

Chapter 8

Cultural Orientation Differences and Their Implications for Online Learning Satisfaction

Moussa Tankari
University of Zinder, Niger

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter, which uses sociocultural learning theory as its framework and a mixed-methods study design, is to understand the differences between personal culture orientation and online learning satisfaction by examining culture at the macro and micro level in an online learning environment. More specifically, this chapter examines the cultural orientation differences among graduate students enrolled in at least one online course in the fall of 2011 at a Western institution of higher education and how these cultural differences impact their level of satisfaction with online learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data is collected, respectively, via surveys, and interviews indicate that, although culture does not directly affect satisfaction, there is a need to raise awareness about the critical factors that may affect online learning experience and to provide guidance for practice and future research.

INTRODUCTION

According to the US Department of Education (2009), online learning has become popular because of its potential for providing more flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any place. Frequently, the focus entails:

1. Increasing the availability of learning experiences for learners who cannot or choose not to attend traditional face-to-face offerings,
2. Assembling and disseminating instructional content more cost-effectively, or
3. Enabling instructors to handle more students while maintaining learning outcome quality that is equivalent to that of comparable face-to-face instruction.

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In addition, online learning offerings are being designed to enhance the quality of learning experiences and outcomes.

However, research in online education is generally impoverished with respect to theory, and the limited theoretical underpinnings used in online education research largely ignore culture as a significant factor. Few online education researchers have incorporated cultural dimensions into their investigations, and there is an even greater lack of research investigating the connections between cultural orientation and satisfaction with online education. An extensive survey of the literature by Macfadyen, Roche, Doff, Reeder, and Chase (2004) revealed four different research orientations regarding culture and education in cyberspace. Generally, these research orientations focus on studies related to:

1. The interactions in an online course which involved culturally-diverse adult learners;
2. The access to the Internet among different groups;
3. The assessment criteria applied in online education; and
4. The design of virtual learning environments to accommodate the needs of culturally-diverse learners (Edmundson, 2007).

As noted above, there is surprisingly little published literature on the cultural aspects of online learning and teaching, and there are even fewer research-based studies (Gunawardena et al., 2003). Traditional learning environments may become sites of struggle for teachers and learners when there is a collision of different cultures (Uzuner, 2009). More often than not, it is difficult for the teacher to accommodate each and every student's culture. Therefore, the students are expected "to step out of their own culture and temporarily enter into the culture of the instructor" (Moore, 2006, p. 1). This chapter comprises four distinct sections. The first section describes the theoretical background of the study, the second section reports on the methodology used, the third discusses the results, and the last provides suggestions for future research and conclusion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter and study, sociocultural learning theories are applied as a foundation for studying how culturally diverse learners feel satisfied with their online learning experience. The rationale is that sociocultural learning theories are learner-centered and provide insight into collaborative approaches to student learning. These theories also take into account the social and cultural aspects of acquiring knowledge. Collaborative learning is an effective means of increasing student achievement and cognitive development (Wang, 2007). Research also shows that in a community-of-learners, a learner's potential performance level is increased. This chapter examines social learning theory and its implications for online teaching and learning. In this section, two important theories are discussed because of their connection and relevance to online learning: (a) collaborative learning and (b) community of learners. In addition, the influences of culture and ethnicity and learner characteristics in online learning environments are explored.

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