

Chapter 27

Cultural Considerations of Online Pedagogy

Judith N. Martin

Arizona State University, USA

Pauline Hope Cheong

Arizona State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides readers with foundational knowledge of how cultural factors mediate online learning and instruction in global education--based on a review of contemporary scholarship. The authors first describe three approaches--social scientific, interpretive, and critical-- to theorizing the role of culture in online pedagogy. Then, for each approach, the authors review the existing literature and discuss how that theory applies to online pedagogy, specifically identifying the assumptions, the contributions, and the limitations of each theory. The objective of such a review is to highlight pressing issues and theoretical gaps related to cultural factors in the context of online learning. Finally, the authors present practical suggestions that provide readers with the knowledge needed to create effective online materials for students from other countries and cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Online instruction is increasingly prevalent in universities worldwide. An estimated 4.6 million students, more than twenty five percent of all U. S. students in higher education, are now taking at least one course online. This number represents a 17% increase in the number of students in online

courses over the previous year, and this number far exceeds the 1.2% growth of the overall student population in U.S. higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The rising popularity of applying a global approach to education (Gacel-Ávila, 2005) also facilitates the use of online communication technologies in pedagogy in order to extend learning beyond the geographical confines of the classroom (Burbules, 2000).

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Cultural Considerations of Online Pedagogy

This chapter presents a review of the research on online pedagogy. Specifically, the authors critically examine the role of culture in e-learning classes given that theorizing about online pedagogy has not kept pace with the proliferation of online communication and curricula (Herie, 2005; Kelly, Ponton, & Rovai, 2007; Njenga & Fourie, 2010; Price & Oliver, 2007). Moreover, the authors use this review to draw recommendations for integrating intercultural theory and online pedagogical practices. The objective of this approach is to address the increasing use of online media in teaching and the fact that the individuals who develop related instructional materials are often working beyond the realm of their theoretical understanding (Baggaley, 2008; Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007; Johnson, 2010). In this theoretical void, there are the heated voices of both utopian (Wellman, 2004) and dystopian understandings of the Internet (O’Sullivan, 2000) as well as an “equipment centered” view of online pedagogy (Dutton, Cheong, & Park, 2004; Holloway, 1996; Middleton, 2010).¹ The authors, in turn, were motivated to analyze and articulate the cultural considerations of online pedagogy in order to fill a major research lacunae – the “culture and online pedagogy” gap – in the communication literature. In so doing, the authors provide a foundational knowledge needed to communicate effectively with individuals from other countries and cultures via online instruction (Chen, 2007; Herring, 2004).

While there has been an explosion of research investigating various aspects of e-learning in education and technology disciplines, there is far less attention to online pedagogical issues in the communication field. Additionally, scholars suggest that cultural issues impact both the teaching and learning in online courses (Chen, 2007; Moore, 2006; Young, 2008), yet few communication scholars have focused research attention on this topic. Therefore, this chapter reviews the existing literature in communication and related fields on the intersecting topics of communication, culture, and online pedagogy. It also presents both theoretic

cal and practical implications for communication professionals working in increasingly globalized and mediated educational environments. In this review, the authors strove to be extensive in their search to include qualitative and quantitative articles on online pedagogy published in all major communication journals. This selection included related journals ranked in the social scientific citation index as well as new electronic journals on the topic. In all, the authors reviewed a total of 28 journals and 623 issues of these journals for the past five years. A list of journals reviewed is presented in the Appendix at the end of this chapter.

Culture is a contested definitional arena and has a rich and varied history in communication research (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley, 2006; Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama & Yep, 2002; Hall, 1992; Moon, 1996; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). These debates continue to have a profound influence on theoretical and methodological choices and advances in the communication field, including the study of online pedagogy. Such discussions include the postpositive studies where culture is defined almost exclusively in terms of nationality to the more in-depth interpretive studies (Carbaugh, 1988; Shuter, 1990) to the more recent critical conception of culture—where culture is viewed as a contested zone of competing power dynamics (Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009). Within the context of these discussions, this chapter does not propose a definitive articulation of the relationship between culture and online pedagogy. Rather, the authors attempt to outline some productive and useful ways to discuss the cultural factors operating in computer-mediated educational settings. In doing so, the intent of the authors is to contextualize emerging debates about online pedagogy, provide heuristic value for further empirical studies on the topic, and describe some practical implications for online instruction in global contexts.

Accordingly, in the chapter, the authors describe social scientific, interpretive, and critical approaches to theorizing the role of culture in

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