Chapter 11
The Cultural Aspects of E-Learning and the Effects of Online Communication: A Critical Overview

Amani Hamdan
University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this chapter is to build on the insights of educators regarding the relationship between culture and online learning. In this chapter, I shed light on the ways in which culture has a significant influence on online education and vice versa. The chapter is based on primary data drawn from undergraduate female students’ responses regarding how online education is changing their learning culture and how their culture is influencing online education. Sixty undergraduate Saudi female students participated in the survey in order to identify how using the Internet, online education and online discussion forums is challenging cultural norms. The literature in the field of online and distance education is also explored to help answer these questions. Students indicated that online education helped them to challenge some cultural norms, enhance their learning culture and improve their communication skills.

INTRODUCTION
Challenging traditional, face-to-face methods of teaching and moving towards innovative, student-centered approaches are crucial trends in contemporary education. Online education in particular is emerging as an important feature of higher education in all fields. Over the last decade, educational programs worldwide have begun employing online learning as an essential part of the delivery of courses and even of entire programs, to the extent that it is now part of higher-education mainstream
in many countries. “Students are demanding more courses and programs to be offered online. Yet, in light of the growing population of learners from various cultural backgrounds engaged in online education…” (Wang & Reeves, 2007, p. 1) there is an urgent need to understand how culture affects online education and, conversely, how online education affects culture.

Culture is defined by Hofstede (2005) as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 4). These differences in programming largely account for differences across cultures. It is clear that cultures and cultural values around the globe are changing in unprecedented ways as a result of the exponential growth of communication exchange channels, an important aspect of which is the increasing ease of access to online courses, programs and information. The culture of learning is undergoing rapid transition, including in the Middle East. Saudi Arabian students, for example, have begun to participate in this communications exchange and, in consequence, their culture of learning is changing in ways that could not have been anticipated even two or three years ago. These students, both female and male, are now able to gain access to learning resources such as journals, magazines, periodicals and intercultural-communication forums that would not be available to them but for their connection to the Internet. The unprecedented openness to new educational resources and cultural perspectives is leading Saudi Arabia’s younger generation to become less conservative. The implications of this process for the Saudi culture as whole are reinforced by the fact that the youth component of the Saudi population (i.e. those under age 35) currently stands at 65 percent.

This paper aims to explore the ways in which students’ culture of learning is changing as a result of the introduction of various modes of online learning. This paper also aims to explore the ways in which culture and cultural values affect the application and success of online-learning strategies. Particular attention is directed to learners’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of online communication. My analysis is based on observations of two groups of Saudi female university students as they begin to integrate online-learning systems into their studies. My analysis also draws on the key literature relating to online learning.

The core conclusion of this paper is that online education and culture have a reciprocal and correlative relationship. This paper explores the emergence of online education globally and in Saudi Arabia; issues, controversies and problems; traditional education as the backdrop to Saudi online learning; and, finally, the findings of an empirical study on the same.

THE EMERGENCE OF ONLINE EDUCATION GLOBALLY AND IN SAUDI ARABIA

Rapid technological advances and the emergence of the global knowledge-oriented economy have not only encouraged governments to provide the infrastructure for web-based instruction but have also necessitated a significant increase of investment in Internet technologies for increasing access to educational resources. Online education and embedded online communication in higher-education courses and programs are no longer considered to be luxuries or mere supplements to learning but, rather, integral parts of higher education in many parts of the world. “Colleges and university students in the USA increasingly view online components of their courses as commonplace as textbooks and other traditional resources” (Wang and Reeves, 2007, p. 2) and this is true not only of North American students but also of students in Saudi Arabia.

Many educational programs in Saudi Arabia have integrated online education into almost every undergraduate program. Major universities in Saudi Arabia are in the process of implementing