Cultures meeting cultures in online distance education

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Abstract

One effect of the evolution of e-learning is the inclusion of a growing number of learners who participate in courses designed and delivered by American and European universities while remaining within different social cultures. However, American and European distance education is guided by certain theories, derived from American and European culture.

This paper sets out to raise some questions and invites a discussion about how teaching and the view of learning based on these theories might cause conflict with the values that underpin the cultures of students taking courses from other countries. The potential of e-learning to become a global phenomenon will be frustrated as long as educators in more technologically developed countries fail to understand the needs and perspectives of the vast potential populations of students in other countries. Further, the potential will be missed for students in technologically developed countries to benefit from learning the perspectives of people in other countries. The promise of a global e-learning system is dependent on better understanding of the differences in views of learning in the different cultural contexts.

The point of introducing this discussion is not to report easy solutions, since there are none. In fact our early investigations indicate an almost complete absence of data or discussion of the problem. The point therefore is to contribute to recognizing a previously un-noticed problem and to suggest an opportunity for e-learning organizations to take an early lead in helping us to understand what this mix of e-teaching and learning and culture is all about. After exploring the problem, we will report the results of two exploratory research studies that sought the views of learners on this issue.

1. What do we mean by distance education and culture?

Some definitions are in order. For the purposes of this discussion *distance education* is «planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative arrangements» (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 2).

Culture is a term grounded in anthropology and the subject of endless debate. One reasonable definition is: «the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people…communicated from one generation to the next» (Matsumoto as cited in Gunawardena, Wilson & Nola, 2003, p. 754). Culture can also be understood as a system of socially and historically created traditions that includes educational and pedagogical traditions. The key point here is that behind these educational traditions there are philosophical ideas. These can vary significantly from one culture to another, and it is in this variation that lies the root of problems in cross-cultural understanding – and misunderstanding.

2. Key Ideas Influencing American Distance Education

Key philosophical ideas in American distance education can be connected to the work of James, Dewey, Rogers and Maslow, and Knowles.

– William James' (1916) notion of pragmatism emphasized «real life», «practical», «practice-based», and «problem-solving» approaches to teaching and learning.

– John Dewey's (1938) foundational ideas included experiential learning, learner-learner collaboration, reflective thinking and the concept of education as a transaction.

– Carl Rogers' (1961), as well as Abraham Maslow's (1968) humanistic psychology influenced ideas on learner responsibility. Rogers' famous book, *Freedom to Learn*, (1969) emphasized personal responsibility and freedom to choose and leaves us with the notion of learner self-direction as a key concept in American education.

– Malcolm Knowles' in his book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1980), built on the work of Rogers, provided the model of the teacher as a non-directive «facilitator» of learning for adults.

These teaching-learning ideas were influential on Charles Wedemeyer and Michael G. Moore in setting foundations for an evolving culture of American distance education. Wedemeyer, who was at the University of Wisconsin from the 1950s through the 1970s, emphasized the potential of technology as a means of opening access for adult learners. His book, aptly titled, *Learning at the Back Door: Reflections on Non-Traditional Learning in the Lifespan* (1981), defined education through correspondence as «independent study». Beginning with his

Articulated Instructional Media (AIM) project he identified the importance of looking at correspondence and technology-based teaching and learning from a systems perspective, an idea he developed as an adviser at the founding of the British Open University.

In the early 1970s, Moore, a student of Wedemeyer, expanded on the notion of independent study as well as ideas about a systems approach. Building on Dewey's ideas on transaction, as well as ideas from Rogers and Knowles, Moore (1973, 1983) developed the theory of transactional distance. The term transactional distance was identified to focus discussion on the interplay and effects of physical and temporal distance on the relationship between learner and teacher. Moore suggested that such distance could result in a psychological discomfort or psychological satisfaction for the learner, depending on her or his level of autonomy. He defined distance in education as sets of variables in course design, instruction and learning, called structure and dialogue and related this to learner characteristics of autonomy. Thus, the philosophy underlying American distance education theory incorporates not only application of technologies but also includes an emphasis on these transactional variables of structure, dialogue and autonomy.

3. Application of Ideas to American Distance Education

Certain key aspects of American distance education practice evolved from the above philosophical and theoretical foundations. These include a focus on the individual, the importance of interaction and interactivity, and more broadly, an understanding of the importance of a systems approach.

