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The World Wide Web and Cross-Cultural Teaching in Online Education

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of virtual universities and online training with a global reach indicates that the opportunities and demands for successful cross-cultural communication expand exponentially, and that instructional paradigms are shifting. Online and distance education is increasingly becoming part of traditional universities as well (Irele, 2005). In 1997, over 60% of all public institutions of higher learning in the U.S. offered distance education courses; by 2001, that number rose to 90% (IES, 1997; 2001). In Canada that number is currently estimated to be 85%[a]. An online teaching environment "goes beyond the replication of learning events that have traditionally occurred in the classroom and are now made available through the Internet"; it provides for different and new approaches to learning, and calls for "flexible teaching….that incorporates a variety of access opportunities as well as a variety of learning modes" (CATL, p. 1). Online teaching here refers to teaching that takes place in programs and courses that incorporate an online component such as WebCT, those that rely completely on WebCt and other similar applications to deliver course or program content, as well as courses offered internationally as part of institutions' distance education degree programs. As online teaching is gaining prominence, educators are compelled to interact meaningfully with individuals from different cultures daily. These interactions demonstrate that teaching and learning are culturally-based processes and that instructional content and how it is experienced reflects the values and practices of a particular cultural group.

The new realities place new demands on educators' knowledge and skills. The cross-cultural context of instruction poses a number of challenges associated with cross-cultural communication in general, such as different communication and decision-making styles, different approaches to task-completion, knowledge, disclosure, and different attitudes toward the learning situation in general. These challenges can lead to misinterpreting the intentions behind certain actions and behavior. In addition, teaching in an environment where many students possess knowledge that they do not, educators have to become collaborative designers, instructional planners, mentors and facilitators of learning, rather than transmitters of authoritative knowledge in a traditional sense. They need to acquire greater familiarity with different learning styles, as well as understand that many of the components determining the nature of learning styles and attitudes toward learning are culture-based (Chorney, 2007; Hao, 2004; Kim, 2001).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the properties of the online environment in general are inherently suited to help educators reconceptualize their role and engage in constructive cross-cultural communication. This is due to the new technologies' potential to enable collaborative teaching in an environment of diverse users and to support multiple learning styles. At the same time, the presence of collaborative technology itself does not guarantee that successful cross-cultural communication and learning will take place. The disembodied nature of online communication can sometimes add to the inherent challenges that accompany face-to-face cross-cultural communication.

Instructors who teach in cross-cultural contexts online will need to engage with the new technologies in a more purposeful way and apply that engagement to program design and teaching practice. They will need to devote some time to designing for interaction and collaboration in order to overcome common challenges in cross-cultural communication.

A more systematic study of the open-ended and interaction-enabling properties of the World Wide Web would help those who design for diversity in online educational environment. The open-ended and interactive nature of the World Wide Web, as the main platform for online cross-cultural teaching, can serve as a conceptual model to help teachers overcome common challenges in cross-cultural communication.

BACKGROUND

As e-learning is gaining prominence, and as distance education turns our world into a "global village", compelling educators to interact meaningfully with individuals from different cultures daily, it is becoming clear that both learning and teaching and culturally-based processes, and that instructional design is not culturally neutral (Campbell, 2004; Chorney, 2007). Instructional content, and the way that content is experienced, reflects the values and practices of a particular cultural group—most commonly, English speaking western cultures. Unless greater care is taken, this situation can alienate a number of students.

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Since all education is based on interaction and communication, and cultural differences are often at the root of communication challenges, educators' ability to deal with those differences will determine largely how successful they are in practice. In cross-cultural contexts, teachers acknowledge that learners bring prior knowledge and experience to the learning environment. In these contexts, teachers can no longer see themselves as exclusive sources of knowledge. Rather, they need to see themselves as guides who facilitate the learners' navigating through networks of existing meanings to create new ones. They need to encourage learners to make connections between previous and new knowledge, to integrate previous knowledge with new knowledge, and transfer it from one context to another. In the new paradigm, teachers teach "for transfer", and embrace collaborative teaching.

Collaborative teaching rests on the assumption that learning is "more of a process than a product, in which internal meaning is made through the building and reshaping of personal knowledge through interaction with the world" (Campbell, 2004, p. 152). Collaborative teaching means engaging learners in the learning process and encouraging them through various activities to construct knowledge in a way that is meaningful to them. Teaching collaboratively means being willing to recognize and practice explicitly the reality that there is always more than one way to solve a problem, and more than one point of view in interpretation. Collaborative teaching is reflective, as it implies that instructors will be willing to reflect on their teaching, words, claims, and so on, on an ongoing basis, and be prepared to change their perspective at any given point if change is needed. The instructor who is committed to teaching collaboratively will be teaching students the nature and value of successful communication and collaboration by example.

Like the organization of materials on the WWW, this teaching model is inherently nonlinear, as it encourages the making of connections and identifying of differences among a multiplicity of perspectives on the same issue in no particular linear order. The collaborative model is based on flexible thinking, and is best achieved through the practice of so-called "transformative communication". There are a number of indicators that transformative communication is happening. Among them are the following:

1. The student teaches the instructor something that he or she did not know before, either about the technology or about content.
2. More emphasis is placed upon finding support or backing for a position than on conforming to an authority.
3. Students participate in setting the agenda for the class by helping choose content, learning methods, or both.
4. Students are calling the instructor's attention to valuable learning resources.
5. While the instructor helps establish expectations and articulates a clear assessment standard, the students collaboratively guide much of their own learning.
6. The instructor finds him or herself saving student work—not merely as examples of student work, but as content resources for future reference (cf. Sherry & Wilson, 1997).

This flexibility of approach relying on collaboration and learning as a process becomes crucial in the context of cross-cultural instruction. Individuals process information and approach learning in different ways, which results in different learning or "mind" styles. There are a number of different classifications concerning learning styles (cf. Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1999; Keefe, 1979). One such classification accounts for cognitive differences among learners according to two criteria: the way learners acquire information—though concrete experience or abstract conceptualizations; and according to how they internalize or process information—through active experimentation based on the method of scientific, deductive reasoning, or reflective observation (Kolb, 1984, 1985). Some learners prefer and appropriate knowledge and information offered through text, others through images and graphic representation. While most students have become proficient in interpreting text or print, only a portion of those students is actually composed of so-called "verbal learners," those who prefer to learn from texts and lectures (Campbell, 2004, p. 178).

Individual responses to the learning situation will be influenced by the learners' prior knowledge and the way they think of the individual's past experience, and this, in turn, will depend in some definite measure upon each person's background, including the individual's culture. While models of cognition are not entirely predetermined, they are also shaped through social interaction (Helwig, 2005; Nations Johnson, 1993; Oishi, Hahn, Schimmack, Radhakrishan, Dzokoto & Ahadi, 2005; Smetana, 2002). Since individual development is mediated by social interaction in a culture-specific, historical setting, and since culture influences one's cognitive processes, including the attitudes governing the assimilation of information, there is common ground on which culture and its impact on cognition can be studied (Abi-Nader, 1999; Neff & Helwig, 2002). The relationships between learning styles and cultural backgrounds are therefore strong and complex (Hao, 2004; Kim, 2001).

The nature of this relationship and its implication for cross-cultural education can be understood in the context of the often cited differences among cultures and the attitude those differences shape. There are a number of ways according to which cultural differences have been conceptualized (cf. McCutcheon, 1993). One recent model interprets the differences in terms of a "global learning style," associated with Japanese learners, vs. an "analytical learning style," associated with learners from Europe, North

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