Chapter 3

Learning to Become an Online Learner in a Chinese University:
A Tale of Transformative Pedagogy

David Stein  
The Ohio State University, USA

Hilda R. Glazer  
Capella University, USA

Michael Glassman  
The Ohio State University, USA

Xing Li  
Central China Normal University, China

ABSTRACT

The authors describe how transformational pedagogy can be applied to teaching in a cross-cultural classroom to promote deep learning. Technology tools, instructional teams, time for instruction, and language are shown to be key elements in considering the depth of change possible when introducing ideas to disrupt the idea of the classroom as well as the location of the classroom. Recommendations for teaching in a cross-cultural environment include developing trust in the translator, becoming familiar with the tools used in the host country, considering how examples and terms may be misunderstood, and becoming comfortable with emergent instructional designs such as transformative pedagogy.

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INTRODUCTION

The following comment from an international graduate student experiencing an online course in the United States illustrates the tension between face-to-face instruction and online learning when the learner’s dominant mode for instruction is face to face:

Firstly, I do apologize for not being able to catch up your online class. Honestly, I found my first participation in the ‘real’ online class demands more time, commitment, and efforts because to change my mode of learning shaped by long established face-to-face learning experiences is not easy and can be accomplished in short time. It is very difficult to me to get used to fully participating in the online class for the first time while three other face to face classes I am taking are still dominantly demanding. I really want to take the class but I know my limit well. Hence, it seems I have to drop your class. (Student, personal communication, January 13, 2017)

This student from another culture brings a mental model of how a classroom works, including time commitments, role of the instructor, scheduling of activities, and assessments. The expectation is that teaching should be instructor centered and should build upon the idea of information transfer (Swan, 2010). A mental model is a framework, a way of interpreting and explaining daily activities and expectations. Mental models help us generalize from situation to situation when the elements are similar. Our mental models are our personal images of reality, and they shape our attitudes. They may limit our ability to see beyond the schema developed from prior encounters. How we perceive the classroom and the subsequent activities attached to a classroom are part of our cognitive structures and set up a set of assumptions about how teaching and learning should occur. The mental model students bring to the classroom can shape their interactions with materials, learner behaviors, and expectations of the instructor and the instructional process (Mezirow, 2000; Magzan, 2012).

When an international student becomes responsible for developing a participation schedule for a session extending over a period of days, and when the student is asked continuously to interact with content, peers, and instructors any time, any place, and with anyone, a challenge to the mental model develops. The learner’s idea of a classroom and how to be a successful learner in an online classroom is questioned. This disruption in habitual ways of thinking about the design of instruction can be viewed as a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000; Cox & Vaughn, 2016). A disorienting dilemma in this case is a disruption in everyday thinking patterns that is not consistent with our model of how the online classroom functions and the role of the learner in that classroom. A disorienting dilemma need not be negative; it can be
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