

Distributed Learning Environment in Multicultural Context: A Symposium

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Abstract

Globalization of education in a true sense cannot be achieved only by establishing accessibility, developing cost effective technologies. Due to easy accessibility of information, communication, resources and movement of people from one place to another, teachers in a classroom or outside the classroom have to deal with many more different situations than ever before. Present day classrooms (traditional and virtual) consist of students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. All these issues, challenges and demands cannot be solved overnight or by an individual. Discussions were held on some of these issues during the symposium session through brainstorming, idea generation and visual representation of distributed cognition. General issues of multicultural setup concerning design, delivery and communication in distributed learning environment were discussed. In this article the authors have summarised the points discussed and emerging ideas for future work to be done in this regard.

Introduction

Issues of culture, ethnicity, race, age, gender, digital divide, language, to name just a few, have assumed greater significance in the present day society as a result of changing demographics and the growing national awareness of differences. New skills and knowledge are required in fields such as workforce diversity, human resource management, education, and conflict resolution.

This article deals with issues and concerns emerging from creation and implementation of distributed learning environments in a multicultural context. This has become more important than ever before with the advancement of information and communication technologies and due to increased mobility of people in recent years. A number of researches and publications have been done in the areas of both distributed learning and multicultural education.

A book by Glass & Vrasidas (2002) describes the current state of developments in distance education and distributed learning. Topics covered include research and evaluation in distance education, online communities, faculty productivity, online assessment, critical issues and the digital divide, and the hidden curriculum of e-learning. A paper by Barone, Hawkins and Oblinger (2001) identifies significant issues associated with distributed education and suggests questions to help institutional leaders establish and validate their options. The issues considered in this paper are: (1) challenging assumptions about distributed learning; (2) student learning; (3) strategic goals; (4) intended audiences; (5) market size and growth of distance education; (6) governance and organization; (7) partnerships; (8) quality; (9) policies; (10) barriers; and (11) leadership challenges.

The points discussed in this article are that while current technological advances have made it possible to instruct outside of the classroom setting i.e. in a distributed learning environment, we forget to consider the multicultural context in which the students and the teachers are operating. It has been well researched that conceptual understanding, ways of communication, thinking pattern and behaviour of people are embedded in the culture. Bhattacharya (1999) examined the conceptual understanding of people from different cultural background of a particular reading material. When developing material for distributed learning we emphasize that the material should be of high quality, comprehensive and pedagogically sophisticated. Now the question is how do we do that? How can we develop material, which will cater to a population of all kinds of diverse learners? How should we select the teachers or mentors when dealing with people from anywhere in the world?

Major goals of this symposium are to: (1) offer an opportunity for discussing in-depth the skills, training and understanding required in order to work in a distributed learning environment; (2) focus on some of the unique issues that professionals face in working with a culturally diverse population; and (3) create a multicultural environment in which an open, cross-cultural dialogue can occur.

Discussion

The following points in response to a tentative list of issues and concerns were noted during a brainstorming session following the presentation of the introduction to the symposium:

Stereotyping: Teachers may have unreasonable expectations of their students depending on their cultural backgrounds. For example: Asian students are brighter than others. Thus there is an expectation that Asian children will always excel in mathematics, or that different cultures have preferential learning styles, for example, Polynesian children prefer kinetic learning styles. There may be a presumption that boys don't read or that girls cannot read maps, or that old people cannot learn.

Immigrants and the conflicts of interest among teachers and students. This also covers rural/urban migration: The split in home-school environment and reality for students from different cultures to that of the school can arise from conceptual differences rooted in language usage as well as in habits and customs. For example the language of science may have no equivalent in the home language, so the student fails to grasp the 'reality' of the science concepts. Similarly a student may have housekeeping duties that prevent him/her from doing expected homework or there may not be access to media or other resources required for lessons in the home.

Teachers' open-mindedness vis-à-vis students' achievements: If teachers expect writing and reporting to be carried out to a certain standard he/she may overlook conceptual achievements in the students. For example, a student may express biological terms in the vernacular if these terms are used in the home, and be punished for the language and not recognised for the knowledge. This is similar to problems arising from learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

Teachers' understanding of students' problems arising from cultural contexts: This is similar to other points raised in that culture is embedded in language and values. Cultural differences can be expressed simply in whether a child meets the eyes of a teacher while speaking, smiles at the 'right' times, uses 'acceptable' eating habits or uses 'please' and 'thank you' when expected. Teachers who note these problems can gently guide the students to avoid the problems in the future.

Dilemmas due to differences between value system at home and in school: This can range from religious observation requirements to shared physical education for boys and girls.

Identity crisis: Value conflicts and mismatches between home and school environments may give rise to identity crisis that will accentuate normal adolescent identity problems and make school and learning much harder for the international student.

Gender differences and people perception and behaviour in face-to-face and in on-line environments: On-line education is the most obvious distributed learning environment. The problems and dilemmas associated with this are not just technical. Language becomes the sole method of communication with no body language to impart meaning or soften the impact. Thus in one sense on-line communication removes gender and other cultural barriers, but in another sense allows misunderstandings to develop without recourse to quick correction.

Immersion in the normal classroom. Is this a solution to the problem of multi-cultural issues? Special education needs students have been seen to benefit from mainstreaming if the support systems are strong. Thus multi-cultural issues can be similarly addressed with mentoring, special support classes, peer support and aware teachers.

The digital divide and the generation gap: The older generation does not have the prerequisite knowledge or even the language associated with digital technology.

Music/visual art and culture: This is an area where much multicultural understanding occurs, for example, youth culture can be approached through their music. Much can be said using visual displays and music that may be misunderstood using other methods.

Summary

There needs to be ongoing debate, discussion and research regarding the several related issues discussed and raised in this article. We all need to be mobile, adaptive and work collaboratively along with rapid social and technological changes. It is not possible to resolve conflicts, reduce tensions and solve problems arising from mobility and advancement in the techniques of communication and interaction without considering the multifaceted views of the issues. Therefore, we, the members of the special interest group in AARE and others having similar research interests and concerns, intend to engage in a continuous dialogue through an online discussion forum and collaborative research projects in order to get to some possible answers to the questions through our joint

efforts. Collaborative research in progress will be presented in the forthcoming 3rd Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (<http://www.col.org/pcf3/>).

Reference

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