7th International Conference on Intercultural Education "Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World", EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

Key Challenges of On-Line Education in Multi-Cultural Context

Roy Damary, Tatiana Markova & Natalia Pryadilina *

Robert Kennedy College, Technoparkstrasse 1, 8005 Zürich, Switzerland
Ural State University of Economics, 8th Marta St.,62, Ekaterinburg, 620219, Russia
Ural State Forest Engineering University, Sibirsky Trakt 37, Ekaterinburg, 620100, Russia

Abstract

In meeting the ever-growing educational needs of culturally diverse student populations, universities and colleges still seek to maintain high quality standards, both for in situ and online education. Despite the latter's reportedly high effectiveness potential, online degree courses tend to have low students' persistence and satisfaction rates.

In this pape,r we examine the role that students' and instructors' national cultures play in the way individuals learn at a distance. We argue that students' individual culture dimensions may prove influential in achieving overall learning outcomes. The key complexities for students involve understanding the instructor's role in a socio-constructivist approach, adapting online collaborative learning and acquiring academic skills. These can become crucial barriers to effective online learning. No less a challenge is presented by online distance education for instructors. Academic institutions' managements have high expectations in terms of utilizing up-to-date teaching techniques, enhancing competitive edge and maximizing cost-effectiveness. Thus, the teaching staff is expected to play an increasingly essential role in the new environment. We conclude that instructors have to develop strategies to motivate, support and counsel students with the aim of facilitating the students' on-line learning experience. This implies that teaching staff have to acquire new skills and competences vital for multicultural online education.

Robert Kennedy College, whose experience is reflected in this paper, shares much of the issues of other institutions aiming to utilize distance online learning, but has the advantage that it was set up from the start as an online institution

Keywords: multicultural education, online learning, instructor's role, collaborative learning, academic skills, national culture

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 22 774 36 11; fax:+33 450 42 83 70;
  E-mail address: r.damary@insamgeneva.org,, with cc: markova_tl@usue.ru

1. Introduction

It is estimated that e-learning is used by more than 100 million people in the world (Bakanova, 2007). Many analysts confidently predict further growth in this sector of the market of educational services. International experience suggests that, given high-quality educational content and competent course design, the effectiveness of e-learning is not inferior to that of full-time training. Today this is officially recognized at the UN and UNESCO.

Information and communication technologies gave a dramatic boost to the development of distance education internationally. In recent decades, educational institutions around the world responded to this trend by offering online courses as a part of their overall education curricula both on and off-campus. Many postgraduate students prefer online courses owing to their distinctive advantages, including lower tuition fees, adjustable speed of study and greater cultural diversity. It is also believed that learning at a distance can be at least as effective as traditional face-to-face mode. Nevertheless, a growing concern remains that distance learning is 'compromising the quality of education', partly because one of the key challenges is lack of appropriate interaction practices. This is especially true for international distance learners, who encounter, among other issues, culture-dependent social interaction differences in virtual learning environments, which may discourage them from succeeding in or even completing the online course. (Allen et al., 2004; Zaborova & Markova, 2016; Rovai & Barnum, 2003).

Social interaction, i.e. establishing social relationships between instructors and students and among the students, is considered to be one of the key factors in distance education. Many researchers have supported the concept that teacher/student and student/student interactions are important elements in the design of online courses. They report very high correlation between interaction in online courses and student satisfaction. Students tend to associate strongly effective social interaction with online learning enjoyment, effectiveness of learning online, and even the likelihood of taking another online course. What is more, effective social interaction is perceived as a prerequisite of quality assurance in distance education. Yet, there has been quite limited research into the cultural barriers to effective social interaction patterns. These issues must be resolved, as there is almost no doubt that in multicultural virtual educational environments, where instructors and students have varying cultural backgrounds, the importance of proper social interaction patterns is bound to increase even further. (Anderson, 2003; Cho & Berge, 2002; Fulford & Zhang, 1993; Kearsley, 1995; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Picciano, 2002).

In this paper, we argue that educators need to enhance awareness of the ways culture impacts social interaction and affects students' and instructors' perception of distance education in order to ensure high quality standards of social interaction in distance learning. This will enable them to overcome the key challenges posing international students, which involve understanding the instructor's role in a socio-constructivist approach, adapting online collaborative learning and acquiring academic skills.

