solving problems.

Diversity in education posits greater challenges in understanding the impact of culture on learning style preferences. Learning begins from the very household a person belongs to and understanding learning styles in this particular context may form many important implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning. In general, existing research provide limited support to differences in preferred learning styles across cultures, these findings do not take into account disparate traditional backgrounds and ethnic diversity, and understanding the impact of ethnic culture on learning styles has largely been ignored by researchers. Resultantly, cultural learning style preferences of individuals belonging to various ethnic groups remain vulnerable and prone to be affected by various multi-faceted complex factors, stipulating further research. As a consequence, this study developed, compared and tested a structural equation model based on two theories: ELT by (D. Kolb, 1984), and culture model by (Hofstede, 1991). It analyzed the relationship between various cultural dimensions of culture and multicultural learning environment along with impact on student performance.

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