Since the earliest days of correspondence education, the *individual learner* has been the central focus of American distance education (Saba, 2003). Even in recent years, with the application of teleconference technologies, group methods are only instrumental to a primary focus on individualized instruction. Nevertheless, despite this focus on the individual, the importance of interaction has also evolved as an important consideration in distance education. Moore (1989) related interaction to the concept of dialogue and identified three types of interactions: student/teacher; student/student; student/content. This has become a standard theoretical concept in much subsequent research, but the internal dynamics of each of these types of interaction have been little researched. Related to this, there has been a growing recent interest in social relationships, especially as manifested within online distance education. As more people come to teaching online from conventional classrooms, emphasis has developed on how to emulate social relationships like those of the classroom. With roots in humanistic psychology, «social presence» (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) is the psychological sense that the learner has of being a part of the virtual group as result of interactions with other distance learners and instructor.

The interactive features of an online learning environment allows for Dewey-like reflection and group construction of knowledge. These are expressed in contemporary terms as constructivist learning. Constructivism is based on Rogers, as well as cognitive psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner and emphasizes the proposition that «learners could learn actively and construct new knowledge based on their prior knowledge [and] construct knowledge through social interaction with others» (Huang, 2002, p. 28).

Many American distance educators see the increased *interactivity* provided by e-learning impacting distance education with the potential for increasing their ability to tailor instruction to individual learners' needs, based on the students' input, as well as enabling more meaningful collaborative learning, especially with the creation of online learning communities.

As a significant aspect of structure, a *systems approach* is a core theoretical idea that originated with Wedemeyer and has been advocated by Moore. Moore & Kearsley (1996) described a distance education system as «consisting of all of the component processes that make up distance education, including learning, teaching, communication, design, management, and even such less obvious components as history and institutional philosophy» (p. 5). The following is a contemporary (Saba, 2003) representation of the macro-structure of distance education as explained by expanded view of systems theory.
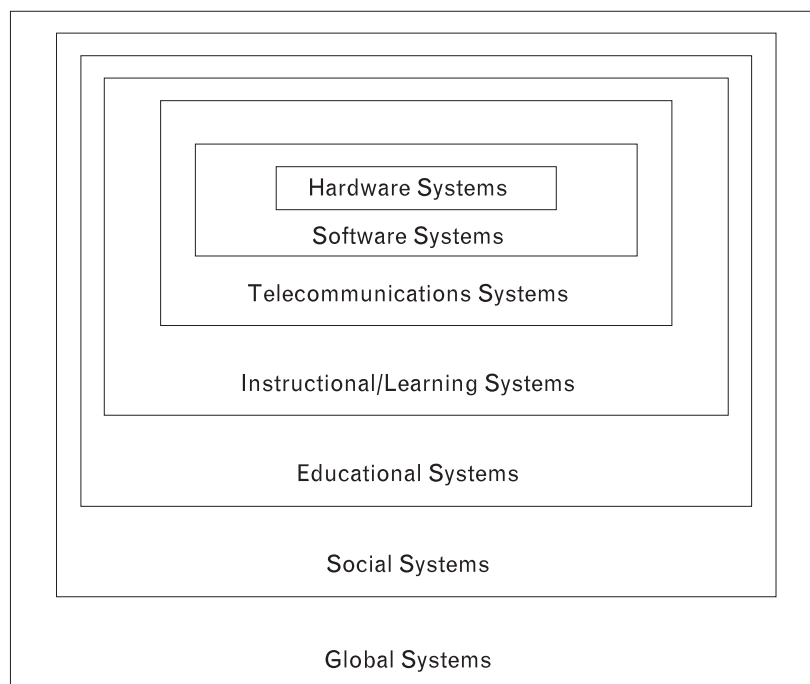

Figure 1 Saba's (2003) hierarchy of interacting subsystems that affect distance education (p. 8).

The model reveals highly significant systems existing beyond the tele-communication systems (which is as far as many e-learning proponents can see). Further, it provides recognition of the limits of a psychologically based focus solely on the teacher-learner interaction and learning systems. The model helps to emphasize the social and global cultural contexts in which learners are situated, but which have received so little attention in the American distance education literature until now.

As noted previously, a psychological approach to understanding learners is a key American tradition. In American distance education, when learners' characteristics are discussed, they are invariably in psychological terms, such as cognitive and attitudinal characteristics. Learner background characteristics are discussed in the psychologically-based literature from a success and retention perspective; for example those traits that are related to success within distance education courses. Australian distance educators, McLoughlin (1999, 2001) and Collis (1999), labeled this emphasis on psychological barriers always in light of what inhibits people's success a «deficit model».

However, there is a dusting of broader understanding of learner contexts. The International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) conferences, in particular one held at Penn State University in 1994, provides an example of attempts to broaden the focus to international learner contexts (Thompson, 1995).

