Facilitation across Cultures in the Online Classroom

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Abstract. The author explores how cultural differences manifest themselves in online course settings, including how instructors identify these differences and perceive their roles in the classroom with respect to facilitating across multiple cultures. The author also analyzes how instructors perceive the importance of culture in the classroom and how these perceptions affect facilitation strategies. Findings point to the significance of seeking out cultural differences early in a course and how instructor-student interactions allow for a deeper understanding of misunderstood issues or course content. The author describes key strategies that are essential to identifying and facilitating cultural awareness in the online classroom, as well as creating a safe space for discussion.

Keywords: online learning; cultural difference; online course facilitation; student-teacher interaction

1. Introduction

One of the benefits of online learning is the opportunity it gives students to participate in a course or program of study regardless of where they reside. A broad search of online course and program offerings reveals that colleges and universities, both on-ground and online, are continuing to expand their recruitment efforts to reach international students beyond the United States (U.S.). The opportunity to earn a degree from a U.S.- based institution via distance is an appealing alternative for international students; the cost-benefit of not having to travel to an on-ground campus abroad is a good motivator for choosing online programs.

The continued influx of international students poses unique opportunities as well as challenges in online learning environments. Research continues to explore factors that can positively or negatively affect a student's experience including: language barriers and proficiency (Zhang & Kenny, 2010), course design and instruction (Minjuan *et al.*, 2010; Zhang & Kenny, 2010), and cultural differences (Liu *et al.*, 2010; Tu, 2001). Along these lines, one important area of study focuses on the student experience in online learning and how it relates to

communication that occurs in the classroom, both collaboratively among students and individually between a student and the instructor (Anderson, 2008; Tu, 2001; Vatrapu & Suthers, 2007). For students from other cultures, in particular, communication plays a critical role in the overall learning experience.

Online course instructors must adapt course facilitation methods in light of cultural differences. Liu *et al.* (2010), for example, suggest that instructors "incorporate features that accommodate different cultural pedagogy" and "appreciate cultural differences" (p. 182). While this particular suggestion is certainly noteworthy and valid, more specific direction is warranted with respect to what types of changes should be made when working with international students as well as the specific facilitation and communication processes used across multiple cultures.

2. The Complexities of Online Instruction

In an online course setting, the instructor plays a critical role in many aspects of a course, with the success of a course relying greatly on the quality of the instructor. In a survey of over 500 instructors, instructional designers, and college administrators, over 37 percent of participants identified teaching or technical competency as the most significant factor that affects the success of an online course (Kim & Bonk, 2006). An online instructor must be proficient in an extensive range of competencies in order to be effective in the classroom, including a high level of professionalism, the ability to socially facilitate, as well as an overall degree of technical competency (Bawane & Spector, 2009).

A critical aspect of an instructor's role in an online course is building a learning community among students. Anderson (2008) notes "experienced online learning teachers must make time at the commencement of the learning interactions to provide incentive and opportunity for students to share their understandings, their culture, and the unique aspects of themselves" (p. 48). Building a learning community in an online course poses unique challenges that are not present in a traditional setting (Vesley *et al.*, 2007). It is important for instructors to continually find ways to build a community with their students.

In an online course, instructors also must also engage students in other ways, such as discussion forums, rather than relying on face-to-face communication. The balance of how to facilitate discussion boards, as well as when and how to lead discussions, can be a complex task (Mazzolini & Madison, 2007). In addition, as Vonderwell *et al.* (2007) note, assessment in online learning must "take into account assessment as a process as well as assessment as an outcome" (p. 323). They go on to say that it is important for assessment to be embedded in the course, via discussion boards, peer review, and other self-regulating activities. The complexities of the role of an online instructor are compounded by the need to recognize student differences within the classroom. Research indicates that the growing numbers of students from various cultures within the online classroom warrants further exploration of strategies that are effective when working with a global population (Yang *et al.*, 2010).

3. Multiculturalism and Online Learning

An instructor's understanding a student's cultural background is important to online learning (Cercone, 2008; Lim, 2004; Rogers *et al.*, 2007). In order to better define strategies for working with a multicultural student group, it is useful to investigate culture and how it manifests itself in an online course setting. To begin, it is helpful to explore the psychological underpinnings of how students learn in light of their cultural norms. Notable works related to learning and culture stem from the field of psychology and organizational learning (Hofstede, 1983; Hofstede, 1984) and recognize two types of culture -- individualistic and collectivistic.

