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Identifying and Understanding Cultural Differences in the Online Classroom

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine how online course instructors identify cultural differences among students in the classroom. In addition, the study explores how knowing students' cultural backgrounds and cultural norms can prepare instructors to facilitate among varied learning styles, values, and perceptions within a course. The findings lead to a better understanding of how instructors in online course settings can better identify and attend to the learning styles and needs of students in light of cultural differences.

Introduction and Purpose

Recent research has focused on understanding student engagement in the online classroom, exploring topics related to content acquisition, participation, and learning styles (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009; McCarty, Bennett, & Carter, 2013; Nemanich, Banks, & Vera, 2009; Şendağ & Ferhan Odabaşı, 2009). An important aspect of successful online learning is effective communication and collaboration in the classroom. Paloff and Pratt (2010, xi) note that collaboration is "the cornerstone of the educational experience" in an online environment, since much of what students do relies on working together. Yet, the online course setting shifts the dynamic of how students interact due to a lack of physical presence, with heavy reliance on the written communications via discussion boards and e-mails. The purpose of this study is to examine how online course instructors identify cultural differences among students in the classroom. In addition, the study explores the psychological underpinnings of culture and their influence on how students engage in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

The review of literature focuses on several important concepts related to identifying cultural differences in an online course setting. To better understand how culture is identified in the online classroom, it is important to begin by examining its significance, as described in the first section of the literature review. The second part of the review explores the psychological and cultural constructs of students and their relevance to an online classroom environment.

The significance of culture

The definition of the term *culture* can be very complex, often associated with the term *diversity*. For this study, the terms *culture* and *cultural differences* were not defined in the original survey data collection tool in an effort to allow definitions to emerge based on participants' own understandings and interpretations of what these terms mean to them. Interestingly enough, the terms *culture* and *cultural differences* were characterized similarly by almost all of the participants throughout their responses. Cultural differences encompassed variances in written expression, country of origin, and cultural norms, which affected levels of participation, motivation, and other factors in the course.

Perhaps one of the most common factors emerging in the exploration of cultural differences among students is a potential language barrier that impacts communication and interactions within a course (Benzie, 2010; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). In addition to language,

culture can also impact other areas such as learning styles (Kim & Bonk, 2002; Ku & Lohr, 2007), and motivators to learning (Wlodkowski, 2011). The more instructors can understand culture and how it affects the student experience, the more they can use this information to benefit the course through new teaching strategies. Research has shown that strategies such as removing cultural barriers (including biased content or language) (Liu, Liu, Lee, & Majuka, 2010), offering culturally responsive student support services (Lee, 2010), and adapting course design (Brown, 2010) are all possible ways to create a culturally inclusive course. Adapting course facilitation methods is also critical to allowing students to engage in meaningful discussion and communications as well (Brookfield, 2009; Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Cooper, 2012).

Psychological and cultural constructs

Just like people do not live and grow in isolation, learning does not happen in isolation; it is attached to and guided by one's cultural norms (Prpic & Kanjanapanyakom, 2004). As defined by Lehman, Chiu, and Schaller (2004), *cultural norms* are "common beliefs, expectations, and practices" of a society (p. 691). These norms help to guide individuals in behaviors related to areas such as parenting (Lehman et al., 2004) and interpersonal communication (Harton & Bullock, 2007). For example, parents will guide their children in the same cultural practices that they learned as children, therefore extending the life of a culture. In interpersonal communication, cultural norms will ultimately determine how a person will interact with those around them.

Researchers in the field of psychology have focused on the influence that others have on one's behavior and beliefs and the importance of culture in the development of the self. Classic studies in the field of psychology have explored specific ways in which people can be impacted by those around them, including the processes of conformity and obedience. Earlier works focused on behavior and culture indicate that individuals can be pressured to behave in certain ways in response to authority (Milgram, 1963) and via pressures to be accepted and liked (Asch, 1956). Later works pointed to the role of interpersonal communication in the development and continuation of cultural norms (Latané, 1996). *Communication* in this instance can include conversational or behavioral exchanges (Harton & Bullock, 2007). Ultimately, society is "a collection of subcultures, an organic changing entity feeding on and evolving by communication" (Latané, 1996, p. 24). Individuals are sharing accepted cultural practices simply by interacting with one another; these norms are passed on through conversations and behavioral examples.

Cultural norms regarding communication play a crucial role in the classroom environment. Each culture has its own rules regarding when to speak, how much to speak, and how loud to speak (Johnson, 1997); these rules will impact a student's functioning in the classroom setting. For instance, students from collectivist cultures may not agree with sharing their knowledge in front of a group, and therefore might refrain from questions asked to a whole class (Johnson, 1997). Instructors might misread this silence as a lack of interest or engagement, when in fact it could simply be the result of underlying cultural norms. Likewise, these students might notice and feel they are being misjudged by their peers and instructors (Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003). This misunderstanding could help to create an uncomfortable and ineffective learning environment.

Students from other cultures may also think it is best to leave longer spaces before responding to an instructor's question; they may view American peers who respond quickly or guess as being reckless (Johnson, 1997). As described by Bista (2012), Asian students are largely

guided by cultural norms that have taught them to show respect to teachers and to be silent in the classroom. Students from this cultural background view being silent in the classroom as a form of restraint and respect (Bista, 2012), but it could limit their participation and engagement in a traditional American classroom. However, Yi (2013) found that Asian students in an online classroom found it easier to participate in course discussions because they did not feel pressured to wait for someone else to finish speaking.