4. Voices of Concern

Concerns about the neglect of other cultures by American providers of e-learning programs, have been noted earlier, some even in pre-Internet days, by a few distance educators: Moore (1994) questioned American teachers' preparation to teach audio and video based distance education across international borders; Bates (1994), in Canada, expressed concern that «cultural diversities and cultural imperialism [of the United States, in particular] are critical issues» (p. 21), and Saba (1994) alerted us that we are working within an «emerging multipolar world…unlike in the past, the flow of information will not be unidirectional from the developed countries to the underdeveloped ones» (p. 111). In the UK Anita Pincas (2001) proposed opening the discussion of the «hidden international problems that globalisation of education creates» because of «pedagogical and linguistic cultures» (p. 30). Dorsher (1999), in *Hegemony online: The quiet convergence of power, culture, and computers* concluded that online communication has the capacity to reflect and reinforce hegemony, more efficiently than any medium before it.

Other distance educators were working out of concern for the dynamics of cross-cultural educational situations. By the mid 1990's, Henderson (1996), in Australia, was calling attention to the possible impact of culture in online learning

environments and the «need to respond to increasingly diverse learner populations» (as cited in Collis, 1999 p. 202). Wilson (2001), writing from his West African practice, called for «cultural distance» (p. 52) to be considered, along with the concepts of time and place as important elements in distance education. Cultural distance involves the ramifications of materials produced in one culture for use in another culture; thus, complicating the already existing recognition of time and place separation of learner and teacher.

Gunawardena and associates (Gunawardena, Nolla, Wilson, Lopez-Islas, Ramirez-Angel, Megchun-Alpizar, 2001; Gunawardena, Wilson, Nolla, 2003) have been the primary voices in American distance education in moving learners' cultures into empirical study. Gunawardena and associates (2003) proposed a conceptual framework for designing a cross-cultural online course.

Critiques of American approaches to distance education come largely from practitioners in Canada, Australia, and the UK. Mason (2003) explained that, «While America is leading the practice of global education, a good deal of the research about the phenomenon [of global education] comes from those countries most likely to be affected by American domination of a global market in education» (p. 745). Evans & Nation (2003) commented, «the rhetoric of globalization abounds in educational contexts today» (p. 783) and for some «is substantially Americanization in that the dominant influence via the Internet is from the United States» (p. 781).

Various terms have been used to describe the dominance of the United States on the World Wide Web. Boshier, Wilson & Qayyum (1999) used the term «electronic colonialism» (p. 276) and are «disturbed by US hegemony» (Boshier & Onn, 2000, p. 14). Blanchette (1997) referred to «information imperialism» when describing the US dominance of the World Wide Web. The majority of Internet presentations are described as English language dominant, as the American packaging of culture, as insisting on techno-rational ways of knowing, and as aggravating inequality by a dominant focus on Euro-American individuality. Wilson, Qayyum & Bosher (1998) concluded their article, *World wide America? Think globally, click locally*:

> In an era of globalisation, cyberspace is vast and seems unconnected to any geographic place. It is everywhere but nowhere all at the same time… although cyberspace straddles oceans and continents, it is like a boomerang that keeps going back to the U.S. (p. 120)

However, Mason (1998) wrote, «I find no evidence for the emergence of one or even several global players preparing to take over higher education on a global scale». But, on the other hand, she posited that the most successful e-learning organizations will be those who address «cultural differences». Thus recognizing the importance of the cultural issue.

5. Theories of culture

To help us further open up for understanding the cultural problem, we turn to three different theories of culture. First, Holliday's (1994) concept of layers of culture in education gets us started in understanding. Holliday's main point is that «cultures are not mutually exclusive, but have cultures overlapping, containing and being contained by other cultures» (p. 28). Fay and Hill (2003), who applied the Holliday model when studying a UK-Greece program, connected the model to an e-learning environment (see figure 2). They pointed out, «In educational terms, the small culture of a distance education program is located within a host culture complex constituted of a range of overlapping cultural influences and centers of gravity» (p. 16).

