Chapter 18

Intercultural Issues in Graduate Blended Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an exploratory case study of intercultural issues in graduate blended learning environments. As U.S. Universities strive to increase the diversity among student, faculty, and staff populations, culture is beginning to emerge in the literature as a potential variable in the efficacy of virtual and blended course delivery (Al-Harthi, 2005; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Still in its nascent stages, there is scant research on the topic of technology mediated graduate courses and even less on culture as a pivotal element of blended learning environments in graduate education. Findings from this study indicated that participants agreed blended courses offered opportunities to balance work, family, and school obligations; however, a majority of participants also noted that intercultural issues were prevalent and played a role in how blended courses were viewed. The results of this study have implications for university faculty and administrators who serve diverse student populations.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is beginning to emerge in the literature as a potential variable in the efficacy of virtual and blended course delivery as U.S. Universities strive to increase the diversity among student, faculty, and staff populations (Al-Harthi, 2005; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). The research is scarce on the topic of technology mediated graduate courses and there are even fewer studies on culture as a pivotal element of blended learning environments in graduate education. This chapter reports on an exploratory case study of intercultural issues in graduate blended learning environments.
BACKGROUND

Blended Education

In the last decade, technology-driven methods for delivering courses has proliferated the graduate education landscape (Allen & Seaman, 2005; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Gayeski, 2005; Hyatt, Evans, & Haque, 2009). While proponents of classroom-situated learning continue to debate its virtues with those favoring online courses, blended learning is emerging as a preferred delivery mode (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007) with a variety of studies focusing on related benefits (e.g. Graham & Allen, 2005) and best practices (e.g. Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003). Blended learning is described in this study as “education that combines on-campus and distance approaches” and is frequently aligned with terms such as distributed, hybrid, face-to-face and virtual learning (Nichols, 2008, p. 4).

More recently, culture has gained attention among authors as an important element of design and delivery of virtual and blended course delivery (Al-Harthi, 2005; Ku & Lohr, 2003; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Still in its nascent stages, there is scant research on the topic and even less on culture as an integral component of technology-mediated graduate education. The rate of research in this area has not kept pace with the rapidly changing technology used to deliver education. Undertaking a study at this time is intended to surface yet unexplored issues in graduate blended courses with culturally diverse student populations.

This exploratory case study sought to discover intercultural issues in graduate blended learning environments. Culture implies multiple concepts including education, income, language, age, skills, ethnicity, experience, religion, race, gender, learning styles, marital status, geography, knowledge, occupation, communication, and generation (Bhawuk, Landis, & Lo, 2006; Hofstede, 1984; Hyatt, Evans, & Haque, 2009; Schein, 2004). For the purposes of this study, intercultural issues were examined through the lens of the graduate student. “Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations” (Schein, 2004, p. 32).

Hispanic Graduate Student Statistics

Throughout the past few decades, the U.S., and particularly in the western and southwestern states, has experienced an increase in the Hispanic population, some of whom are enrolled in graduate and post-graduate programs. This case study was situated in a doctoral degree granting university located in southern California. The university has a diverse population and is classified as a Hispanic serving institution. About half of the participants in this study are Hispanic/Latino/Mexican American/Chicano. Therefore, it is helpful to examine the relevant demographic representation. For the purposes of this study, the term Hispanic will be used as the general descriptor of this population.

According to the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), minority enrollment in graduate and post-graduate level programs in the United States increased annually from 4% in 1986 to 6% in 2006 (Council of Graduate Schools, 2006). During that period, Hispanic student enrollment showed the greatest growth. In 2005, 15% of all Master’s degrees awarded in the United States were earned by minority students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Overall, 84.5% of graduate and post-graduate students in fall 2009 were U.S. citizens or permanent residents, with 15.5% representing international students who were temporary residents (Bell, 2010). First time graduate students who were U.S. citizens or permanent residents and who self-identified as members of racial/ethnic minority groups numbered 24.3%. Hispanic students constituted 7.6% of these students, with African American students at 10.2%, and Asian/Pacific Islanders at 6.0%. More than 70% of U.S. citizen/permanent residents who were first-time enrollees.
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