Chapter 12
The Role of Social Constructivist Instructional Approaches in Facilitating Cross-Cultural Online Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The role of the university is rapidly changing in this new information age, as many courses and programs are using on-line modalities (i.e. live, interactive audio or video or video conferencing, pre-recorded instructional videos, Webcasts, CD-ROMs, DVDs, or computer-based systems accessed over the Internet) as part of their instructional delivery. Online learning education has closed the gap for many learners who would have been unable to attend an institution of higher learning due to family and career obligations; it has also been instrumental with facilitating collaborative learning and teamwork among students in cross-cultural and cross-national settings. However, due to these geographic variations among online learners from culturally diverse backgrounds, instructors may be faced with challenges hindering their facilitation of online courses and the overall learning outcomes among cross-cultural students. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss aspects of these challenges, provide educators across all discipline with an understanding of the role social constructivist instructional strategies have on facilitating an inclusive online cross-cultural learning environment, and provide recommendations for developing strategies to accommodate these diverse students.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of online education has experienced a rapid growth in higher education around the globe (Wang & Reeves, 2007) and has become an important part of curriculum delivery not only in distance learning institutions but also in traditional schools. Students who are now attending universities are viewing this technological tool as a commonplace to textbooks and other educational resources. The

expansion of online learning has also been regarded as an ideal tool for globally educating international students who have also become comfortable with using this format (Wang & Reeves). This type of instructional delivery offers cross-culture learners with opportunities for flexible learning that can take place at anytime and anywhere, and is particularly significant among adult learners, as lifelong learning is considered to be both an economic, social and an individual endeavor (White, 2007).

With the growth of global online learning environments it is important that educators be aware of the differing educational values and cultural expectations of students (Pincas, 2001). Each student's values are defined based on their cultural histories, beliefs, philosophies of learning, and personal preferences for learning (Bentley, Tinney & Chia, 2005; Leung, 1996). Culture can be defined in many ways. One typical definition is a "shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across generations" (House, et al., 1999, p. 184). Consequently, technology is not necessarily immune to cultural variations, and has the propensity to affect changes consistently across all cultural contexts (Lin & Hatano, 2003). Therefore, in order for instructional design to be successfully received it will need to accommodate these cultural differences (Seufert, 2002a). Some of the unique challenges online educators will now face are how to decipher whether learning behavior is based on deeply entrenched cultural values that should not be focused on or should it rather be recognized as a superficially based practice that can be addressed in facilitating learning. Additional challenges may include:

- Selecting what instructional strategies should be integrated in cross-cultural/multi-cultural situations, and
- Knowing what type of instructional strategies will be most beneficial for a particular group of students, and
- Deciding how instructional approaches should be integrated in cross-cultural settings (Parish & VanBerschot-Linder, 2010).

It is plausible to say that there is a need to anticipate that issues to related to cultural differences will influence today's increasingly cross-cultural postsecondary institutions' retention rates and academic success of students.

Due to these growing demographic changes in online enrollment, instructional design theories are needed to guide online instruction and the integration of new technologies to enhance teaching and learning in numerous settings (Reigeluth, 1999). Also, in order for instructional designs to be effective instructors will need to understand the current trend toward globalization of education that is best responsive to the many learning approaches and cultural differences among participants (Seufert, 2002a). Even though, culture has been addressed in the field of Instructional System Design (ISD), it appears to be an under researched area (Henderson, 1996; Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007). If education and instructional designs are an inherent social process (Schwier, Campbell & Kenny, 2004) then instructional providers cannot take an impartial position in creating courses and materials for instructions. They must now become more knowledgeable about the cultures of online students and how these cultures may play a role in their learning preferences (Nisbett, 2003). This should be seen as an important step in on-line course design, especially, as it becomes a prominent delivery system for learning in post secondary institutions, instructors will face a plethora of challenges requiring them to develop, design and deliver effective instructions.

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