The Holliday model provides a conceptual overview of the complex nature of the American educational system, within which international learners living in their home cultures have to operate. What is described as «international» is an understatement of the many cultural boxes that any internati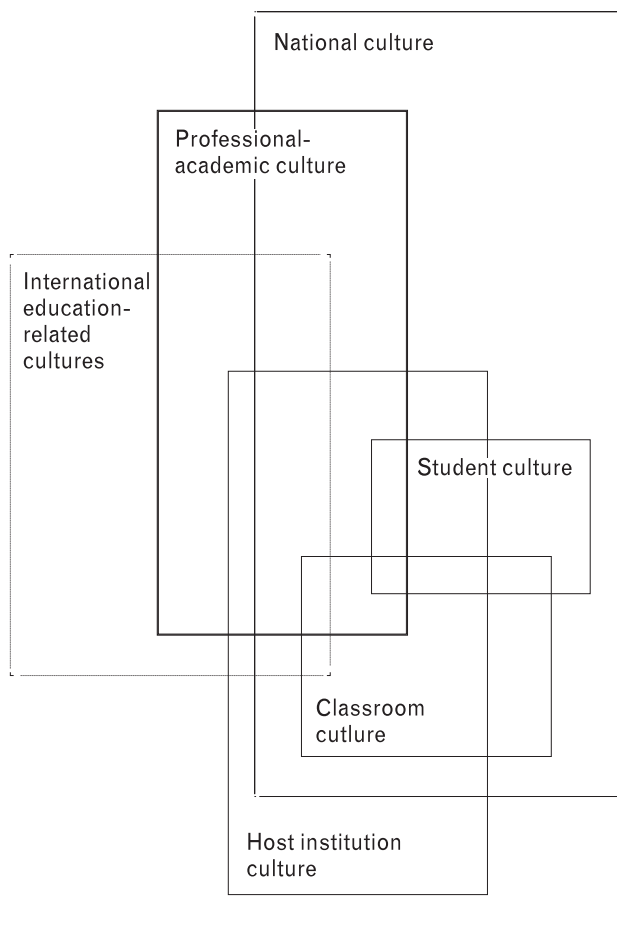onal student will be located in. But the model gets us started in recognizing the interaction of the ethnic pedagogical traditions of international learners and the professional-academic culture of the host university, which holds different pedagogical traditions, influencing the design and instructional perspectives of the course.

Further understanding of the complexity of the problem comes if we superimpose Saba's model of hierarchical interacting distance education subsystems on to the Holliday model (see figure 3). Together we have a model that represents the intersection of two complex, interacting systems, including social and global aspects of distance education interacting with technological, pedagogical and organizational systems.
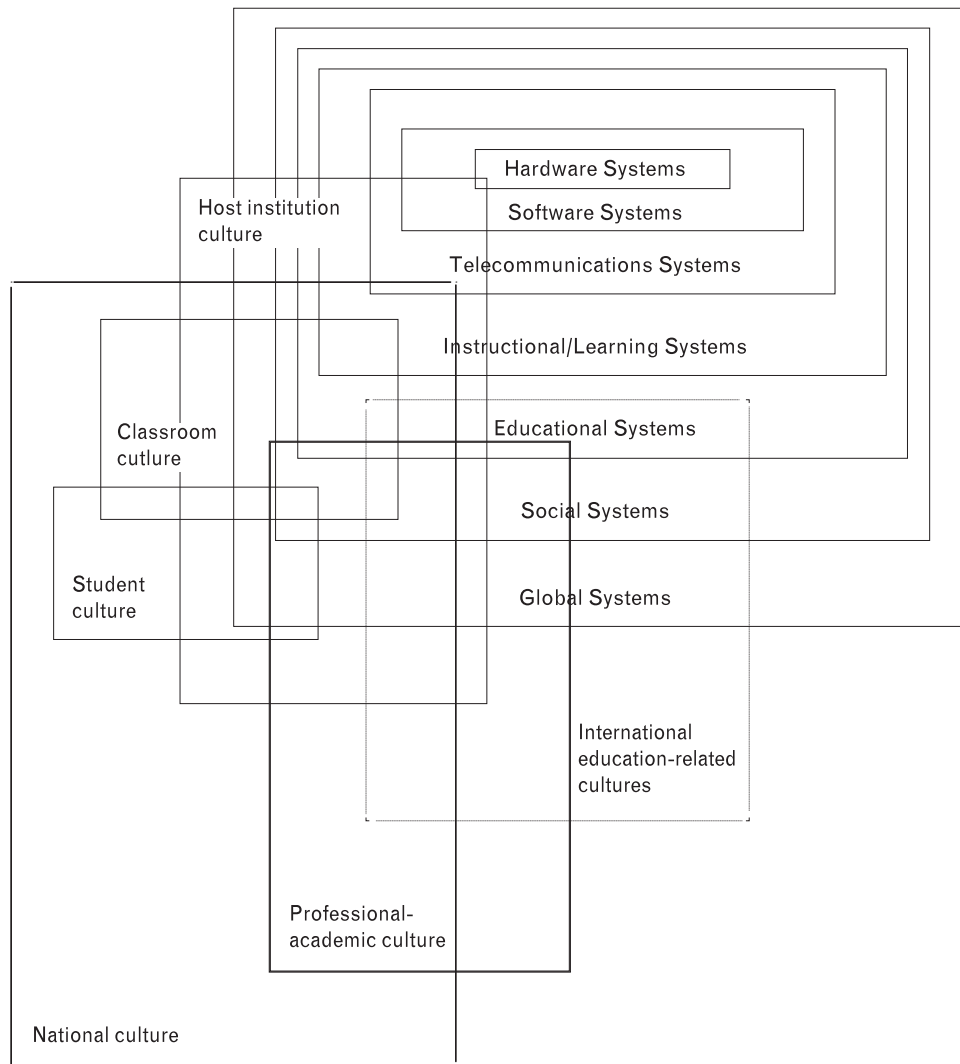

