Addressing Cultural Diversity Through Learner Support

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Abstract

Cultural diversity amongst learners in open and distance education arises from colonization and more recently from the internationalization and globalization of learning made possible by distance education. Culture, defined as ways of seeing the world and operating within it, plays a central role in learning, in terms of learners' own cultures and cultural approaches to learning – hierarchy, learning styles, orientation to individual or society, and language; the cultural expectations of academia and its disciplines, including distance education; and the cultural forms imposed on learning by various media. A variety of strategies are suggested whereby distance educators can support learners in ways that not only acknowledge cultural diversity but celebrate it and its potential for enhancing emancipatory learning.

Introduction

Distance education began as emancipatory global practice. Its aims were to break down barriers to education and expand learner populations beyond the geographical, social, economic and political boundaries of the elite core of societies around the world. To the extent that these aims have been fulfilled, the learner populations whom distance education has reached have been arguably more diverse than those targeted by elite education. This diversity encompasses many dimensions, including class, gender (cf. von Prümmer in this volume), age, colour, ethnicity, and culture. It is this last dimension, cultural diversity, that we will consider in this chapter. This discussion will deal with the implications of internationalization and globalization of distance education, in particular the digital revolution, for the cultural diversity of learner populations; definitions of culture, particularly in the context of learning and learner populations; various intersections of culture and learning, in terms of learners' cultures, academic cultures, and the cultural forms imposed on learning by various media; and finally, some examples of good practice in supporting learners that not only acknowledge but celebrate cultural diversity and its potential for enhancing emancipatory learning.

Cultural Diversity in Distance Education

Distance educators, especially in the so-called settler countries of Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, have been continually challenged by the need to take cultural diversity into account in developing and delivering courses and programs, even though these challenges have received only occasional attention in the literature. The populations of these settler countries are by definition culturally diverse, having been the product originally of colonization and subsequently of continuing waves of immigration. As a consequence, even mainstream programs offered by distance means involve sometimes a sizeable minority of learners whose first language is something other than the language in which the materials are written, and whose culture is not

likely reflected accurately or adequately in the learning materials. This is doubly or triply so for the first, internally colonized, peoples of these regions – Canada's First Nations, the native peoples of the United States, Australia's aboriginal peoples, the Maori of New Zealand. Distance education, and especially open education, programs have been important educational and empowerment vehicles at both secondary and post-secondary levels for these learners, many of whom live in Third World conditions in some of the most affluent countries on earth (cf. McMullen & Rohrbach, 2003; Amaru, Rae & Shadbolt, 1995; Henderson & Putt, 1993).

In the world's poverty zones potential learner populations for distance education programs are even more diverse. On the continents of Africa, Asia and South America, the agents of conquest and colonization grouped and divided peoples according to political and administrative expediency, often as the spoils of war. If ethnic and tribal groupings were considered at all, the operative rationale tended to be divide-and-rule. The consequence is a set of nation-states in which the languages spoken number in the dozens or even hundreds and where racial, ethnic and religious affinities and divisions provide the raw material on which are enacted multiple and sometimes bloody struggles of identity and resistance. This diversity receives little attention, however, in the distance education literature. The narratives or analyses that do emerge from distance education practice in these contested states (and these are vastly underrepresented in the literature given the enormous numbers of learners that are involved) tell of the challenges of lack of resources, infrastructure, and trained personnel, but seldom of the nearly impossible task of meeting the needs of such diverse populations.[1]

This neglect of issues of cultural diversity in the distance education literature appears to be coming to an end, however, with the advent of on-line learning. As Gayol and Schied (1997, p. 1) point out, "On a global scale, computer mediated communication (CMC) is becoming one of the most important pedagogical sites for upper and middle class people". Thanks to the compression of time and space made possible by the digital revolution, courses on-line are immediately available to learners anywhere in the world who have the resources required to access them. Distance education providers, both public and private, have been quick to seize the opportunity that on-line delivery provides for truly global reach to market their courses worldwide. Many of these offerings are at postgraduate level, in the field of distance education itself (witness the Masters of Distance Education programs that are available online from Maryland and Oldenburg, the UKOU, Athabasca University, and the University of London/IEC) and in business subjects, particularly the MBA. These programs are expensive, and learners – increasingly termed "customer" or "consumers" in the language of the education marketplace – are choosing amongst the programs on offer with quality and value-for-money as prime considerations. Amongst the criteria these consumers are applying in their decisions are (1) relevance of content to their local situations and (2) recognition in the service or support components of their geographical, political and cultural realities. Providers are in turn discovering that in order to provide satisfactory learning experiences to this international audience they must pay increased attention to matters of culture. A

[1] The writings of Indian distance educators are a significant exception, and in their words we do hear of the challenges of honouring the multiplicity of voices, languages, castes and ethnic identities that characterize their learner populations (for examples see the *Indian Journal of Distance Education* and the proceedings of conferences held by the Asian Association of Open Universities – www.ouhk.edu.hk/~AAOUNet).

variety of articles and books are now appearing that deal with the culture of learners and the cultural and ethical implications of the Internet as a vehicle for teaching and learning (e.g., Gayol & Schied, 1997; Lea & Nicoll, 2002; Tait & Mills, 2003).