Warning: this paper has a cultural bias, which is better "confessed" than hidden. The experience and much of the literature reflected in this paper is from the 'Anglosphere'. Thus the term 'international', applied to students, really means those from non-English-speaking countries. Moreover, the great bulk of experience in distance education reflects educational programmes in English.

2. Literature review

Culture is a rich and complex concept. Despite reflecting various disciplines, scholars have arrived at a common ground regarding the definition of culture. Culture is viewed as a subconscious concept; it represents a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms, which manifest themselves in the behaviour and other artefacts of a given group. Hofstede (1991:5) defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes a member of one group or category of people from another". The concept that culture is "programmed", in other words, "learned", implies that it is not an inherent part of human nature and is not the same as individual personality. However, culture is shared by the members of one group. Hall (1984) puts forward another concept, which helps refine the concept of culture. He views culture as communication and compares it to an invisible control mechanism operating in our thoughts. We become only aware of this control mechanism when it is severely challenged, for example by exposure to a different culture. Spencer-Oatey (2000) broadens the concept of culture still further and concludes that culture performs a role as an influencing factor for behaviour as well as an interpretation factor of behaviour. The interpretative role of culture

becomes even more significant when addressing cross-cultural interaction. This must be borne in mind by those who strive to teach or learn in cross-cultural classrooms. (Dahl, 2004; Joy & Kolb, 2009).

Each country seeks to explore and develop its own interaction model of learning and teaching to meet the requirements typical of its environment. Therefore, in the culturally diverse virtual learning environment, instructors face a great challenge in accommodating these culture-determined differences. Hofstede (1986) categorized these differences into four groups: the social positions of teachers and student; the relevance of the curriculum; the profiles of cognitive abilities, and what is expected of teacher/student and student/student interaction. He related the last mentioned to his 4-D model of cultural differences (Individualism versus Collectivism, large versus small Power Distance, strong versus weak Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity versus Femininity) and concluded that learning experience can be rather challenging, unless instructors and learners undertake efforts to bridge the cross-cultural teaching and learning gap. (Hofstede, 1986; Rovai & Barnum, 2003).

In recent years, research into understanding cultural clashes in a classroom was expanded even further. Scholars studied the impact that national culture exercises on learning styles. Yamazaki (2005) demonstrated these multiple interconnections between culture and learning styles in his meta-analysis. He synthesized the cultural typologies from the fields of Anthropology, Cross-Cultural management and Cross-Cultural Psychology and compared them with the learning styles in Kolb's (1984) learning theory. He concludes that the national culture is "the sixth level of interplay between a people and the world", along with psychological types, educational specialization, professional career, current job and adaptive competencies. The cultural factor is thus a crucial factor to be considered when it comes to analyzing learning styles in intercultural context. (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001; Vita, 2001; Yamazaki, 2005).

Later, Joy & Kolb (2009) examined the impact produced by culture on learning styles in comparison with the other learning style-specific variables. They found, that culture, along with education-related variables such as level of education and area of specialization, makes the greatest impact on learning styles. Researchers also described the dimensions of culture, based on the GLOBE study, which influenced learning styles. This work showed that culture does play a significant effect in deciding a person's preference for abstract conceptualization versus concrete experience. Given these findings, instructors have to ensure that online course design allows for different learning styles of culturally diverse student population. Moreover, it is essential to train international students to utilize different learning styles and roles. Otherwise, the multi-cultural online classroom will prove to be a challenging place to study. (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

In this paper, we give thought to the challenges posed by Robert Kennedy College instructors and professors. RKC was created ex-nihilo as an online college. That implied that many costs of buildings and of tenured instructors disappeared and the whole operating structure allowed far more modern tuition fees. This makes the institution attractive for international students, who receive their degree from British universities partnering with RKC (the Universities of Cumbria, Salford and York St.John). RKC has over a thousand students entering each year to study postgraduate Degrees in Business and Law. A degree course takes one or two years and is divided into "modules". A module takes from two to three months, and a student may take one module at a time, or two in parallel.

Students come from all over the world, as do the teaching staff. This exposure to a vast range of cultures is both stimulating and challenging. In the remainder of the article, we will analyse these challenges from the instructors' perspective.

