THE INVISIBLE ROLE OF DIVERSITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

LAURA PIPOLY, UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX, ARIZONA, USA

ABSTRACT
This paper was designed to provide a better understanding of diversity in distance education. Distance education students are scattered across the world and in many cases instructors are also geographically as widely dispersed as students. Being geographically dispersed may add to diversity. Research has demonstrated an increase in diversity in our population and of specific interest is how diversity will have an impact on student learning in distance education programs since it has been determined that our education and learning styles may be culturally bound. In this quantitative study a survey of 200 online students was sampled to determine their educational needs and provide data about the diversity of students. Diverse students have diverse needs and it should be further explored what interventions and strategies can be applied at the instructor and course development level to use diversity to build a more dynamic learning experience since the overarching goal would be for faculty to become knowledgeable about techniques to foster diversity and be able to implement these strategies within their online classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Cultural hegemony, Distance education, Diversity, Self-awareness, Self-disclosure

INTRODUCTION

Distance education continues to increase in popularity so it is important to determine the role of diversity in student learning as stated by the National Center for Education in 2014. According its statistics in the years 2007-2008, 4.3 million undergraduate students took at least one distance education course. This ends up being 20% of all undergraduate students. There is also global demand for distance education. In Asia alone there has been a substantial growth in the last ten years with the development of at least 10 mega-universities and over 70 open universities (Jung et al., 2011). In South Africa distance learning has been identified as being the primary system to provide access to higher education for most students within the country (Lephalala, Makoe, 2012). Universities with enrollment of diverse students must contemplate the “assumptions about teaching and learning that must be addressed in subtle and complex ways in the virtual international classroom” and students educational values are influenced by cultural norms and there may be a variety of personal preferences for learning that are culture bound (Faiola, Matei, 2005). While a student’s culture is “invisible” within an online classroom it is imperative to determine if nevertheless cultural factors have an impact on students learning and their engagement of the course material.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The innovative “use of technology allows for new directions in education, reaching student populations that until recently were not only unreachable, but were only imagined” (Butcher,
2006). Distance education students are scattered across the world and in many cases instructors are also geographically as widely dispersed as students. As distance education programs open up educational options for students worldwide the topic of diversity in distance education should be further explored in depth. Similar to teaching a campus course, one should take caution to avoid a “cultural hegemony” which is defined as basing teaching on one set of values, usually from the dominant culture (Gramsci, 1971). Students in distance education programs may have an “invisible” culture in that their student identity may be summed up by a name on the screen. However, that does not mean that the cultural identity of the student does not have an impact in the students and their classmates learning.

The purpose of this study was to explore learner's perceived importance on cultural background in a distance education course. The overarching questions to consider become: Does a student’s culture have an impact on the distance education classroom? If so, to what extent does it impact the classroom? Since student’s culture is “invisible” in the online realm, does it still affect learning and engagement? If so, what interventions by distance education instructors should be used? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed as distance education continue to be comprised of diversified learners.

**Literature Review**

Schools are becoming more culturally diverse than ever before and it is important for faculty to become culturally competent and recognize that diversity is a valuable tool. Not only is this trend occurring in traditional educational, but it is also occurring in distance education. Current projections show that enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools is expected to increase 44% between 2011 and 2022 for students who are two or more races. For the same range of years, further predications demonstrate a decrease of 6% for students who are White; a 2% increase for students who are Black; an increase of 33% for students who are Hispanic; an increase of 20% for students who are Asian/Pacific Islander and a decrease of 5% for students who are American Indian/Alaska Native (Hussar, Bailey, 2014). This data is important to take into consideration since today’s school aged children will be tomorrow’s college students, so we need to know what their needs are now so that we can be proactive in ensuring that we are culturally competent in our methods of instruction.