Defining "Culture"

Before launching into a discussion of these cultural issues, it is important to clarify how the terms "culture" and "cultural" are – and are not – being used here. We are not using "culture" to refer to singing and dancing, or, as Quirk (1989, cited in Gayol & Schied, 1997) puts it, a set of traditions, costumes, and ceremonies shared by groups and generally attached to ethnicities, territories, or institutions. Culture, especially as it operates in learning contexts, is far more profound and dynamic than these surface features alone. It involves beliefs and values, ways of seeing the world, and ways of knowing, thinking, doing and relating to the cosmos and to society. These beliefs, values and practices are learned from infancy onward, and are shared with other members of a particular culture or subculture, even though they might take idiosyncratic forms in any given individual. Culture is very much bound up in the process of defining one's identity, or better, identities, especially if one looks at identity in the way that Eduardo Galeano does (personal communication): "Identity is no museum piece sitting stock still in a display case, but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life". Notions of culture, especially if they are to be useful in discussions of learning, are therefore shifting and changing in their visible manifestations as individuals and groups respond to their circumstances. Inevitably notions of culture are abstracted and generalized from observations and accounts of behaviour; nonetheless, the more concretized one can make these notions in both space and time, in terms of specific groups in specific situations at particular times, the lower the risk of fixing or enclosing people and societies within artificial cultural boundaries.

Culture and Learning: Some Intersections

That said, we will proceed to explore some aspects of culture and learning, in particular the intersections of various cultures – those of the learners, the academy, and the media – in a admittedly abstract manner but with caution and drawing on concrete examples.

Learners' Cultures

Approaches to learning can differ profoundly from one culture to another. These differences can be summarized in terms of hierarchy, style, orientation, and language.

Hierarchy: Learners in much of the world are accustomed to a hierarchical approach to learning whereby the teacher and the text are superior and the learner inferior or subordinate. Learners are taught to pay respect and attention to the teacher and to the texts they are given, which they are expected to regard as authoritative and not to be questioned, at least overtly. Learners are also expected to take responsibility for their learning, which is accomplished through working hard, attending regularly and paying attention (e.g., Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Robinson, 1999). In the literature on culture and learning there tends to be a binary distinction made between a hierarchical approach such as this and the "Western", presumably egalitarian approach to learning. It is probably more useful, however, to regard differences among approaches as matters of degree rather than as absolutes. For example, writings on e-learning tend to emphasize a constructivist

approach to teaching and learning, in which learners, as people who are already "knowers", construct their own learning alongside their teachers. This approach takes advantage of the capabilities of the Web and of computer-mediated communication for collaborative learning, but is far from being universally accepted or applied in educational settings by either teachers or learners (cf. many of the chapters in Lea & Nicoll, 2002).

Style: The same point can be made about learning styles. There is no question that learners differ in the styles of learning they prefer. For example, learners may take a "deep" or a "surface" approach to learning, as first described by Martin and Saljo in the 1970s (Martin & Saljo, 1976a, b). Entwistle (1994) further refined this schema to include a "strategic" approach: learners using a "deep" approach to learning are intent on understanding the material for themselves and transforming the information they receive into knowledge; learners using a "surface" approach intend to cope with the content and the tasks set and to reproduce what they receive; those using a "strategic" approach intend to excel on their assessed work and devoted themselves to organizing their time, effort, and conditions of study in order to excel (cited in Thorpe, 2002). There is also research evidence for some cultural constellations of learning styles. For example, Kawachi (2000) used Entwistle's "Approaches to Studying Inventory" (ASI) to research the approaches to learning of some 500 baccalaureate-level students in Japan, and found that these students tended to cluster in the "surface" learning range. Kawachi went further than simply applying the inventory, however, suggesting that a "surface" approach is not the inferior approach to learning suggested by Western interpretations of ASI data, and that restructuring ASI scales for Japan indicates that a surface approach and memorization are associated with good quality learning in Japan. There is also evidence that students tend not to use one learning style exclusively, but rather to use different styles for different tasks, depending on the nature of the task and their level of interest in it (e.g. Crook, 2002). As Crook puts it, this approach to learning as cultural practice moves us away from essentialist notions of "learning style" as something akin to "personality trait" and toward a notion of learning as something we decide to do rather than as something we are (Crook, 2002, p. 152).

