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

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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 paper, 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

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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

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