> Individualist culture [...] awards social status to personal accomplishments such as important discoveries, innovations, great artistic or humanitarian achievements and all actions that make an individual stand out. Collectivism, in contrast, emphasizes individuals in a larger group. It encourages conformity and discourages individuals from dissenting and standing out. (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011, p. 2)

Western culture is typically identified as individualistic in nature, although there are subgroups within the U.S. that could be viewed as collectivist (Neuliep, 2012). Other individualistic countries include Germany, India, Lebanon, and New Zealand (Fischer *et al.*, 2009). Asian cultures, including China and Korea are typically more collectivist in nature. These cultural dimensions play an important role in understanding students in higher education course settings and greatly affect how an individual learns (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Using individualism and collectivism as a framework is important for understanding culture in online learning.

Tapanes*et al.* (2009) found that a student's culture heavily influenced their perceptions of an online course, with collectivist learners feeling as though the instructor did not consider culture when facilitating. When research frames a particular culture as either individual or collective, it gives a clearer indication of how a student will engage and communicate in the classroom. For example, Ku & Lohr (2007) note that Asian cultures have a much different learning style than their Western counterparts, with students from Asian cultures (more collectivistic in nature) taking the time to adjust to the course format, as well as the cultural (more individualistic) dimensions of a U.S.-based online course.

In a cross-comparison of student behaviour in online collaboration, Kim and Bonk (2002) found that Korean students were more socially driven, Finnish students more group focused, and U.S. students more action-oriented. In a similar manner, culture affects motivation in learning as well. Research shows, for example, that in an online course setting, there was a significant difference among student motivation when comparing Korean students and U.S. students, with Korean students tending to have less motivation and U.S. students enjoying

the self-satisfaction of finishing assignments and reaching goals within the course (Lim, 2004).

In light of the complexity of the intersection of student cultures in online learning, all of the various aspects of the online classroom, including course facilitation, design, and delivery, have been focal points of recent research. Researchers continue to examine new ways to facilitate discussion boards (Rovai, 2007), use technology to engage students (Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Milheim, 2011), encourage collaboration (Milheim, 2011; Paloff & Pratt, 2010), and utilize adult learning theory to more effectively approach the course design process, overall (Cercone, 2008; Milheim, 2012) in light of individual student cultures.

4. Purpose of the Study

Specific, tangible suggestions for online course instructors are needed with respect to facilitating with and among students from various cultural backgrounds in the online classroom. This study seeks to answer questions related to how faculty can most effectively work with students from various cultures in an online learning environment. Specifically, the questions guiding this research study are:

- How can faculty identify potential cultural differences in an online course setting?
- How do faculty perceive their roles in the online classroom with respect to attending to cultural difference among students?
- What strategies do faculty use to effectively foster communication with and among students of various cultural backgrounds?
- What is the perceived value of cultural difference in an online course, and how do these differences affect interpersonal dynamics?

By addressing these questions, this study sought to find applicable strategies that allow instructors of online courses to effectively facilitate across the various cultural differences present within their respective classrooms. Forty-one instructors of online courses completed a qualitative survey related to their teaching practice, responding to questions relevant to communication, culture, and course facilitation strategies in an online course setting. After an analysis of the survey responses, multiple themes emerged that shed light onto best practices and strategies for working with students from various cultural groups.

5. Research Procedures

5.1 Participant selection

Upon receiving appropriate approvals from the sponsoring organization's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study was initiated. Data collection in the form of a short-answer, written, web-based survey occurred from December 2012 through February 2013. A total number of 41 individuals (n=41) participated in the study. The target participants were faculty or instructors who had taught at least one, complete online course by the time the survey was taken. Participants self-selected to take a survey of seven open-ended questions via an online survey website.

Participants were recruited in three different ways: 1) self-selection via the sponsoring University participant pool; 2) direct e-mails from the primary researcher to friends and colleagues outside the sponsoring University who might have been interested and qualified to take the survey; and 3) a repeated, monthly posting in the sponsoring institution's newsletter with a direct link to the survey. Participants who were aware of the study were also invited to forward the invitation to participate to their colleagues, thus creating snowball sampling.

5.2 Data collection
At the beginning of the survey, participants were given a brief introduction to the study. The survey questions focused on their role as an instructor in an online setting with respect to facilitating communication across cultures. Once data were collected, a qualitative survey analysis was conducted to determine the common themes among responses. To do this, a color-coding approach to identify key words, terms, or phrases was used. Another review of the survey responses that yielded noteworthy quotes or responses that were not aligned (or dramatically different from) the common themes was also carried out. All of the highlighted data were inserted into an electronic database for manual cross-comparison and further review and analysis.

