

## Development of Cultural Flexibility Through Education



### Education

KEYWORDS :

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### ABSTRACT

*Technology plays a prominent role in the field of education in the present scenario. Innovations in education and its methodology are creating a tremendous impact on the society too. Offshore distance education has been transformed by new information and communication technologies. This paper focuses on the cultural diversity in online learning and brings out the importance of flexibility in education concerning cultural issues.*

### Introduction

Technology is increasingly shaping the nature of offshore educational delivery as information and communications technologies now allow educational institutions to extend their reach well beyond the commuting distance of students and staff. (Bates and de los Santos 1997; Blight 1999) Multi-campus universities have become the norm, as it is now much easier for universities to establish numerous dispersed campuses that remain integrated into a single institution by umbilical cords of optical fibre cable.

Offshore distance education has also been transformed by new information and communication technologies. (Bates 1997; Bates and de los Santos 1997) In the earlier print/post phase of distance education, most students were located relatively close to the institution, and almost entirely within the same country. Internationalization was difficult due to the cost, slowness and unreliability of international communications. Distance education has begun to internationalise rapidly with the popularization of e-mail and the advent globalizing the market for distance education, since it is now possible for prospective students to choose from a wide range of web-based courses offered by providers based in many different nations.

### Cultural diversity in online learning

The use of online learning in offshore delivery raises a number of cultural issues. International online learning environments bring together, in an unfamiliar environment, students and educators whose experience of teaching and learning stems from very different cultural traditions. Educators who have taught international students in classrooms come to understand that students from different cultures bring with them different experiences and expectations of teaching and learning. A number of useful guides to teaching international students have been published in Australia recent years. (Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Metzger 1992)

International students who travel to another country expect a different type of education than they are used to and such international exposure is part of the appeal of study abroad for many students. (Rizvi, forthcoming) Australian educators expect international students studying in Australia to adjust to local cultural and educational norms, to a certain extent. However, as Kelly and Ha have pointed out, the situation is very different for students who are studying Australian courses in their home countries, while remaining embedded in their own language, family, work, peer and social groups. (Kelly and Ha1998) For these students, an imported curriculum and pedagogy is transplanted independently of its social context. Students who travel overseas and who are temporarily living in the culture out of which the course emanates and whose values it reflects can make more sense of a foreign form of educational than students who do not know much about the culture from which the educational provider emanates. For this reason, institutions providing courses to offshore international students have a greater responsibility to make their courses culturally appropriate and relevant to international students.

### Responsiveness

In each of the cases mentioned above, educators had consider-

able understanding of their audience-a necessity for effective communication in any medium-and members of the Aboriginal community were involved at each stage of development. This is a necessary first step. Educators must be familiar with their students backgrounds, assumptions and expectations. In international education it means having some familiarity with the students county of origin and the educational practices that the student would be used to in their home country.

This responsiveness, while important, faces two major limitations in international education. Firstly, there is always a multiplicity of cultural formations (however defined) in any educational context, including distinct cultures of the institution, the subject discipline, the teachers and the students (Collis 1999). The examples cited above all aim to help the students and teachers move between different cultures. Any course must be responsive to a number of demands for cultural inclusion, emanating variously from students, teachers, governments, employers and so on. The second qualification to responsiveness is the issue of increasing diversity in student and teacher populations. It becomes difficult to tailor a course to a student body who maybe living in different countries, speak many different languages at home and who may never meet in person. It is reasonable to expect a greater degree of localization in courses that are offered to a small number of distinct student groups, however courses offered transnational are increasingly offered to students in many nations, making responsiveness to local cultures more difficult. For this reason a parallel strategy of cultural flexibility is also crucial in developing sustainable uses of new media in international education.

### Flexibility

Recently, several writers have encouraged the development of cultural flexibility as way of catering to cultural difference in online teaching and learning. Lyn Henderson (1996) advocated courses that manage to allow multiple forms of teaching and learning simultaneously. She suggests that rather than imposing a pre-determined style of engagement, courses should flexible enough to cater for diverse approaches. In spelling out the features of courses that should remain open she lists several aspects of teaching and learning in binary pairs, including pedagogical philosophy (instructive vs constructivism), role of instructor (teacher-proof vs equalitarian facilitator) value of errors (errorless learning vs learning from experience) and motivation (extrinsic vs intrinsic) Her points are that any course should be designed with these continuums in mind and aim to allow students and teachers to choose their own style of learning or teaching as the course progresses. In a recent paper, Betty Collis (1999) has responded to Henderson's call by putting forward design guidelines for the development of such culturally flexible online course support sites. She lists the following ten principles.

### Plan for flexibility and adaptation when the www-based course support system is first designed

Design for a variety of roles for both instructors and students allow roles to be interchangeable or modifiable within the same system offer support for an eclectic variety of types of learning experiences...

Do not assume students will use the course support site as a primary source of course content. . . Books and print materials are better for primary study materials in terms of portability, ease of use and cultural fit than computer materials.

Use the course support site to supplement study materials and to integrate and manage student study activities. The course support site should initially be as empty as possible. to be filled by the course proceeds...

Design the www site so that students and instructors can input and make use of variety of combinations of supplementary media and other resources.

#### **Design for minimal technical levels**

##### **Reduce fixed text on the screen to a minimum**

The requirement for organizational flexibility will may run into opposition from bureaucratic institutions that have developed procedures enabling them to treat students as a mass in order to achieve administrative efficiencies. However they commonly generic study materials which are often produced in the central campus by teachers with little familiarity with offshore students teachers who are distant from their students should be open

about their remoteness and attempt to transform the outlying peripheries into multiple creative centers as much as possible. Building on the local knowledge of face to face teachers in this way requires coordination between a geographically dispersed teaching team.

#### **Conclusion**

As flexible delivery of tertiary education internationalizes, research is needed to inform the development of relevant, appropriate and culturally sensitive pedagogy for the virtual learning spaces that are increasingly being inhabited by students all over the world. In delivering culturally appropriate online education to offshore students developers must ensure that their course both responds to the cultural perspectives of the student population and is flexible enough to allow for multiple ways of studying. In both cases it is crucial that distant instructors are familiar with their students cultural contexts But this understanding is no substitute for face to face relationships between students and their local teachers and efforts to improve cultural sensitivity inflexibly delivered courses must work towards strengthening rather than undermining the close relationships between students and local teaching staff wherever they maybe.