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The Challenge:
Cultural Diversity
in
Distance Education Course Design

Introduction

Distance education began as a way for populations to learn without regard to political, geographical, or economic status. Cultural diversity was originally the result of the formation of colonies. Culturally diverse populations increased with the influx of immigrants making it likely that the language of the learner was different than the language used to write learning materials. Further, there are populations that were divided causing the resulting population to possess potentially hundreds of different languages. These differences in language caused difficulty in creating learning materials that were an accurate reflection of any one group. Although little attention has been given to the role of diversity in distance education, it is through diversity that freedom in education has the potential to grow (Spronk, 2010).

Cultural Diversity Discussion

The digital age has brought with it the ability for learners to have unrestricted access to course materials in an online environment if they possess the means with which to do so. This not only benefits learners, but proves an opportunity for educational institutions to promote their institution worldwide. Distance education institutions continue to encounter the challenge of incorporating the needs of a diverse population into the creation and design of distance learning courses. With globalization in the digital age in which we live, seekers of knowledge cross many boundaries to obtain the education that they need in order to progress in their careers and for improving their socioeconomic status (Spronk, 2010)

Although there has only been limited attention given to the importance of considering cultural diversity during the development and execution of online courses, learner support has

evolved as a result of increases in computer and internet use. The increase in computer-mediated-communication has had far-reaching implications for various cultures and their quest for education. Education has become more available in virtual learning environments and the use of English in an increasing number of learning environments may result in a cultural disconnect (Dillon, Wang & Tearle, 2007).

Multicultural and cross-cultural learning and teaching is becoming more common as a result of industry globalization and the expansion of worldwide trade. Interaction between cultures is also becoming more frequent. Further contributing to the increase in cross-cultural education is an increase in specialized professional training which has prompted the need for specialized education among a wider cultural diverse population. Professional demands have prompted various populations to add to their existing training, take new training and to upgrade their current skills in order to progress in their current profession and meet the needs of a fast-paced environment (Spronk, 2010).

An increase in the needs of learners worldwide brought to the forefront a variety of deeply rooted cultural values and beliefs that affect how the learning process takes place. By viewing diversity as an asset, rather than something to be tolerated, many challenges associated with current and future worldwide communities can be addressed without fear that the cultural identity will be lost. Appreciation of cultural diversity benefits the community by allowing for cultural expression through the interaction of various cultures. As the pool of learners expands worldwide, so does the need to adapt students' learning experiences in terms of access, which will open worldly experiences for everyone (Spronk, 2010).

A greater recognition of the potential conflict for students who are forced into a learning environment should be considered by course designers. Because of the many differences in learning styles designers must guard against creating courses that are not compatible with the cultural values of the learners (Parrish, 2010).

Attention to cultural diversity is not just for learners. Institutions providing education programs must also recognize that they also have a culture and they must understand the impact of their own culture on their learners. Education providers must consider that cultural differences may contribute to responses from learners being different from what they anticipated based on their own cultural values. In addition, educators must also consider the culture of certain professions and academia for example in order to strike a balance that will benefit all parties involved (Spronk, 2010).

Just as in our personal lives, we cannot make assumptions about how people behave and why they behave in a particular manner, differences in culture and misinterpretations when interacting with others can occur in education as well. Developers of learning support systems must learn and understand that cultural behaviors involve behavior and thought processes that are “embedded” as a result of human nature’s desire to fit into social groups and these thought processes have a profound effect on human personalities (Parrish, 2010).

Even with the notation that change is inevitable, educators cannot dismiss the fact that they are positioned to effect and influence learners in areas of social change. This is why it is important that instructional institutions make conscious efforts to preserve the cultures of their learners. Educators must also understand that the teaching process is a result of the transferring,

not only information, but also transferring knowledge and how they happen to know what they teach within the context of the culture of the educator (Parrish, 2010).

Addressing Cultural Diversity in Distance Education

Advances in online learning appear to have spawned an end to the negligence of cultural diversity issues. Various approaches to addressing cultural diversity have been developed that will acknowledge cultural diversity with respect. Some best practices for addressing cultural diversity include contextualizing the learning, creating safe spaces for learners, welcoming alternatives, using media effectively and celebrating diversity (Spronk, 2010)

Contextualize the learning

“Learn your learners” by requiring the students to make a full analysis of their learning assumptions and determine whether or not the content of the course is challenges their assumptions. Ensuring that the learners know what is required of the institution and that they are provided with instructions in skills for which they may have no knowledge or familiarity. Learners will also need to be fully instructed on rules of what is required and the learning medium that will be used (Spronk, 2010). With a conceptualization approach to learning in a diverse population, course designers should consider that individuals react differently to situations resulting from their cultural beliefs. As a result, each learner will establish a different meaning associated with a given situation. This creates an “adaptive” learning environment. This adaptive environment should assist with a better alignment of culture and language, enriching the lives and knowledge of the entire population of learners (Dillon, Wang & Tearle, 2007)

Create safe space for learning

With the use of computer-mediated-communication in a distance learning environment, the teaching processes must be designed in such a way as to promote student engagement in the social aspect of learning. By creating an environment that is comfortable and respected by all communicators. Learners should understand that there will be feedback, but should also be confident that they can participate in an environment free of criticism and hostility. Providing an environment where learners feel that their contributions are valid and respected invites open discussion and sharing (Spronk, 2010).

Welcome Alternatives

There are often many ways to accomplish a task and tutors, learners and support personnel should have an environment open to alternative solutions. Doing so will create an environment of trust and confidence among learners, staff and support persons and can also be used as a tool to gauge to progress the learners (Spronk, 2010).

Effective use of media

Proper training on media uses by students and trainers can enhance the learning experience while saving time and effort. Provide support to learners through clarification of instructions (Spronk, 2010).

Celebrate diversity

Given that cultural behavior is implicit and that most people are unaware of their behaviors until they are exposed Learners of all cultures should be encouraged to celebrate the diversity of the

group and the world. Providing assignments for learners provides an avenue for learners to learn more about each other and their various cultures foster a sense of belonging and enrich the experiences of all involved (Spronk, 2010).

Conclusion

From the beginning, cultural diversity has been a part of the history of the world. In the past few decades, technology has provided a means for multicultural and cross-cultural diversity to converge through education. Distance education has expanded its reach to many who would otherwise not have an opportunity to learn, and has provided a portal into other cultures that may not have been attainable were it not for technologies used for the dissemination of information online. Through learner support communication with other cultures as well as opportunities for growth through education are made possible. As the boundaries between countries break down, technology continues to bridge the gap between people and countries.

References

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