6. Findings and Discussion
6.1 Identifying cultural difference
Among nearly all of the participants there was a general acknowledgement that culture plays a critical role in the classroom. One individual stated that cultural difference "changes the landscape of our classes when we share." Along these lines, many agreed that it is difficult to identify cultural difference in an online setting since the online environment gives a sense of anonymity and masking of culture. This "masking" can have a significant impact on the communication that occurs in the classroom. As another participant noted "there is [...] racial cloaking that is very liberating for my faculty and students. The inability to stereotype people quickly makes online classrooms full of opportunity to make cultural assumptions that lead to conflict."

The anonymity offered in an online setting often makes recognizing cultural difference a bit of a guessing game. Faculty must rely on cues and written evidence to identify a student's cultural background. In fact, of the 41 participants, over half indicated that they seek written clues into a student's cultural background during the early weeks of a course. These clues are discovered through terminology, phrases, vocabulary and expressions.

In some cases, students self-identify that they are of a particular culture, or instructors embed activities into a course that allow students to provide examples of their culture. This makes the guessing game a bit easier, rather than relying on assumptions or clues. As an instructor of a nutrition course noted: "...students provide examples of how their family cultures and backgrounds have shaped their food habits and traditions. For example, Muslim students celebrate Ramadan once a year, and Jewish students celebrate Hanukah".

Another participant stated: "I have had students in classes from the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and Asia. Most of the time discussion of culture shows up in examples students use to make a point about a concept we are studying in class."

Despite written and recognizable cues, it is evident that instructors often correlate culture with certain characteristics. Throughout the survey responses, a common theme was the evidence that previous teaching experiences affected future assumptions related to culture, and, in some cases, correlate race with culture as well, with one participant stating that "[...] students of color (or ones I have reason to think are students of color) are very reticent about discussing issues regarding race in the classroom". Another stated"that most students in my classes who are international, or not from a more mainstream U.S. culture, tend to make efforts to blend and not set themselves apart from mainstream classroom culture".

In addition to identifying individual student cultures, participants noted the importance of being aware of differences among these cultures, and what that means to the learning community. Often, cultural differences can impact how students interact in a course. While most agree these differences contribute positively to the learning community, they can also impact interactions by creating assumptions. While most participants indicate that identifying culture is important, there were a few who felt it has no impact on the classroom, or do not make great efforts to recognize differences. One individual wrote: "I do my best to ignore the cultural differences among my students. I treat all students alike". Another stated: "Cultural differences do not influence the online classroom provided the learning objectives are met".

Overall, the survey of online instructors shows that identifying the cultural backgrounds of students is important in the classroom. Whether there are direct clues and indicators of culture, or a perceived assumption, instructors, overall, strive to acknowledge these differences when entering the classroom.

6.2 Perception of role
Survey responses heavily indicate that instructors play a critical role in fostering communication across cultures in the classroom, particularly on discussion forums. Most of their roles in communication with and among students relate to monitoring the discussion boards, while promoting a safe learning environment. Several noted the importance of "encouraging interaction among all student groups" and "creating a 'safe space' for students" in light of cultural difference. Notably, fifteen of the 41 participants used the word "facilitate" or "facilitator" in their response to how they view their role in the classroom. This facilitation is done via tactics such as close management of discussion boards, correcting and assisting with grammar, being actively responsive, and promoting a respectful environment. The term "facilitator" is typically used in a positive manner; yet, two participants described more of a mediation approach by being a "peace keeper", "limiting inflammatory discussion posts", and "being an intermediary".

In addition to monitoring discussions and encouraging interactions, a common theme among responses is the importance of their overall purpose to the classroom. While activities such as monitoring discussion boards and diffusing potential communication issues are important, instructors strive to encourage learning. To do this, many note the importance of urging students to express themselves and expand on their written ideas, while maintaining a mutual respect for others. One wrote: "It's my job to pique students' interests and challenge their thinking so they stretch a bit more and to provide them the materials they need to do this." Another noted: "[...] beyond encouraging communication, I find that you need to give students ideas or examples of how to keep the conversations going. [...] the natural tendency is for students to respond positively to one another but not to encourage further dialogue".

It is apparent that online course instructors view their roles overall as important to fostering communication among and with students in their courses with cultural differences affecting the way communication occurs in the classroom. Online instructors must navigate cultural differences among students, and survey responses indicate that this can affect the way communication occurs during a course. A notable theme among responses was the need for sensitivity to other cultures, and the importance of proactive strategies for fostering communication. This includes adjusting office hours (to accommodate those who are not in the U.S.), limiting jargon or phrases that will most likely not be understood by ESL students, and setting standards for interaction. Proactively changing discussion posts or clarifying lessons has also assisted instructors as well. One notes: "In some situations, I have to reword a discussion posting or response so that is can be appropriately 'understood'". In some cases, others follow-up with phone calls to students if there is a clear miscommunication that needs to be clarified.

