Chapter 7

An Exploratory Study of Cross-Cultural Engagement in the Community of Inquiry:
Instructor Perspectives and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines instructor multicultural efficacy in global online learning communities. To explore this phenomenon in the CoI framework, a two-phase study was conducted with 10 instructors from two Alberta higher education institutions. Phase one comprised creating intercultural competency indicators to test how they developed and expanded existing teaching and social presence indicators. Qualitative data revealed that in the lack of any cross-cultural design, instructors utilize facilitation and open communication strategies to foster learning and prevent conflict. Phase two involved augmenting the 34-item CoI survey instrument. Additional roles that relate to instructor cross-cultural efficacy were incorporated into both teaching and social presence elements based on qualitative findings. Quantitative data revealed that the incorporated cultural indicators correlated highly with the teaching and social indicators, indicating their usefulness to measure multicultural efficacy in the CoI framework.

INTRODUCTION

The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds (R.D. Laing, as cited in Harrington & Hathaway, 1994, p. 1).

Asynchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) learning communities have afforded a growing number of cross-cultural learners the opportunity to study in internationally renowned universities or institutions without being bound by geographical or temporal constraints (McIssac, 2002). However, as learners cross educational borders, cross-cultural learners are faced with myriad issues and challenges. Factors such as language and technological limitations are

just some examples that barely scratch the surface of this complex subject. There are indeed other major cultural issues that may negatively impact cross-cultural online learners. Moreover, the limited theoretical underpinnings used in online education largely ignore culture as a significant factor (Wang & Reeves, 2007). Thus, instructors who fail to understand the differing needs and worldviews of these learners may in fact adversely affect successful educational outcomes in online communities of inquiry.

This study explores how instructors of asynchronous text-based online courses accommodate and make provisions for culturally diverse learners in online communities of inquiry. The main premise of this research was that, because instructors project their individual personalities in the online environment via their teaching and social presence, both of which are largely rooted in their dominant culture, their values, beliefs, and attitudes will significantly affect learners' social and cognitive presence. The term culture is defined in this study as "the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual" (Matsumoto, 1996, p. 16). Further, cross-cultural students may find it more difficult to project themselves socially in asynchronous online learning environments due to inherent cultural differences and backgrounds. "Cross-cultural" refers to interaction among individuals from different cultures (http://tinyurl.com/44vlwv3). In the context of this study "cross-cultural" specifically refers to individuals who may or may not be currently living in Canada but were born in another country and whose native language is notably not English or individuals who identify with a culturally distinct group (e.g., Aboriginals, French Canadians, or a new immigrant group now residing in Canada).

Based on data collected from two survey instruments, the Adapted Multicultural Efficacy Questionnaire (AMEQ) and the CoI questionnaire, this chapter proposes a revised 37-item CoI survey instrument for measuring instructor multicultural efficacy in an online community of inquiry.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There is great consensus among scholars that culture plays a major role in online learning (Bates & Gpe, 1997; Morse, 2003; Hewling, 2005; Moore, 2006; Edmundson, 2007, 2009). However, literature on this topic is still in its infancy and there are deficiencies in research-based studies especially in regards to globalization of education and cross-cultural issues (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003; Edmundson, 2007; Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker & Vogt, 2009).

Studies have revealed that some of the factors that hinder successful online learning are as follows:

- Inability to understand specific cultural references;
- Language limitations;
- Inability to question authority (instructor or peers);
- Differing emotional needs;
- Time zone limitations; and
- Technological limitations (Zhao & McDougall, 2008; Uzner, 2009; Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

Considering the exponential growth and needs of online learning programs and degree programs offered internationally, it is pivotal to increase intercultural awareness and efficacy of teachers in addressing the needs of a global population in order to achieve successful educational outcomes (Lim, 2004).

In a globalized online environment, although teaching should not be based on one dominant set of values or pedagogical assumptions, instructors quite often bring their own beliefs and stereotypes into the learning environment (Banks et al., 2001). Existing "essentialist" or nation-based models of cultural competence may fail to take into account the complexities of intercultural exchange in text-based asynchronous learning environments that foster critical reflection and higher-order learning

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