While diversity is often defined in terms of demographics, this is only one dimension. Simply put diversity is anything that makes us different and can be defined by a number of factors including, but not limited to: race, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, political views, sexual orientation, age, life experiences, language, interests, skills, heritage, geographic location, perspective, culture, ethnicity, education level, lifestyle, background, goals, professional experience and philosophy. In addition, in higher education more and more students from outside the U.S. are enrolling in U.S. based distance education programs. While it is often the “universities task for diversification of the student body, the educator’s challenge is to create an environment of cultural sensitivity and cultural competence to confront and overcome tension and resistance”. It is known that diversity brings added challenges to education which include language barriers, racial conflict, feelings by minorities of insecurity, resentment and hostility however it is not clear how these traditional challenges of diversity would be impacted in a distance education program (Gasker, Campbell LaBarre, 2010).

**Background**

Public schools were initially developed to create bonds between diverse groups. The “Common School Period” is a term that was given to the last 100 years of American education and was coined by Horace Mann since this is the time that school went from being private to being public. The idea behind this term was that children needed to have the opportunity to attend school so that they would be exposed to diverse population groups in the U.S. At the time that this term was coined however diverse had a different meaning than it does now. The diversity of the U.S. focused mainly on immigrant children from Europe.

The current demographics of distance education students as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) are as follows: 21.7% White American, 20% African American, 16% Hispanic, 18.2% Asian, 17.7% Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian 22.2% American Indian/Alaska Native, 20/1% two or more races and 13.4% unknown/other. In the U.S. distance education students are mostly full time employed professionals over the age of 25 that select online programs as a convenient way to obtain an education (Sadykova, Dautermann, 2009). Moore and Kearsley also confirm that most distance education students are adults between the ages of 25 to 50 years old (Moore, Kearsley 2005). A median age has been reported being from 30-34. These adults balance personal responsibilities and their careers while pursuing their education.

**Cultural Considerations**

The cultural background of a student in a distance education class may be “invisible” since a student is not physically present like in a traditional classroom. All too often students taking online courses may be a name on the screen, so to speak since distance education lacks the face to face of a traditional classroom setting. This however does not mean that diversity does not play a role in the classroom. Students may choose to share their cultural background on their own time frame and in their own way. This may be forthcoming during student introductions or may occur as trust has been established through personal experiences in discussion posts. Shenk, Moore and Davis point out that while students cultural background may be “invisible” to the instructor and students, students will often share their cultural background when it is relevant to the course discussions and once the necessary trust has been developed for self-disclosure (Shenk, Moore, Davis, 2004). Personal self-disclosure is often encouraged in distance education since at the beginning of a course students are encouraged to share a personal biography. Throughout the course students are also asked to share experiences and examples within the threaded discussion area to promote learning. However, sharing personal details may contrast with the cultural values of the student. Japanese cultures do not place a high importance on sharing personal information since in the Japanese society relationships are entrenched within a rigid social network and self-disclosure is not a useful tool as it is in a high relational mobility.
society such as the U.S. (Schug et al., 2010). Encouraging a Japanese student to self-disclose information, may instead push them away rather than engage them in the class. Research has demonstrated that there are many cultural differences that may be present in a distance education classroom (Thompson, Ku, 2005). An in-depth interview of Arabic students pursuing degrees in the U.S found that they were both scared and anxious about taking college courses online because online learning is equated with independent learning (Hofstede, 1991). These students further reported that they purposefully participated less in online discussions because they viewed “eagerness as showing off or trying to appear smart”. This points to the Arabic cultures high uncertainty avoidance as well as the dominate modest beliefs expressed by this culture. Chinese students have also reported that they found the chat format popular in many online classes to be unpleasant and disorganized (Thompson, Ku, 2005). Uzuner’s work demonstrated several cultural commonalities that may have professional implications. For example, some students showed that learners may have a strong preference for uncertainty avoidance and may feel threatened by learning that is unstructured or unclear (Uzuner, 2009). Japanese students reported a higher level of satisfaction with distance education learning when social interaction with others was at a minimum which may point to an independent learning style (Bray, Aoki, Diogosh, 2008). Many distance education courses employ the use of groups or teams to develop a sense of community, which would contrast greatly with this noted preference of Japanese distance education students. Clearly cultures may also differ greatly on the importance of self-disclosure in the classroom, of setting long term goals, and their own personal definition of success (Diller, 2007).