Sometimes conflict arises in the classroom as a result of cultural differences. When this occurs, instructors must strategize on how to effectively handle the conflict. Two-thirds of participants cited examples of a time where culture caused conflict in the classroom, mostly on the discussion boards. It is interesting to note that cultural conflict did not necessarily surface as a result of one common theme (i.e. religion, language barrier, etc.), but there was stereotyping (of race or gender) where the instructor had to step in and diffuse the situation. One instructor wrote:

> When I taught many sections of the [Ethics] course, the assumptions of some triggered polar opposite reactions, from different values. I tried to first understand and respect each perspective where the point of view did not infringe on respecting others. When having to intervene with particularly dicey interchanges, I would sometimes ask to take them offline with me.

Religious difference may also cause potential areas of conflict or misunderstanding, as one participant noted:

Assumptions about each other point to divergence in cultural norms and values. We have very religious students and very conservative students who are interacting with extremely liberal, sometimes well-intentioned but slightly bigoted individuals who have been very sheltered and who are not exposed to people who do not look like or think like them. Those intersections are ripe for conflict if not monitored and facilitated.

Despite the potential for conflict, instructors generally agree that cultural differences add value to the classroom.

6.3 Value of culture

Thirty-nine participants indicated ways that culture is valuable in the classroom. The most common reasons noted for its importance relate to the depth and richness of learning that occurs as a result with these shared experiences, mainly resulting on the discussion boards. As one participant noted: "different perspectives and backgrounds of students can make for interesting and lively discussions". Within the discussions, it is apparent that students (from an instructor's perspective) enjoy sharing their experiences and information about their culture, particularly as it relates to the course topic. One healthcare instructor wrote: "Expression by students of cultural expectations regarding societal and individual care issues often adds volumes to the discussion". Another education instructor notes: "In my classes on learning theory the examples they share really add to it. For example those who have experienced colonial education in West Africa have poignant examples."

Culture also has positive influence on how students conduct themselves in a course. Several participants note how high standards of written communication encourage those with poor English skills to write better, and "be clear in their language use". Recognition of culture also promotes curiosity and "different ways of thinking and looking at the world". This is particularly apparent in fields such as family studies, where "the range of family structures and the wealth of experiences that students bring with them [...] becomes such a powerful illustration of all the ways that we experience family in our communities".

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that culture is an important aspect of the online learning community. How instructors recognize and conduct a course in light of cultural differences has shown to be a critical part of their roles. With the exception of two participants, all of the instructors who participated in this survey value their role, and proactively engage in various strategies to support cultural difference in the classroom. Survey results indicate there are several strategies, which can be helpful to instructors in their online courses. First and foremost is the importance of seeking out ways to determine a student's cultural background at the onset of a course. Sometimes an introductory posting provides good clues. However, instructors should be proactive, and ask students to frame responses with specific examples from their own cultures. It is important to do this in light

of an open, safe environment while keeping a close watch on potentially disruptive or narrow-minded discussion responses.

Along these lines, it is necessary to keep a "safe space" for students where they feel comfortable communicating. This may include reaching out to students who are not as expressive and probing into the reasons for their lack of participation. It is also important for instructors to note general cultural differences (i.e. individualistic versus collectivistic cultures) that may provide some clues into how a student is conducting himself or herself in the classroom. Knowing these potential cultural influences can assist with managing the classroom more effectively.

Online course instructors should also proactively identify potential course design elements that may be confusing to some students. It is important to eliminate confusing language, clarify instructions, and review grading requirements and assignments to avoid confusion. Students from some cultures may not feel comfortable reaching out to the instructor or may be confused because they are an ESL student. Proactively attending to some of these potential issues will allow students to feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom.

Finally, it is important for instructors to realize the value of culture in a course. While participants of this survey, for the most part, felt culture had a positive place in the classroom, it was evident by the survey responses that there were varying levels of its perceived importance. Those working in healthcare and education seemed to find more ways to incorporate cultural difference into examples and discussion as compared to other participants. Those who are not currently incorporating these examples into their instruction should be encouraged to do so.

Overall, this study contributes to understanding how faculty perceive their roles with respect to facilitating student discussion across multiple cultures in an online course. The study identified various strategies used by instructors in light of a diverse, multicultural classroom environment. It also broadens the understanding of the role of culture in online learning and sheds light on how instructors can deal with similar issues within the classroom. Moving forward, future research should continue to explore if and how these strategies directly affect student learning. While instructors agree on many of the tools and methods to manage their classrooms, additional research should focus on the specific utilization of these strategies and their direct impact on the learning process in an online classroom.

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