Figure 2   The host culture complex (Holliday, 1994, as adapted by Fay & Hill, 2003, p. 17).

Host institution culture

Hardware Systems

Software Systems

Telecommunications Systems

Instructional/Learning Systems

Classroom cutlure

Educational Systems

Social Systems

Student culture

Global Systems

International education-related cultures

Professional-academic culture

National culture

Figure 3 The complex, interacting systems-each with its own culture-that international online learners have to negotiate.

Now, let us look at the literature about cross-cultural communication for further theoretical help in understanding the challenges that arise as international students try to bridge these walls, when cultures meet cultures online.

6. Hofstede's Seminal Work

Much of the cross-cultural communication literature is built on the seminal work of Hofstede (Gudykunst & Lee, 2002). In the 1970s Hofstede gathered data from a large-scale study of IBM personnel in 50 countries (Hofstede, Vermunt, Smits & Noorderhaven, 1997). Hofstede's work provides a basis of a framework for how differing worldview might develop and possibly conflict within cross cultural learning groups.

1. Small/large power distance reflects the range of responses of people in various countries to social equality and class differences, which determine access and opportunity to society benefits. For example, this may be reflected in acceptance of power holders' privileges and lack of access to superiors.

2. High/low uncertainty avoidance explains the degree to which a culture can deal with ambiguity and tolerance for deviation from the norm. For example, in a culture with high uncertainty avoidance, instructional design must be organized and clearly articulated for acceptance as formal rules of order will provide greater stability.

3. Individualism vs. Collectivism. Individualism pertains to cultures such the American culture, in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. On the other hand, collectivism pertains to societies such the Arab society, in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups to find a lifetime protection in exchange for unquestionable reality.

4. Masculinity vs. Femininity. These are relative terms as a man can behave in a «feminine» way and a woman can behave in a «masculine» way. In feminine countries, both boys and girls learn to be non-ambitious, modest, and sympathetic. Masculine cultures appreciate assertive behavior and attempts at excelling unlike feminine societies in which excellence is something one keeps to oneself. Other masculine characteristics include materialism, and self-centeredness and other feminine characteristics are interdependence, and service (Hofstede, 1991; Chute & Ahatzer, 1995).
This dimension also refers to the tolerance for masculine «open conflict» or for a feminine continual desire for «accommodation» (Hofstede, Vermunt, Smits & Noorderhaven, 1997).

5. Long term orientation (Confucian – Dynamism). A concept promoted by Hofstede & Bond (1988) that suggests the future orientation of «High Confucian» teachings and past or present orientation of «Low Confucian» dynamism, or said differently the «importance of the here-and-now versus the future» (Hofstede, Vermunt, Smits & Noorderhave, 1997). The concept developed from understanding of some Asian cultural orientation to the future and long term.

Another lens to view cultural differences, especially in distance education, is Hall's (1976) concept of high context culture (HC) and low context culture (LC). High-context cultures (for example, Mexican, Japanese, and some Native American cultures) rely on contextual «indirect verbal messages in order to extrapolate meaning» while Low-context (for example, the United States) cultures «obtain meaning from the information provided by the explicit code of the message itself» (p. 756). Wilson, Gunawardena and Nolla (2000) explain:

In HC situations the culture's information integrated from the environment, the context, the situation, and non-verbal cues give the message meaning (that is) unavailable for explicit verbal utterances. LC messages provide most of the information in the explicit code itself». (p. 453)

Hall (1976) looked at high and low context messages as being placed on a continuum; each at one end of the continuum. He wrote, «Although no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale, some are high while others are low» (p. 75).