**LANGUAGE BARRIERS**

Language may be a potential barrier for diverse distance education students. In terms of language barriers research points out that in some regions of our country such as California it is not uncommon for 30, 40 and even 50 foreign languages to be present among the student population. Much of the content in a standard distance education class is in the written form. In a typical class students are expected to read over the course lectures, announcements, and communicate with their peers through discussion forums. As instructors we should be aware that English may not be a learner’s first language and could thus be a potential barrier in learning when the method of instruction is based so highly on reading and writing skills regardless of the course subject. According to Sadykova and Dautermann, “international students are also at risk of misinterpreting postings and assignments or of being misinterpreted by others thanks to missed vocabulary or grammar structures”. There is also concern that colloquialisms, regional or professional slang, local references to pop culture, and common expressions may be misinterpreted. Researchers recommend “avoiding complex syntax and idiomatic expressions, local humor, local insider examples, and culturally bound allusions to ensure cultural neutrality and portability” (Sadykova, Dautermann, 2009).

Cultural dimensions can be related to a preferred learning style and in general research has demonstrated that multi-mode distance education classes are the most likely to attract the widest market of students (Speece, 2012). It has also been demonstrated that content is processed faster when it is created by a content designer from the individual’s same culture. While this broad approach can appeal to a diverse student body, research has demonstrated that there may be subtler cross cultural complexities related to online learning (Finola, Matei, 2010). Sadykova and Dautermann reported that websites developed for Japan, China and Korea displayed more prominent images while websites developed for Germany, Denmark, and Finland used less animation and a more linear navigational approach. It has also been observed that English-speaking countries derived most of their understanding of content from text rather than from graphics, while Japanese students are more influenced by graphics (Sadykova, Dautermann, 2009).

**LEARNING STYLES**

There is an emphasis on communication (both verbal and non-verbal) with diverse groups. Since both of these are lacking in an asynchronous online classroom, the emphasis is placed on written communication that is generally guided by the instructor in the form of announcements, emails, policy guidelines and discussion forum posts. It is important that distance education instructors establish a clear communication style and demonstrate competence. According to Diller the most important factor that must occur, from the student’s perspective is the establishment of trust (Diller, 2007). Likewise, Thompson and Ku suggest that an online instructor first get to know their students. This can be done by asking students to post their pictures and their background information and interests, also as noted above some cultural groups may be hesitant to share personal information (Thompson, Ku, 2005). A technique that the author personally used in the classroom is to ask students to share only what they are comfortable with. Sometimes the introductions are highly personal and lengthy, while some students care to share only general information such as their anticipated major with their classmates.

Part of our role as educators is also to anticipate critical events that may impact student learning. Taking a proactive approach can ensure student success. For example, Grand Canyon University employs a mentorship program in 2012 in which incoming freshmen are matched with a current GCU student or faculty member and the mentee gets to control when and how frequently they would like to communicate with their mentor. Programs such as this serve several purposes for an incoming student and can help reassure students from all backgrounds as they transition through their online courses. A similar program at the College of William and Mary that pairs incoming students (called protégés) with mentors who share similar experiences and/or identities encourages a safe environment to foster relationships. For example, a participant of the program states a benefit is that “diversity programs are meant to bring awareness and give students a medium to voice their concerns” (Monroe, 2016). Other benefits might include increased awareness of cultural resources available and a way for students to socialize.
Attention should also be paid to the course material itself on all levels: university, program dean, curriculum designer, and instructor. This may include the choice of textbooks, assignments and content language. Furthermore “culturally sensitive content would include cultural narratives and examples from international sources that represent the heritage of students in the course, but also represent international perspectives that might not be present”. An instructor can demonstrate a sense of acceptance to diverse groups by the material that is shared throughout the classroom. Examples might be media that is representative of a variety of ethnic groups and limit cultural specific items. A diverse course content would include textbooks from international authors and collections of articles published worldwide (Sadykova, Dautermann, 2009).