Students may struggle to find a balance between the cultural norms they have grown up with and the cultural norms of the college classroom. As described by Heyer (2012), individuals may “struggle with norms in conflict, trying to grab a foothold in the boggy realm of self and other delineations” (p. 630). This push and pull from multiple cultures and norms could cause difficulties in the college classroom as students attempt to find their own identity in the academic world.

Research Design

As part of a larger research project (Milheim, 2013), this qualitative study used an open-ended, written survey as the data collection tool. The target participants (n=41) were individuals who had taught at least one, complete online course at the time the survey was taken. The survey yielded 41 participants who responded to the survey over a period of two months between December 2012 and February 2013. The primary researcher conducted a content analysis to analyze themes across responses to glean insights related to how instructors of online courses identify and address cultural difference in the online classroom.

Findings

Findings revealed that participants in this study, overall, proactively seek information from students, providing "cues" in course assignments or discussions to elicit more information, related to culture. Once this information is gathered, instructors, for the most part, seek ways to use cultural differences to enhance the learning experience.

Cultural difference in online course settings

In the online classroom, there is a certain level of "masking" of students; that is, students can remain culturally ambiguous to some degree if they choose. Several participants noted that students, to some level, are reluctant to share issues regarding their culture, while others are more open. Other findings pointed to culture affecting how students interact, understand course assignments, and view their roles in the classroom. Some of these indicators are a bit subtler; for example, one participant noted that the type of research cited by a student often indicates whether or not they are from the United States (with those living outside the U.S. having a tendency to cite international research). Several participants equated how students viewed the role of the instructor as an indication of culture, with those residing in Asian countries being more "polite" and "formal" in the classroom. These indicators emerge through written indicators such as term use (i.e. addressing the professor by first name instead of "Dr."), tone (i.e. abrupt versus polite), and spelling (i.e. British versus American spelling of words).

Another interesting finding was that, overall, instructors in online course settings, with the exception of four participants, proactively seek information regarding culture in the online classroom. With the exception of the four, the remainder indicated that manifestations of cultural difference must be continually monitored in order to effectively foster discussion, acknowledge potential points of conflict, and assist students with language barriers. Of the four who did not find culture relevant, one indicated that the role of the instructor was to focus on the

students' achievement of learning outcomes and not to be bothered with their culture. Another described cultural difference as something they ignore altogether.

Identifying culture in the online classroom

There was no doubt that the majority of participants viewed students' cultural backgrounds as a benefit to the learning community in the course. The lack of face-to-face interaction, however, makes it difficult to identify cultural differences, leading instructors to do a bit of guesswork. One participant characterized this as "cultural clues" - often embedded in grammar or vocabulary, among other areas. Nineteen of the instructors who participated in this study look to a student's writing as an indicator of language barriers, which, in turn, may indicate a different cultural background. This is ascertained from the course introduction postings during the first week of class. In addition to language differences, the course introductions hold many other clues for instructors with respect to students and their cultural differences.

Many participants noted that the content of a student's introductory post, as well as subsequent written responses on the discussion boards, can lead to a better understanding of a student's country of origin, religious beliefs, and cultural background. Students, however, sometimes do not readily share this information; several participants noted that they actively seek it by asking probing questions, and volunteering their own life stories to elicit similar details from students. Along these lines, several participants indicated that they rely more heavily on what is shared, and that the differences emerge more organically. That is, they do not necessarily need to seek-out information because it innately materializes throughout the duration of a course. One thing is clear -- written discussions and responses are the primary indicators of culture among nearly all participants.

Implications for Practice

Participants in this study predominately stated that culture is an important factor in an online classroom. These results fit with past research that has supported the notion that culture does influence education. For instance, Yang, Olesova, and Richardson (2010) found that students from different cultural backgrounds interact and respond differently, even in an online course format. However, several participants did comment that culture is not a concern, which could negatively impact learning outcomes for students who do not feel they fit with the academic culture of the classroom. In fact, students who do not feel as though they fit-in may experience *alienation*. That is, students may feel that they are disconnected or do not feel that they can contribute within the class (Mann, 2005). This experience could result in "a dampening effect on sense of community within a virtual classroom environment and can possibly lead to low student achievement and student attrition" (Rovai & Wighting, 2005, p. 107). Therefore, it is important for educators to realize the impact of cultural differences within the classroom and take steps to support a multicultural classroom. To do so, instructors or instructional designers could work to include topics or reading materials that represent other cultures (Luyt, 2013).

Many participants indicated that they look for hints about students' cultural background, but do not necessarily probe for such information. Looking for hints can provide useful information about the cultural backgrounds of students. However, looking for hints within the written word may have limits. Students from other cultures may have different communication styles, and they may feel pressured to mimic the writing style of the dominant culture of the classroom (Luyt, 2013). "When given the choice between self-expression in voice, language, theme, and writing style or following mainstream practices, students may choose the easier pathway of mimicking standardized communication styles" (Luyt, 2013, p. 15). While some

students may provide clues during early posts within the classroom, this may not always be the case. Instructors may need to go beyond this investigative work to ascertain the cultural backgrounds of their students. Several participants did note that they ask further questions to learn more about their students, and in some cases this may be necessary. This could be especially important in more advanced classes, where students may have already learned to conform to the cultural language of the online classroom.

Conclusion

The overarching findings suggest that culture is a key factor and influence in the online classroom; it weaves its way through discussions and is a benefit to a course, overall. However, without knowing students' cultural backgrounds, instructors are at a disadvantage when they enter the virtual classroom. Moving forward, it is important for educational institutions, faculty, and course designers to begin to proactively engage and embed culture into the online classroom so faculty can be more equipped to acknowledge it.

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