3. Challenges of Online Classroom

3.1. Instructors' Role in Online Classroom

International students find it difficult to understand that an instructor's role in an online classroom is much more student-centred compared to traditional teacher-centred classrooms This is because teachers play different roles in different cultural contexts: from hierarchical, when a teacher is perceived as a guru who transmits knowledge directly to the learner, to egalitarian, where teacher and student are perceived as equals (Kebritchi, 2014; Salas et al., 2002).

 At RKC students are expected to construct their knowledge actively, while instructors adopt the role of a facilitator or delegator, and are less likely to play the role of an authority, an expert or a role model. This trend is also observable in traditional classrooms, but even more so in online learning environments. Unfortunately, some students fail to adopt

the role of an active learner and, as a result, have a feeling of alienation and frustration, and simply do not learn so well. This often happens because of differences in perception of such cultural dimension as the Power Distance. Students coming from small Power Distance cultures are used to student-centred learning environments, but not those from high Power Distance cultures. The former eagerly initiate discussions, express personal opinions and disagreements, ask questions and challenge the opinions of other people, even instructors. Those, who come from large Power Distance cultures, are more accustomed to teacher-centred environments and see the "teacher" as the source of all wisdom. They feel embarrassed to ask questions or express intellectual disagreement. These polarizing differences in the perception of the instructor's role significantly impede online interactions and overall learning outcomes. (Grasha,1994; Hofstede, 1986; Zhu et al., 2010).

3.2. Online Collaborative Learning

One more significant issue raised by culture is the very concept that everyone has the right and, indeed, the duty, to bring their knowledge, experience and opinion to the online classroom. Extensive evidence has been collected that collaborative learning leads to a deeper level of understanding, critical thinking, shared knowledge and long-term retention of the learned material. It also promotes the development of social and communication skills, adopting positive attitudes towards learning materials, and building social relationships. However, there has been limited research on the effects of cultural diversity in online collaboration. (Johnson et al., 2000; Kreijns et al., 2003).

At RKC international students are encouraged to learn not only for themselves, but also to contribute to the development of the other group members. Metaphorically, the instructor acts as "King Arthur", presiding over the "Knights of the Round Table", all of whom have the right and duty to participate in the on-line discussion. (That is via on-line "posts".) King Arthur makes a strong point of giving feedback to almost every post either using an "edit function" or responding with a post of his own. Regular social support and group feedback contribute to increased motivation and course persistence. Yet, in RKC's experience, some students, particularly from parts of Asia, quite often fail to comprehend that learning is a social process and experience great difficulty participating in collaborative activities in the forum. This may be because they feel uncomfortable about the change from the traditional social structure of the classroom. Instructors sometimes even have to convince grown men and women that collaborative and participative activities are an integral part of studying on a postgraduate programme (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Thorpe, 2002; Damary & Pryadilina, 2014)

All RKC courses incorporate a week-long residency with other students, where they learn in small groups and undergo "experiential" learning. With one partner institution, the University of Cumbria, learning, which can be termed 'experiential' is partly out-of-doors in a particularly beautiful part of the UK.

3.3. Academic Writing Skills

A key academic skill is writing, ranging from forum participation, through papers for grade assessment to theses and even publications. RKC's experience shows huge variations in this skill. At first glance, this should not be a cultural or linguistic problem as everyone should know how to write in their own language. Should students not be able to transfer that writing skill to the English-language environment of RKC? It is not so simple! The recent studies in similarities and differences in academic writing across cultures clearly show "the cultural resonance of rhetorical patterns". It has been found that culturally influenced linguistic patterns and rhetorical conventions are often transferred to writing and detract from quality work. These cultural differences manifest themselves in multiple ways: from paragraph organisation and argumentation to the use of linking words and the incorporation of citations. Hence, a student following a course at an educational institution using what for the student is a foreign language is challenged to undergo a socialisation processes into academic genres of writing to achieve literacy in their academic discourse community. (Connor, 2002)

RKC sets strict academic writing requirements. Course modules are based on interactive work of between 20 and 50 students in a group working together in a "forum". At the end of each module, and at an interim point in the term, students upload individually written papers on the basis of which they are given their grade. That grade is subject to control by RKC's partner universities in the UK (Cumbria, Salford and York St Johns). At the end of the programme students submit their dissertation – a piece of personal work. Overall, students are required to produce quite several

academic papers, the preparation of which proves to be problematic for many international students. The problems go beyond issue of mastering the English language.

