Chapter 10
Learning Cultures and Multiculturalism: Authentic E-Learning Designs

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly globalizing 21st century knowledge society, multicultural understanding plays a major role. However, what do we mean by “culture” in the educational context, what aspects have or should have an impact on our learning environments, and might some of these assumptions direct the development of our learning environments in an unintended and possibly undesirable way? New learning models that differ from traditional learning approaches might cause a type of a “learning culture shock” for some learners. What are the best ways to avoid and overcome cultural clashes in online learning? This chapter discusses the experiences of two cases from multicultural and multidisciplinary online programs for teacher education and professional development. Both of the programs are based on the principles of authentic e-learning framework described by Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver (2010). The aim of the study was to find out how learners with different cultural backgrounds experience the authentic e-learning process, as well as to find out what impact the authentic e-learning model has on the development of the learning culture.

INTRODUCTION

During recent years, globalization and rapid technological development have brought about changes and new challenges for higher education throughout the world. Different, remote-access online learning approaches, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs), have extended learning opportunities for learners from different parts of the world and created new types of multicultural learning contexts. While these new learning encounters where learners from different cultures...
come together in virtual spaces offer new, exciting learning opportunities for many, they also bring new challenges for educators and educational designers. Increasingly often, learning spaces are virtual and the groups of learners are increasingly diverse. This raises questions of how to take cultural differences into account in the design and delivery of e-learning. At the same time, graduate outcomes such as critical thinking, collaboration skills, appreciation of diversity and intercultural communication skills, are in demand.

Multiculturalism and the impact of cultural aspects in learning are often associated with different ethnic backgrounds, religions and languages. While all such aspects are important to consider, it can also be argued that there are diverse learning cultures that affect the way students and teachers behave in an educational context. These learning cultures can be formed by factors such as academic tradition, field of study, and preferred teaching methods. Very often, these cultures - the traditional teaching and learning practices of higher education - are replicated in online learning. Learning management systems, such as Moodle, Blackboard or Optima, are used for information transfer through lectures or readings, followed by assessment based on the reproduction of this information (Laurillard & Masterman, 2009) Despite this, even the transition from classroom education to online learning can be seen as a major cultural shift (e.g., Develotte, 2009).

How can pedagogically meaningful multicultural learning spaces and processes, that meet 21st century needs, be created? Researchers have earlier examined, for example, issues of culture in online education (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009) and different international pedagogies (Hellsten & Reid, 2008). This study examines two cases of multicultural online learning that are based on authentic e-learning as a pedagogical framework. Authentic e-learning has been found to be an effective paradigm, for example, in supporting advanced knowledge acquisition (Herrington & Oliver, 2000), collaboration and development of a learning community (Oliver, Herrington, Herrington & Reeves, 2007); self-direction and general working life skills (Teräs & Leikomaa, 2011); networking and connecting between educational institutions and working life (Leppisaari, Maunula, Herrington & Hohenthal, 2011), as well as reflective practice (Teräs & Herrington, forthcoming). Deriving from situated learning and constructivist approaches, authentic e-learning offers a strong association with real-life professional practices and ways of thinking, which makes it a more useful approach when skills such as creative and critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration are in demand. (Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Herrington, 2005; Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010).

Authentic e-learning differs from the traditional presentation-driven educational approaches in many ways, and it may create a feeling of unfamiliarity and uncertainty - a “learning culture shock” - for people with a very different learning cultural background. In this chapter, factors that affect the implementation of authentic multicultural e-learning will be addressed. The chapter introduces two cases of authentic e-learning in a multicultural context and examines the effects of the multicultural aspect on their success. The research question represents two sides of the coin:

1. How did the learners from various cultural backgrounds experience the authentic e-learning process;
2. What impact did the authentic e-learning model have on the learning culture in the two cases?

LEARNING CULTURE AND CULTURAL IMPACT

In this chapter, we examine aspects that may affect the learning culture, and introduce examples of cultural impact that arise from the data of the two cases. We are interested in how learners with different cultural backgrounds experience