

Chapter XI

The Effect of Culture on Email Use: Implications for Distance Learning

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Abstract

This chapter examines how students from different cultural backgrounds use email to communicate with other students and teachers. The South Pacific region, isolated, vast, and culturally diverse, was selected as an appropriate research environment in which to study the effect of cultural differences and educational technology on distance learning. The context of this research was two competing distance education institutions in Fiji, the University of the South Pacific and Central Queensland University. Three research questions were addressed: Does cultural background affect the extent to which students use email to communicate with educators

and other students for academic and social reasons? Does cultural background affect the academic content of email messages? Does cultural background influence students' preference to ask questions or provide answers using email instead of face-to-face communication? To address these issues, two studies were conducted in parallel. Subjects were drawn from business information systems and computer information technology classes at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and Central Queensland University (CQU). Four hundred students at USP were surveyed about their email usage. In the CQU study, postings to course discussion lists by 867 students were analyzed. The results of these studies suggest that there are significant differences in the use of email by students from different cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

The impact of cultural diversity on group interactions through technology is an active research area. In common with the business world, the world of education is becoming increasingly globalized, and it is important for instructors to understand the impact of cultural differences on student learning. Cultural diversity represents an enormous challenge for global teams, but also offers a potential richness. Cultures and management styles often clash. People from different cultures have varying ideas about appropriate methods of communication and levels of accountability (Dubé and Paré, 2001). Acquiring the ability to manage cultural differences successfully can give a university significant advantages. The way forward is to foster cross-cultural learning and participation in education (Holden, 2002).

The following scenario highlights some cultural differences that may impact the distance learning process:

“Tenika, thank you for coming to see me. I’m concerned about your silence in class. Fifteen percent of your grade is based on class participation, and yet you never ask questions, express your opinions, or challenge the views of other students in class.” Tenika Kepa, a Fijian M.B.A. student studying in Boston looked down, embarrassed. “Dr. Smith, I’m sorry, in my country to ask a question in class is considered rude. Fijians do not like confrontation. When our people disagree, they remain silent. This is often misinterpreted by people who demand or expect that we tell them to their faces what we do not want. We want them to be sensitive enough to feel that we don’t agree. This is part of our culture.” (Woodward, 2000)

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