The first issue is structuring papers. The old school instruction of one paragraph, one topic seems forgotten by many, or never taught. This is not really a matter of language skills but of writing ability and the assimilation of material read into genuine knowledge.

Another issue arises from the wide spread of the Internet, which makes the knowledge of the whole world easily accessible by students, yet challenges them with a massive temptation: copy/pasting text straight into the student's paper. A parallel may be drawn with language interpretation. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter, however highly skilled he or she may be, expresses the words of the speaker but does not retain them. In contrast, consecutive interpretation requires a more careful analysis and re-expression of the speaker's words, and the interpreter remembers well what has been said.

RKC students must become more like "consecutive interpreters", but go even further in adding their own ideas to those of academic writers. The instructor therefore encourages his/her students to absorb all they can from academic sources and then express the concepts in their own words. They must support their words with citations (and the authors of this paper recommend putting them at the end of each paragraph), and should avoid direct quotes unless they are short and pithy. Instructors also insist that, just as in live presentations, in written papers students must use their own words, as it shows their understanding of the material, and brings the paper to life.

4. An Addendum on e-learning for Russia.

The number of international students in Russia is still insignificant, yet online learning is of growing importance in view of the introduction of the Federal State Standards, a shift to tiered education and the associated reduction of classroom work in favour of students' independent work, for the organisation of which distance learning opens up new opportunities (Golysheva et al., 2011).

Distance learning can become an effective way to overcome the isolation of the Russian educational system. Russian distance education aims to go international, in partly adopting educational programs designed for and by international partners. Currently, already a modest but growing number of students are studying abroad and in Russian universities making strategic use of international networks.

Nevertheless, although information technology and e-learning will not be able (neither would it be desirable) to completely replace the traditional form of classroom education and live student/teacher interaction, the style of the latter must be adapted. Obviously, even the most modern ICT cannot replace live communication of the student with the teacher. Therefore, the most promising and effective route is blended learning - a combination of e-learning technologies and traditional classroom work adapted to and respectful of different cultures and their uniqueness.

Classroom work has to play a key role in serving as a platform for self-expression and for discussion of the material that online students have worked on. For knowledge to be properly assimilated, the students must take on the learning process themselves, calling upon their own experience, thinking through the material and expressing their understanding. This can only be done in their own words. Accordingly, in the classroom productivity is improved if, once the instructor has provided the material and the task in hand, he or she allows time for the students to share opinions and put forward their own ideas. However, encouraging online students to attend traditional classes can be a major issue in multi-cultural virtual environment. Administrators and instructors therefore must do their best to make online students understand the importance of face-to-face classroom interactions for the overall success of the online learning.

5. Conclusion

Multi-cultural learning environment has unique potential for bringing learners and teachers of different cultures together, thus bridging the gap in cross-cultural understanding. Despite almost unlimited learning opportunities, teaching/learning in multi-cultural environment can create serious challenges for both an instructor and a student. Obviously, educators, course designers and instructors should seek ways to meet these challenges. In our view, instructors are to play an increasingly essential role in the new environment. We concur with Hofstede (1986) in the

view that teachers must become more aware of their own culture. This will assist them in understanding multiple ways of learning that exist in the world and will make them less resistant to these varieties at intellectual and emotional levels. Therefore, launching a special professional development course designed for online instructors could be a beneficial idea. Another strategy can be to seek ways to facilitate the students' online learning experience. These can involve counseling, supporting and motivating students throughout their learning experience. Instructors should be stimulated to establish 'live' video contact with their students, as it contributes to creating more 'human' relationships and reinforces mutual understanding. Instructors must also equip themselves with a tool kit of teaching methods aimed to create a more collaborative learning environment even if the perception of teacher/learner roles in a group varies.

Despite all the advice that instructors need training in recognizing their own cultural biases and tolerance of the cultures of their students, the very fact that learning excellence is achievable primarily through interaction of students with the instructor and with each other means one thing: the reticence of students from cultures with high Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance has to be overcome for their own sakes. They have to make the greater effort in adjusting their culture to that of the online educational institute.