7. Examples of Differing of Worldviews with Regard to Teaching and Learning

There are some overarching traditions that mark a culture's particular way of approaching education. Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) called attention to some discontinuities of «non-Western» and «Western» worldviews, when they looked at the learning styles of distance learners in Mexico and other primarily Spanish-speaking cultures (see Table 1).

Table 1
SOME FUNDAMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF NON-WESTERN VS. WESTERN WORLD VIEWS
AS PRESENTED BY SANCHEZ & GUNAWARDENA (1998)

Non-Western	Western
Emphasize group cooperation	Emphasize individual competition
Achievement as it reflects group	Achievement for the individual
Value harmony with nature	Must master and control nature
Time is relative	Adhere to rigid time schedule
Accept affective expression	Limit effective expression
Extended family	Nuclear family
Holistic thinking	Dualistic thinking
Religion permeates culture	Religion is distinct from other parts of culture
Accept world views of other cultures	Feel their world view is superior
Socially oriented	Task-oriented

The discussion of Western emphasis on individualism and of Eastern emphasis on collectivism is well documented in the cross-cultural literature (See Hofstede, 1980; Robbins, 1997; Chen & Mashhadi, 1998; Tan, Weis, Watson & Walczuch, 1998; Walker-Fernandez, 1999; Bates, 1999; Gunawardena, et al, 2001; McGee, 2002; McCarty, 2003; Chan, 2003). A note must be offered here: frequent notices

to the difference in the «Western» approach and other cultural approaches to education are well sprinkled throughout the cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural computer-mediated communication, instructional technology literature, and to some extent the distance education literature. While the term «Western» is frequently used to describe a cultural perspective it is an inappropriate descriptor. For example, South American cultures are geographically located with in the Western hemisphere, but have a very different culture than the U. S. culture. However, «Western» is accepted terminology in the literature that describes Euro-United States and other Anglo-Saxon perspectives and is used in the literature to identify possible tension points for learners in a cross-cultural situation.

More particular to a teaching/learning situation, Robinson (1999) provides a table of Western and Asian (Chinese) educational values and characteristics (see Table 2). Although Robinson's focus was on Asian learners and Western teaching her chart is reflective of the distinction between pedagogical values of Western and pedagogical values of other cultures.

Table 2
WESTERN AND CHINESE EDUCATIONAL VALUES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Western models and values espoused in distance education	Chinese education and learners
More open curriculum	More closed curriculum
Multiple sources for course content	Restricted approved sources for course content
Several ideologies & perspectives (goal of impartiality and avoidance of bias)	Single ideology & partiality
Course provision & access determined mostly by market demand & personal choice or circumstances	Course provision & access determined by economic & social development goals & manpower planning norms
Meeting individual needs given a high priority	Meeting individual needs given a low priority
Higher teacher autonomy over content & methods	Lower teacher autonomy over content & methods; heavy reliance on approved texts & curriculum
Challenge to teacher or tutor seen as part of self-development process. Dialogue & interaction encouraged. Questions interpreted as signs of interest	Respect for teacher or tutor, shown through silence. Questions interpreted as rudeness to the teacher or challenging the teacher's authority
Tutor as facilitator or mediator, one source of information among several	Tutor seen as teacher & source of information, conforming to book & curriculum
High learner autonomy & choice. Ideal of «independent learners»	Low learner autonomy, little choice. Learner dependence on teacher

Low reliance on face-to-face teaching	Heavy reliance on face-to-face teaching
Attention given to processes of learning. High value placed on skills for learning, low value given to memorization. Repetition not encouraged as a learning strategy	Emphasis on content of learning. High value given to memorization. Repetition frequently used as a learning strategy
Intrinsic motivation more evidently valued	Apparent dominance of extrinsic motivation
Focus on learning outcomes	Focus on student effort & attitudes
Analytical skills expected & valued. Divergent or «original» thinking encouraged	Learners like to have good spatial & numerical skills; weaker on divergent thinking & verbal skills. Less use of analysis in problem solving & thinking, more use of synthesis
Values of individualism & self-development. Interrogation of materials & teachers as part of learning process. «Constructive confrontation» valued	Values of conformity & compliance, conflict avoidance (social harmony). More emphasis on collective & community relationships
Teacher has high level of responsibility for managing the learning of students	Learner carries main responsibility for succeeding at learning because of learner-effort

Robinson (1999) noted the difficulty in presenting non-Western concepts because most of the research is based on Western psychological assumptions and methods. An example of the limitations of exporting Western developed assumptions and concepts to other cultures can be found in the work of Chan (2003).

