Chapter V

Intercultural Collaborative Project-Based Learning in Online Environments

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Introduction

The growth of online coursework has introduced challenges for learners, instructors, and course designers involved in culturally and linguistically diverse environments. Online learners face the challenges of a lack of visual cues and increased expectations for interaction and collaboration in ways that learners in conventional settings may not encounter. In online environments that include elements of globalization such as international learners, multicultural course content, and twinning projects between universities (Mason, 1998), intercultural communication issues introduce further complexities. This chapter addresses the question, “How can we overcome potential cultural discontinuities in online collaborative project-based learning environments?” We first identify differing worldviews, communication practices, and technological issues that can present barriers that frequently arise in intercultural online courses. We then identify constructivist project-based teaching strategies that reduce these intercultural barriers. Differing worldviews can be reconciled by fostering collaboration, grouping, relevance,
and metacognition. Communication barriers can be minimized by attention to language and community building. Technological problems can be reduced by using asynchronous communication, simplifying online communication systems, and providing technical training and ongoing technical support. The chapter concludes with a model for a third, or polycentric culture that minimizes differences among individuals in terms of their worldviews, communication practices, and technological issues.

**Online Intercultural Learning**

Problems related to online intercultural learning in higher education focus primarily on two interrelated issues: (a) online learning, which frequently requires new ways of interacting and collaborating with others; and (b) intercultural learning, which may include learners and instructors with differing worldviews, communication practices, and technological issues. Online learning raises challenges for learners who may not know how to learn online, and for designers and instructors who may not know how to teach online. As numbers of international students and international twinning projects increase, online instructors and course designers are still expected to provide problem-free intercultural online learning environments.

Online learning characteristics themselves can act as impediments to learning effectively in a largely text-based environment. In the editorial introducing a journal issue about cultural issues of online learning, Mason and Gunawardena (2001) identified three aspects of online courses that contribute to difficulties of teaching and learning: lack of face-to-face meetings, technical and bandwidth difficulties, and challenges presented to nonnative speakers of English. These online learning problems are compounded further by complexities of intercultural learning contexts.

**Intercultural Online Learning Contexts**

Intercultural communication is described as the “study of distinct cultural or other groups in interaction with each other” (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 539). The requirement for learners in culturally and linguistically diverse environments to communicate effectively with the instructor and with each other involves intercultural communication. Wilson (2001) charges that contact between persons who describe themselves differently can lead to cultural discontinuities.

Cultural discontinuities are obstacles in cross-cultural educational interfaces, brought about by “a lack of contextual match between the conditions of learning and a learner’s sociocultural experiences” (Wilson, 2001, p. 52). We have classified the following intercultural factors that impact online learning: (a) worldviews as reflected by cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1997); (b) communication practices reflected in high and low context communication (Hall, 1976) and in cognition patterns (Tharp, 1989); and (c) technological issues.

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