Chapter 15
Culturally Sensitive Instructional Design Principles for Online Learning Environments

Gülen Kartal
Anadolu University, Turkey

Elif Toprak
Anadolu University, Turkey

Evrim Genc Kumtepe
Anadolu University, Turkey

ABSTRACT
Distance education and e-learning practices are preferred by increasing number of people and institutions in the recent years all around the globe. It’s clear that there are different interests, expectations, needs, characteristics, and backgrounds of participants in these learning environments. In this connection, it is important that courses are designed, taking cultural diversity into account, optimizing self-learning in such environments. The instructional designs that support multiculturalism in learning environments, lead to more efficient learning. Based on the awareness about cultural diversity, this chapter focuses on culturally sensitive instructional design principles for online learning environments. Firstly, “culture” as a concept and its components, based on various prominent definitions in literature are given. Then, the design principles are discussed with a critical look on online learning environments, with an eye to different theories and studies of leading researchers in the field.

INTRODUCTION
One of the questions that have preoccupied the human mind since the antique ages has been what type of an existence or realm of existence culture is (Güvenç, 2002, p.16). Researchers have conducted numerous studies up to the present day, and have tried to handle the concept of culture in many different dimensions. However, it has not yet been possible to set forth a single definition that is agreed upon in

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the academic literature, since culture has been reshaped depending on the personal interests, experiences, and definitions of the researchers in these different studies (Wang & Reeves, 2007, p.3). At the same time, the structure of culture that is composed of variable, intangible and complex elements might have also naturally played an important part in this.

As it is well known, many concepts and their contexts are being reshaped owing to technology in our age. Besides, education constitutes one of the first and maybe the most important field of practice in technological advances. Especially in the last years, distance learning applications have been becoming more widespread, giving students a flexible learning environment and opportunities that enable them to learn on their own, at their own pace, as independent of place, time and tutor. In this way, individuals are offered opportunities to develop themselves in the field they want, thus, ensure their lifelong earning continuity. At the same time, the globalization of education is also inevitable in our age since information and communication technologies have transformed the world into a global village (McLuhan & Powers, 2001). Distance learning technologies might be considered to offer a good opportunity in this respect. Many institutions and universities are placing emphasis on international collaboration both for economic and socio-cultural reasons in the recent years. These international distance learning practices may sometimes be in the form of teaching the learners at affiliated institutions/universities located in different countries, and sometimes as massive open online courses (MOOCs) that are open to the whole world, with learners from all ages, backgrounds, geographies, and cultures. Hence, designing courses with these media, for learners of many different preferences, capabilities, and expectations, from different geographies and cultures, considering the influences of multiculturalism on these media might be helpful both to create better learning environment and to observe the problems that emerge at the global level (Kartal & Toprak, 2015). Consequently, it will be possible to generate solutions, design programs and develop open course materials with new perspectives. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to evaluate culture and multiculturalism as concepts, which elements they are constituted of, and their structures and components. Therefore, we need to investigate the influences of multiculturalism on distance learning environments, and the culturally sensitive course design principles. First, various definitions of culture and its components and the structure are compiled in the literature. Next, Hofstede’s Theory of Cultural Dimensions, which is the basis of many cultural studies and is often mentioned in cultural studies in distance education, is discussed. Then, Gunawardena’s Design Model within the scope of this theory for cultural differences in online courses and Khan’s e-learning framework are explained. Finally, a variety of prominent research studies on culturally sensitive online course design principles have been presented with a critical perspective.

BACKGROUND

The Concept of Culture and Hofstede

Throughout history, many researchers have made different definitions regarding the concept of culture, that has been discussed and maintained its significance since the existence of humanity. Through a close look at research made in this field, it is observed that researchers have used Tylor’s definition to a large extent for many years (Güvenç, 2002, p.54). British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1871, p.1) has defined culture as: “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is the complex
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