In attempt to explore the relationship between a teacher's personality and teaching effectiveness in distance education in Hong Kong, Chan assessed 59 teachers' personalities using the Western-based Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (CPAI). She found certain scales on the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory [for example, harmony; *Ren Quig* (social favors that are exchanged according to an implicit set of rules); Ah-Q mentality (mild degree of defense mechanisms is accepted as a protective mechanism against defeat and disappointment); graciousness; veraciousness-slickness (trustworthiness); and face] were significantly related to teaching performance, but were not identified by the MBTI.

8. What International e-learners Have to Say about Culture

Only one study could be found in which learners' perceptions were sought about the impact of their cultures on their online distance education experiences with an American university.

Walker-Fernandez (1999) looked at 12 (five males, seven females; ages from 25-45) learners still living in their home cultures on four different continents as they participated in an online graduate degree program education at an American University. Walker-Fernandez found:

- Evaluation of learning was a particularly sensitive source of tension, as they were aware of, but unable to be sure of the cultural variances between themselves and their teacher and program.
- «Extended identities» were created by the participants as they were keenly aware «of the American rather than global context in which they were participating». The extended identities (as a form of acculturation) allowed them a measure of short-term success within the course.
- Most participants were disappointed in the ethnocentric course material and had hoped for a more global learning exposure.

9. Two recent studies

In preliminary studies by Shattuck (2005) and by Al-Harthi (2005) attempts were made to further understand the question of how non-American students perceive the values related to study in an American distance learning program. One study (Al-Harthi) conducted in-depth telephone interviews with Arab students, while the other (Shattuck) conducted in-depth online interviews primarily with Asian students. The following are some of the more specific findings that illustrate the cultural discontinuities (Wilson, 2001) that are hypothesized from the literature. [Cultural discontinuity refers to the experience of learners when faced with the mismatch of contextual cues in a course designed and taught from another cultural framework (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Wilson, 2001).]

Study One

Experiences of Arab students studying in American distance education were explained through a number of themes including:

– *Anxiety and avoidance behaviour*
  Many research participants did not know what to expect from online learning, and faced with this unknown situation, their initial reaction was avoiding it. Their uncertainty was the source for much anxiety. The researcher explained this with reference to Hofstede's (1991) uncertainty avoidance dimension. His uncertainty avoidance index shows that Arab countries have stronger uncertainty avoidance (score=68) than the United States (score=46). This by definition means that members of the Arab culture feel more threatened by uncertain or unknown situations than do members of the American culture. This feeling, as Hofstede explains, is expressed through nervous stress, and a need for greater

predictability and written or unwritten rules. Tolerance of uncertainty will vary depending on ones culture. The extreme anxiety of learners in this study had a more serious impact on their academic self-concept than Western students were likely to have. It made them question their abilities to succeed in this new learning environment (Gibson, 1998). However, towards the end of their distance education experiences, participants gained greater appreciation and awareness of distance education options. Most said they will take another online course in the future.

– *Participation and privacy*

The lack of physical appearance in the online environment created an impression of anonymity, despite the fact that real names were used. In addition, it reduced assumptions associated with race and gender biases. This was particularly relieving for those who do not represent the status quo such as participants in this study. They felt course environment became «un-scary», and in a way more comfortable and relaxing than face-to-face courses. In addition, participants associated the lack of social presence in their online courses with a reduced sense of social embarrassment. They felt that the social pressure or the need for «face saving», a concept common in collective cultures (Chan, 2002; Tu, 2001), was far less in electronic interaction than in face to face interaction. Consequently, they were tempted to postpone assignments and participation. The researcher, an Arab woman, commented: for a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim country looking different is more visible, especially if she wears a headscarf. In Muslim cultures, social structures such as segregated educational systems and work environments grant more privacy to women. In this study, a female participant wearing a headscarf felt others judged what she said through her appearance. With the absence of physical appearance online she felt much more comfortable to participate. Even Arab male participants concurred that distance education would make it easier for Muslim women to participate in educational settings. They see it as preserving the original idea of segregation between sexes in Muslim societies.

