Chapter 9
Culture in Online Learning: Essentialist and Post-Essentialist Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Culture and learning form a tapestry of indistinguishably interwoven elements that continuously interact and shape each other. Connective technologies potentially increase intercultural interaction among the members of learning communities that can embrace greater numbers of individuals from diverse cultural orientations. The unpredictable and varying natures of culture and online learning lead researchers to continually revisit and explore key properties, processes, and issues in culture and online learning. Therefore, this article firstly gives an account of how culture is contested and highlights the challenge of providing an all-comprehensive definition. Further, it focuses on the role of culture in online learning and briefly presents both the essentialist and post-essentialist frameworks of culture utilized to provide insights into the role of culture in online learning. Finally, this chapter provides recommendations for a culturally-inclusive online learning and points towards future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

As connective technologies become more efficient and widespread, the number of both free and priced online courses for the international audience has been increasing exponentially. Online learning presents distinctive opportunities and affordances for intercultural exchanges among learners, which might pose both an advantage and a threat in the online learning environment. While cultural difference in online learning has the potential to foster mutual exchange of new insights, it has also been associated with negative potentials such as the problems of exclusion and cultural offence (Doherty, 2004). The eventual impact of online learning is also much dependent on the culture of learning and teaching, which dominates
the sociocultural structure of the educational institutions (O’Dowd, 2009). The use of technology itself is not a sufficient requirement for a successful multicultural learning environment; culturally mediated social interaction, understanding and perseverance towards a shared vision is considered among factors leading to an effective learning process as well (Chen, Mashhadi, Ang, & Harkrider, 1999). Culture impacts every facet of online learning, from course and interface design, to communication in a sociocultural space, and to the negotiation of meaning and social construction of knowledge (Gunawardena & Jung, 2014). Therefore, we need to further our understanding into culture, which plays both a central and challenging role in multicultural online learning environments (Ess, 2009).

The collection of individual experiences of a person or a group is deeply infused with cultural values and culturally patterned ways of thinking and interacting, which determine who they are and shape how they learn (Faiola & Matei, 2006). When individuals position themselves in the online learning environment, they tend to carry their own culturally formed orientations with them while they adapt to the new culture (Collis, 1999; Lauzon, 1999). For this reason, researchers have taken an interest in understanding what cultural elements learners bring and how these elements interact in the online learning spaces. On the other hand, the technologies utilized to deliver learning online are not culture-free artifacts, but they are also shaped by cultural ways of thinking and interacting (Brock, 2006). Therefore, the technology itself needs to be addressed as an active player in online learning (Hewling, 2009).

Goodfellow and Lamy (2009a) posit three reasons why more research into culture in online learning is urgent; 1) the growth of multiculturality in higher education to extend educational opportunities to those who have been under-represented, 2) socioeconomic development which triggers the growing use of online and distance learning by educational institutions to increase the number of international students, and 3) the emergence of ‘new’ cultural and social identities in virtual learning (p. 8). Research have attempted to develop insights into the role of culture in online learning through adoption of essentialist cultural frameworks that associate culture with national or ethnic base in which the individual is situated. These essentialist frameworks acknowledge that national or ethnic characteristics that inform such structures as upbringing, schooling, language and social customs shape the mental and behavioral patterns of the individual (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009a; Macfadyen, 2009). Therefore, researchers have primarily investigated how national and ethnic identities interact with intercultural communication and learning online (Gunawardena & Jung, 2014). However, although useful at some level, the essentialist frameworks of culture are limited in that they fail to account for extensive range of additional cultural factors that interact within the online learning environments (Ess, 2009). In addition, since it is highly possible that individuals bear an endless combination of various cultural traits that is distinct from the national or ethnic culture they are situated in, national or ethnic frameworks of culture would fall too simplistic, and thus incapable of fully capturing cultural differences in online learning (Ess, 2009). The question of culture in multicultural online learning environment transcends national borders and includes numerous learners independent of nationality or ethnicity (Hewling, 2006). Hence, more comprehensive frameworks of culture that go beyond national or ethnic identification is needed to develop an understanding of the interplay between culture and online learning. This chapter firstly gives an account of how culture is contested and highlights the challenge of providing an all-comprehensive definition. Further, it focuses on the role of culture in online learning and briefly presents both the essentialist and post-essentialist frameworks of culture utilized to provide insights into the role of culture in online learning. Finally, this chapter provides recommendations for a culturally-inclusive online learning and points towards future research directions.
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