Orientation: Students also differ in their fundamental aims or orientation to study, with individualism and education for self-development at one end of the continuum and the group and the advancement of the community at the other. Chinese education, for example, is described as serving the goals of socialist development, wherein teachers cultivate favourable attitudes in students toward learning and society. Learning in a group, face-to-face, is the norm (Robinson, 1999). Another example of group orientation comes from South Africa, where learners in the teacher education programmes described by Bertram (2003) and Corry and Lelliott (2003) appear to rely heavily on student study groups and face-to-face tutorials. A third example comes from distance education programs involving Canadian First Nations learners, who express a strong preference for group-based learning and at least some face-to-face contact with teachers and other learners (Spronk, 1995; McMullen & Rohrbach, 2003). By contrast, education systems informed by the philosophical tradition of the European Enlightenment tend more towards an individualist orientation that places a high value on individual achievement. This orientation is powerfully reflected in distance education, especially in its first- and second-generation versions, the implications of which for learners from other philosophical traditions are explored in more detail below.

Language: Finally, language plays a major role as a cultural characteristic of learners. Robinson (1999), for example, describes Chinese learners as having developed their own distinctive patterns of abilities and thinking (high on spatial, numerical and non-verbal skills and lower on verbal dimensions and analogical thinking), patterns that are attributed to their early learning experiences in mastering a logographic script. Kawachi (2000) also suggests that the surface approach to learning evident from his study of Japanese university students is likely influenced by a cultural difference in thinking, again influenced by neural networks created during early acquisition and reinforcement of Japanese language skills. Kawachi argues that language development in Japanese children generates dependence on visual-spatial intelligence, favouring memorization, whereas English language development preferentially develops logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligence, favouring active questioning. Mayor and Swann (2002) provide a detailed account of the ways in which English encodes values that may be unfamiliar or even unacceptable to students from other linguistic and cultural contexts; teaching through English is associated with a set of communicative and pedagogical practices that may not be universally shared. These points are developed in greater detail in the following section.

Academic Cultures

Many features of the academic culture familiar to most learners whose first language is English may strike learners from other linguistic and cultural traditions as alien. These features include:

- Linear logic, thinking in straight lines, rather than the more lateral or spiral logics of other traditions;
- An analytical approach that emphasizes dividing reality into its component parts, rather than more synthetic approaches that emphasis the whole over the parts;
- An expository, declarative and deductive rhetorical style that works from the "big picture" or thesis statement down through the supporting details or arguments, rather than an inductive style that requires learners to be more tentative, stating rationales and arguments before attempting a more generalized statement;
- Encouraging debate, discussion and original thinking, compared with academic traditions such as that which Robinson (1999) describes for Chinese learners, for whom three key rules are "memorize the lesson, practice the skill, and respect superiors".
- Privileging the written over the spoken word. Despite the continuing dominance of the lecture as teaching mode, learners in the West are assessed primarily on their ability to express themselves in written form. In contrast, most of the world's languages have only recently been written down, in the context of conquest and colonization, hence the cultures associated with these languages are based on the spoken word and oral traditions and histories that continue to inform daily existence. The impact of the written word on oral cultures has been powerfully described by Ong (2002), and in specifically academic contexts by Scollon and Scollon (1981).

To further complicate this disjunction of so-called Western academic culture with other traditions of learning, there are also disciplinary subcultures. The essays required of a student in a course in English literature, for example, tend to take a form quite different

from those required in psychology courses, and different again from the reports required from a physics lab. Distance education modes of presentation in many ways take on the characteristics of a subdiscipline of broader academic culture; many of its characteristics represent a departure from the norm of academic culture, and an even greater departure from the norms of other learning traditions, in a number of ways:

- Learner autonomy as a desired goal – first- and second-generation distance education modes (Nipper, 1989) were founded on the concept of the autonomous learner working through prepared course materials with the support of a tutor.
- An emphasis of "learner-centredness" in development and presentation of learning materials and an effort to meet individual needs, especially through various forms of learner support.
- The teaching function of the learning materials and the consequent facilitating and mediating role of the tutor - tutors in first- and second-generation distance education are expected to support the learner in learning from the provided materials, a role that most academics find unfamiliar and even uncomfortable in their first encounters with distance students.
- Multiple sources for course content - following on the example set by the UKOU, most distance teaching providers do their best to provide a variety of perspectives and voices in their learning materials, in an effort to provoke the learner to challenge the authority of the materials rather than to take their authority for granted.
- Dialogue as a central feature of both the learning materials and the learner support system - materials encourage activity on the part of the learner in response to what she or he is reading, watching or listening to; two-way communication with tutors and if possible other learners is a fundamental requirement of learner support provision (cf. Holmberg and Hülsmann in this volume).
- Processes of learning as a central concern of designers and developers of distance education provision - because of this focus on promoting dialogue and activity/ interactivity in distance teaching and learning, designers tend to pay a great deal of attention to the processes of learning at a distance, certainly more than is typical of the "stand-and-deliver" mode of face-to-face, classroom instruction.
- A focus on learning outcomes - this is a major feature of the emphasis on the processes of learning is, typically in the form of aims and objectives, toward and around which instruction is designed and on the basis of which learner performance is assessed.
- The use of media for teaching and learning - most distance education continues to rely on text, but text that is presented in a variety of ways, including electronic. Other media, such as sound and moving images, can be used as the primary means of providing learning material, but typically these other media are used in support of text rather than in place of it.