Although these conclusions are based on the experience of RKC, they can be of great value for all educational institutions that provide online learning in international tertiary market. Russian universities must learn from the experience gained by their foreign counterparts to make sure students benefit to the full from the exposure to the online learning in multi-cultural environment.

References

Anderson, T. (2003). Modes of interaction in distance education: Recent developments and research questions. *Handbook of distance education*, 129-144.

Bakanova E. E-learning in Russia: problems and prospects. URL: http://www.cnews.ru/reviews/free/national2007/articles/e_learning.shtml

Cho, S. K., & Berge, Z. L. (2002). Overcoming barriers to distance training and education. *USDLA Journal,* 16(1), 16-34.

Connor, U. (2002). New directions in contrastive rhetoric. TESOL quarterly, 493-510.

Dahl, S. (2004). Intercultural research: *The current state of knowledge.*

Damary P., Pryadilina N.K. In: Modern professional education technology: problems and perspectives. Materials of Scientific Conference with international participation. 2014.

Fulford, C.P. and Zhang, S. (1993). Perceptions of interaction: The critical predictor in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education* 7(3), 8-21.

Golysheva, M.D., Didenko A.V., Vlasov M.V., Asadullina L.I. E-*learning and distance education in Russia and abroad: problems and solutions.* URL: www.gramota.net/materials/2/2011/4/12.html

Grasha, A. F. (1994). A matter of style: The teacher as expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator. *College teaching*, 42(4), 142-149.

Hall, E. T. (1984). The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time. Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Press/Doubleday.Hofstede, G. (1986). *Cultural differences in teaching and learning. International Journal of intercultural relations,* 10(3), 301-320.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (1991). Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind (Vol. 2). London: McGraw-Hill.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Stanne, M. B. (2000). Cooperative learning methods: A meta-analysis.

Joy, S., & Kolb, D. A. (2009). Are there cultural differences in learning style? International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 33(1), 69-85.Kearsley, G. (1995).The nature and value of interaction in distance education. Distance Education Symposium 3: Instruction. University Park, PA: American Center for the Study of Distance Education.

Kebritchi, M. (2014). Preferred Teaching Methods in Online Courses: Learners' Views. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(3), 468.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kolb, D. A., Boyatzis, R. E., & Mainemelis, C. (2001). Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. Perspectives *on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles,* 1, 227-247.

Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of management learning & education*, 4(2), 193-212.

Kreijns, K., Kirschner, P. A., & Jochems, W. (2003). Identifying the pitfalls for social interaction in computer-supported collaborative learning environments: a review of the research. *Computers in human behavior*, 19(3), 335-353.

Muilenburg, L. Y., & Berge, Z. L. (2005). Student barriers to online learning: A factor analytic study. Distance education, 26(1), 29-48.

Picciano, A. G. (2002). Beyond student perceptions: Issues of interaction, presence, and performance in an online course. *Journal of Asynchronous learning networks,* 6(1), 21-40.

Rovai, A. P. & Barnum, K. T. (2003). On-line course effectiveness: An analysis of student interactions and perceptions of learning. *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education*, 18(1), 57-73.

Salas, E., Kosarzycki, M. P., Burke, C. S., Fiore, S. M., & Stone, D. L. (2002). Emerging themes in distance learning research and practice: some food for thought. International Journal of Management Reviews, 4(2), 135-153.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000*). Culturally Speaking : Managing Rapport through Talk across Cultures*. London, Continuum.

Thorpe, M. (2002). Rethinking learner support: The challenge of collaborative online learning. *Open learning*, 17(2), 105-119.

Vita, G. D. (2001). Learning styles, culture and inclusive instruction in the multicultural classroom: A business and management perspective. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 38(2), 165-174.

Yamazaki, Y. (2005). Learning styles and typologies of cultural differences: A theoretical and empirical comparison. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(5), 521-548.

Zaborova E.N. & Markova T.L. Students as social actors of virtual educational environment. Actual Issues of Sociology of Culture, Education, Youth and Management: Materials of the All-Russian Scientific Conference with international participation. Fev.24-25, 2016, Yekaterinburg, Russia, 392-397.

Zhu, C., Valcke, M., & Schellens, T. (2010). A cross-cultural study of teacher perspectives on teacher roles and adoption of online collaborative learning in higher education. European Journal of Teacher Education, 33(2), 147-165.