Cultural Challenges of E-Learning Experiences
An Exploratory Research

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and advances in information and communication technologies have increased the diversification of the characteristics of targeted students. The cultural diversity of users benefits learning but challenges institutions. In this context, we are trying to identify the cultural dimensions that influence the e-learning experience of users from different cultures. As we are interested in the meaning given by users to their experiences, we have conducted a qualitative study with 15 teachers and learners in a multi-cultural context. The content analysis showed the existence of four dimensions that can be factors of convergence or divergence for the learners. These dimensions are management of time and learning activities, management of the learning space, management of interpersonal relations, and style of communication. The results call the attention of professionals to improve the practical approaches to adapt e-learning services to different cultures in order to improve the perception of the e-learning experience.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Dimensions, Culture, E-Learning Experience, Learners’ Perceptions, Teachers’ Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

During the last years, different platforms of online learning emerged offering to people from all over the world the ability to be enrolled in a diversity of programs. So online teaching today is deeply related to the technological tools and concepts that will give a meaning and a direction to the integration of technological innovation in teaching. The development of teaching methods adapted to this context is very challenging. The use of information technology and communication for education (ITCE) is one of the pillars for the development of the information society (Garcia & Tejedor, 2012).

As a teaching method based on information and communication technology, e-learning is a substantial issue for reflection (Al-Gahtani, 2016; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Lin, 2011). The global market for online education and training is expected to be about $50.4 trillion in 2020, compared to $47.9 trillion in 2015, with an annual growth rate of 1% (Ambient Insight, 2015). Education circles are turning to online learning to take advantage of its many educational, economic, and social benefits. It would seem that this technological change has transformed the thought related to teaching and has transformed the ancestral habits of teaching, from a concept of a package of knowledge to be delivered, into a permanently open learning environment (Faerber, 2002).

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It has also allowed the personalization of courses through the organization of content, which offers more modularity (Lewandowski, 2003). When technological conditions are met, it offers the greatest number of learners the opportunity to access knowledge at a relatively low cost (Chao & Chen, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2007). This mode of learning thus reinforces the trend towards internationalization and the potential for access to knowledge by reducing space-time constraints and increasing flexibility (Chao & Chen, 2009; Wu et al., 2010).

On the other hand, the internationalization of this service is raising important questions regarding the understanding of target groups from different countries and consequently, different cultures. “This redefinition of the services opens up the market for education services to be exported as goods.” However, this service given the cognitive and emotional involvement of the customer (learner) is a special product. In addition to that, constructivist approaches to teaching highly encourage the participation of the learner and the interactivity between students. So, we should consider the communication process in our evaluation of learners’ experiences online.

As the majority of researches are done in occidental countries, we should seriously wonder if the learning systems adopt methodologies and pedagogical resources suitable to the profile and reality of the socio-cultural context of many learners (Germain-Rutherford, 2007). This phenomenon may influence the efficiency and quality of the learning process online (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Swierczek & Bechter, 2010). We can wonder if the values and principles developed and applied in occidental countries are still internalized by users of the e-learning processes in other countries (Biggs, 2001). Thus, our research question is: What dimensions of culture influence the perception of the e-learning experience of users from different cultures?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid development of information and communication technology and the internationalized of many educational systems have fostered the emergence of increasingly multicultural online learning environments. This brings the notions of diversity and interculturality to the heart of curricular concerns (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Çiftçi, 2016; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Lee & Markey, 2014; Germain-Rutherford et al., 2007). Faced with this diversity of audiences and needs, many teachers realize the importance of taking into account the notions of multiculturality and interculturality in the design of online courses and in the choice of technological tools to develop these courses and trainings (Ahn, Yoon & Cha ; 2015), Dunn & Marinetti, 2002; Hew, 2018 ; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018 ; McGee, 2002; Moore, Shattuck & Al-Harthi, 2006).

However, academic publications that address the influence of cultural diversity on the online learning experience remain similar to a “black box” (Çiftçi, 2016; Hew, 2018; Lee & Markey, 2014; Swierczek & Bechter, 2010; Wang & Reeves, 2007; Yang et al., 2014). In order to address this gap, the concepts of e-learning and culture are presented as well as the potential influence of culture on the e-learning experience.

E-Learning

If we refer to the history of online learning, we can notice that it is the last form of what was called ‘distance learning’. Stimulated and transformed by new technical media, distance learning is now part of a new approach translated into the concept of ‘interactive distance learning’. When it was introduced to the Internet, this concept was replaced by the term “e-learning” and was renamed “e-learning 2.0” with the rise of “Web 2.0”. It was than surpassed by “e-learning 3.0” with “web 3.0” characterized by technologies like big data, cloud computing and augmented reality that increases the learner’s participation in the learning process. We are lately talking about “e-learning 4.0” that promotes mobile learning.

A wide variety of definitions around the term e-learning coexist. Each definition is part of a trend and has a conceptual anchor. Some definitions focus on distance, others on support. Some
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