Media Cultures

This brings us to the third set of cultures that intersect in the provision of distance education, those of the media. Each medium relies on a different set of symbols – the written word and static visual portrayals in the case of the print medium, moving images in video formats, and sound in audio. Each imposes on the users, both learners and teachers, a different set of rules, protocols and logics, not all of which are equally

appropriate for all tasks; the presentation of a detailed argument, for example, is more effective in a print format than in video. Each medium also makes different requirements of the user; for example, in distance learning contexts, video or audio presentations are most effective when accompanied by text materials that provide a framework within which to watch or listen, especially since most learners are accustomed to using video and audio as entertainment rather than for formal learning.

Media for learning have received a good deal of attention in the education literature, focusing on television in the 1970s and especially in the distance education literature on audio- and video-conferencing in the 1980s and early 1990s. The current preoccupation is computer-mediated communication and its challenges to teachers and learners. Gayol and Schied (1997, p. 1) describe its complexities: "CMC encompasses all the existing forms of narration: conversation, speech, written and visual… (and) is more powerful than other media not only because it allows for a fusion of technologies and texts, but because it allows people to have instantaneous, decentralized and always available interventions." The authors explore the cultural consequences of the global use of CMC, including its continuing reliance on English and its cultural impositions, the possibilities for shaping and even creating identities in an electronic universe, and the potential for collaborative learning and communities of practice. Research on these issues is still at an early stage, and there is still much to know, especially about learners and teachers who use languages other than English (e.g. Aylward, 2002) or whose cultures are predominantly oral rather than written (e.g. Corry & Lelliott, 2003, Voyageur, 2001).

Good Practice

In the meantime, what can distance educators do to address cultural diversity, especially in terms of learner support? There are a number of strategies that foster an approach to learning which not only acknowledges but celebrates diversity, while still respecting the strictures of any particular medium or academic culture or subculture. These are not new; rather, they build on existing good practice amongst distance educators worldwide.

- *Contextualizing the learning*: Make the various cultural contexts – of the learner, the academy and the medium – as explicit as possible. First, tutors and others can structure activities that require learners to analyze their own assumptions about learning and the extent to which these assumptions are being challenged in a given course context. Second, the skills and requirements of the academy and the discipline need to be made explicit, and if necessary, taught; for example, learners accustomed to examinations as the sole assessment mechanism may have to be taught how to write academic essays or self-reflection pieces; learners who in other learning environments have been taught to copy will need to be untrained and assisted in following new rules about plagiarizing. Third, learners will need to be trained in how to use the particular medium of learning, its rules, protocols, requirements and possibilities.
- *Creating safe spaces for learning:* Assist learners to develop and abide by ground rules for communication based on mutual respect, constructive criticism, and informed and principled tolerance. When learners feel that their thoughts and opinions will be welcomed, subject to criticism but in a respectful manner that aims to build rather than in a hostile manner that aims to destroy, they will be more likely

to participate in whatever dialogue or discussion that is open to them, or even to initiate new ones.

- *Welcoming alternatives:* Give tutors and other support personnel the freedom and support to consider and even welcome alternative approaches to academic tasks, such as accepting a video or audio presentation in place of a written essay, or an essay that is structured in an unconventional yet effective manner. In this way learners will gain confidence in their own skills and knowledge, and course presentation personnel will gain experience in other possibilities for assessing learner knowledge and performance.
- *Using media effectively:* Train both learners and support personnel in how to work with any given medium. Even in the case of print, which most of us tend to take for granted, instruction and support may be needed in skills of comprehension and interpretation, especially if learners are operating in a second or third language.
- *Celebrating diversity:* Encourage learners to share information about themselves and to respond to others' sharing. Devise assignments and assign tasks that build on learner identities, and incorporate the results as much as possible into the course material so that everyone can learn from and appreciate the richness that arises from a culturally diverse group of learners.

Conclusion

In sum, in dealing with cultural diversity through learner support, the watchword is to take as little as possible for granted and to open up as many possibilities and alternative paths as the particular discipline and mode of presentation allow. Challenge and resist narrowness, and welcome and celebrate diversity. Both learners and supporters will be the beneficiaries.

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