**Self-Awareness**

Educators must become self-aware and understand their own values, beliefs, and biases. It is essential that these are fully understood and that an educator is sensitive to when and how they may interfere in an instructor/student relationship. Some ways to reinforce this skill would include journaling exercises, developing an autobiography and cultural competency training. Educators should also be encouraged to embark in consultation and understanding student resistance and identify student development. There are assessments to help determine cultural competence for instructors, although these are not routinely employed in the education field for educators or students. One example of an assessment is the Windham International Cultural Model Self-Assessment Tool which could be used as a training opportunity for instructors (Coleman, 1996). Furthermore, instructors can take on an advocacy role with students and develop partnerships to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity (Diller, 2007). These suggestions are ideal, but on a practical level instructors are often stretched very thin in terms of course loads. Instructors often have little to no training on student dynamics and gaining a deeper sense of self-awareness would often fall outside of the realm of typical training.

**Methodology**

**Design**

A mixed method approach was used because the purpose of this study was to explore learner’s perceived importance on cultural background in a distance education course and to add to the body of existing knowledge (Creswell, 2006). The data was explored to uncover common themes, which is a hallmark of case-study research, while rating questions allowed participants to respond to how they feel about a statement with a 5-star Likert scale.
within the last five years”? Participants that responded “yes” were then asked to complete three additional questions which include:

1. Have you revealed your cultural background in your distance education class?
2. If you shared your cultural background in your distance education class, why? (To share about myself, felt pressured, learn about others, part of example/personal experience, did not share)
3. How strongly do you feel your cultural background has/had an impact in your online learning? (Star rating question e.g. strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Findings

There was a response rate of 72.5% and a median response time of 11.3 seconds. A sampling bias of 8.0% was calculated by Google Consumers Survey based on a comparison of this question’s sample distribution with that of the US census data. Data was analyzed and aggregated using the Google Consumers Survey. In regard to question number one, 83.1% of participants responded that they had shared their cultural background in their distance education course. This left 14.9% of participants to state that they had not shared their cultural background during their distance education course and 2% of students unsure if they had shared this information. For question number two the most common theme that Google demonstrated as being trending towards was coded as “to share about myself”. Question number three showed an average of 3.8 stars with points to a rating of “agree”.

Discussion and Summary

There are many positives of having a diverse student body. Diversity can foster an equity pedagogy, empower school culture and social structure, create prejudice reduction and undermine implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives and biases (Banks, 2015).

In the prejudice reduction dimension, teachers help students develop more positive attitudes towards different racial and ethnic groups. School can help students develop more positive intergroup attitudes and beliefs. An equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, gender and social-class groups. This includes using a various teaching styles and approaches that are consistent with the wide range of learning styles within various cultural and ethnic groups (Banks, 2015).

From the above research it is clear that a learner’s cultural background may appear to be invisible in that it is not seen within a distance education classroom. However, this should not lead one to believe that it does not have an impact since results show students agree that their cultural background does have an impact on their distance education learning. Research also demonstrated that students from diverse backgrounds are often willing to share their cultural background in the context of the course for the purpose of sharing about themselves and agree that it has a strong impact on their overall learning.

The present study used a large sample base of 200 participants and had a high response rate for survey research of 72.5%. However as with all research there are potential limitations. Some potential limitations could be that participants in the study were completing the survey for an award (premium content). Participants may have falsely responded to the screening question and thus invalid their response. Participants in this study needed to have computer usage and internet access to take part, although both of these requirements would also most likely need to be met as a distance learner. It may also be suspected that for question number three additional themes could have emerged if a qualitative study method was used. Future studies may delve into the reasons why students selected not to disclose this information, since this data may be information rich. Despite these limitations, the research has demonstrated that learners are willing to share about their cultural background in a distance education course and feel strongly that it has an impact in their learning.

Gasker and Campbell LaBarre sum it up well that “To achieve cultural competency, programs, faculty and students all need to be open to vulnerability and change” (Gasker, Campbell LaBarre, 2010). From the author’s perspective this study show that learners do feel that there cultural background has an impact in their learning which would lead instructors to utilize teaching techniques to minimize this impact. As noted this can be achieved by using a broad approach to course design, developing a trusting relationship with students, and integrating diverse course content can help to bridge the cultural gap that can occur for distance education students. Instructors should also encourage students to share about themselves, but do so in manner that does not pressure a student to disclose if they are not comfortable doing so.


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