– *Persistence of Shame Culture Online*

However, using distance education, as one way to increase women participation in educational setting, is not as straightforward as it may first appear to be. There are deeper cultural issues to be considered. In Arab cultures, women are constantly concerned about society perception of their families and family name because, Soffan (1980) explains, in Arab society «the women is the repository of moral deeds in her family, thus she can destroy the honor of the family. She carries her family honor with her, even after marriage and she continues to represent her family through modesty» (p. 18). This can inhibit a female student from course participation with men who might know her family. For example,

a female participant reported that she would log off a chat with her instructor and other «American» colleagues as soon as a man who knew her family would log in. Her concern of his perceptions of her and subsequently her family was greater than her belief in her noble motive of learning. Hofstede (1991) explains that collectivist cultures are «shame cultures», in which individuals who infringe upon rules of society, in this case social restrictions of the relationship between genders, will feel ashamed. In individualistic cultures, guilt is the counterpart characteristic of shame. Hofstede states, «shame is social; guilt is individual» (Hofstede, 1991, p. 60). Shame is a collective concept originating from expected social sanctions when cultural norms are broken, thus it can only was only be felt in the presence of a shared culture. In the absence of a shared culture, participants accepted assumptions and values of Western culture behind the design and facilitation of material. However, a greater complexity arises when overlapping cultural influences are recognized because what is taken for granted as an «accepted» view of social and political structure, gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, nation, or profession, may not be considered in the range of acceptable beliefs or customs for a person from a different cultural background (Fay & Hill, 2003; Dorter, 1997).

– *Avoiding Confrontation*

A number of participants felt a sense of helplessness and frustration when instructors exercised their power such as deleting questions posted by students, grading assignments without clear comments and lack of responsiveness to student questions. Such reactions from instructors made students feel neglected and doubt their abilities to learn in this new environment. This consequently affected their final grades. Despite this, students in this study chose to suppress their frustration instead of confronting their instructors. Even those who tried to confront their instructor did not persist. Hofstede (1991) refers to this unwillingness to confront others and acceptance of the consequence even though it was distressing, as valuing the «virtue of harmony and maintenance of face», which is associated with collective cultures.

– *Language Difficulties*

For most international students, like participants in this study, English is a second language. While advanced English learners appreciated the time gained in online courses, participants with low language proficiency had an added difficulty online with the rigorous amount of reading and writing required. The lack of physical gestures and the total dependence on the written word made online participation more time consuming. Therefore, one participant decided not to participate and lose a 5% of the course grade. On a positive note, online participation provided more structure and rules which consequently reduced uncertainty for some participants. One participant with low English

proficiency explained that being able to view other classmates' assignments made the «American standard» in writing more visible to him. In addition, the use of what he referred to as «academic language» over colloquial speech made it easier to understand others online compared with face to face. Collective cultures depend more on high context messages, while individualistic cultures depend more on low context messages (Hofstede, 1991). This made online participation «doubly» hard for Arab students who come from a collective, oral culture to participate in low context, written messages (Hall, 1976).

Study two

The Shattuck study was focused on questions derived largely from course-design issues as presented by the distance education and cross-culture computer-mediated literature. In the findings:

- While the literature reveals that cultural discontinuities and other teaching-learning dynamics occur in online distance education when provided from one cultural perspective to learners from another, this study showed the strength of those tensions from the learner's perspective. They consistently and clearly volunteered tensions between their culturally influenced expectations of how teaching and learning works and what they experienced in American online courses. The participants focused on the role of the teacher, on the confusion of working within a learner-centered, constructivist design, and on the type and amount of interactions required.

- But, participants quickly began connecting teaching and learning issues with isolation from the whole distance education experience. They were not just describing nonpolitical, procedural differences. They were exposing impositions of another cultural framework on their own cultural expectations and traditions. They were describing the interaction of multiple layers cultures on their experience.
  Holliday's model provided an analytical framework to view the multiple layers of culture that the participants were describing.

- The international students felt marginalized within the e-learning environment. As concluded by the researcher: «Constructivist-based pedagogy couched in the highly interactive communication world can be a lonely place for an international online learner whose cultural experiences are different than the dominant educational cultures». Participants in this study did not experience a virtual «third culture» (as suggested by Lunden in Mason, 1998), but recognized that they were «outside of familiar meaning systems» (Pratt, 1999) and struggled with clashing of their deeply embedded, «non-negotiable» cultural traditions (Gunawardena et al., 2003) – theirs as well as unspoken western educational traditions.

10. Summary and Implications

This paper set out to raise some questions about the complex relationship of e-teaching, learning, and culture in global learning environments and to point out an opportunity, if not an obligation, for e-learning organizations to take the lead in the discussion. Models by Holliday and Saba, separately and together, were offered as a way to begin dealing conceptually with the complicated overlapping system of cultures of the online learning environment that the learner faces. In addition, Hofstede's work in cross-cultural communication provides useful explanations for some of the reflected cross-cultural differences in the online environment. Results of two recent studies provide some insights into the experiences of Arab and of Asian learners as they participate in American e-learning environments.

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