

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY: INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines instructor multicultural efficacy in global online learning communities. To explore this phenomenon in the Col framework, a two-phase study was conducted with 10 instructors from two Alberta higher education institutions. Phase one comprised creating intercultural competency indicators to test how they developed and expanded existing teaching and social presence indicators. Qualitative data revealed that in the lack of any cross-cultural design, instructors utilize facilitation and open communication strategies to foster learning and prevent conflict. Phase two involved augmenting the 34-item Col survey instrument. Additional roles that relate to instructor cross-cultural efficacy were incorporated into both teaching and social presence elements based on qualitative findings. Quantitative data revealed that the incorporated cultural indicators correlated highly with the teaching and social indicators, indicating their usefulness to measure multicultural efficacy in the Col framework.

Key words: Community of Inquiry Model; CMC; cross-cultural; teaching presence; social presence; instructor cultural awareness; intercultural competency

1 – INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

There is indeed great consensus among scholars that culture plays a major role in online learning [1]. Yet literature on the topic is still in its infancy and there are deficiencies in research-based studies especially in regards to globalization of education and cross-cultural issues [2]. Asynchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) learning communities have afforded a growing number of cross-cultural learners the opportunity to study in internationally renowned universities or institutions without being bound by geographical or temporal constraints [3]. However, as learners cross educational borders, cross-cultural learners are faced with myriad issues and challenges. Studies have revealed that some of the factors that hinder successful online learning are as follows: inability to understand specific cultural references, language limitations, inability to question authority (instructor or peers), differing emotional needs, time zone limitations, and technological limitations [4]. There are indeed other major cultural issues that may negatively impact cross-cultural online learners.

The Col framework is geared toward providing a theoretical framework that addresses how learning and teaching can be achieved in dynamic yet intricate online learning environments through the use of effective communities of practical inquiry. The model contemplates the complexities of written communication in achieving and fostering higher-order thinking skills in online and blended higher education. Although the Col framework is becoming increasingly influential for explaining and prescribing effective conduct of collaborative constructivist online learning and teaching [5], it does not consider cultural issues and multicultural online engagement [6].

The core elements that constitute the Col framework are: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Cognitive presence is perceived as vital to achieving effective educational outcomes and it “*reflects the inquiry and learning process*” [7]. The function of teaching presence is to design, facilitate, and direct the cognitive and social processes of learners for the purpose of realizing educational goals [8]. Social presence is the degree to which a person is able to identify with the group or course study, communicate

effectively in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships by projecting his/her individual personality in CMC [9].

This study explores how instructors of asynchronous text-based online courses accommodate and make provisions for culturally diverse learners in online communities of inquiry. The main premise of this research is that, because instructors project their individual personalities in the online environment via their teaching and social presence, both of which are largely rooted in their dominant culture, their values, beliefs, and attitudes will significantly affect learners' social and cognitive presence. The term culture is defined in this study as "*the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual*" [10]. Cross-cultural students may find it more difficult to project themselves socially in asynchronous online learning environments due to inherent cultural differences and backgrounds. "Cross-cultural" refers to interaction among individuals from different cultures (<http://tinyurl.com/44v1wv3>). In the context of this study "cross-cultural" specifically refers to individuals who may or may not be currently living in Canada but were born in another country and whose native language is notably not English or individuals who identify with a culturally distinct group (e.g., Aboriginals, French Canadians, or a new immigrant group now residing in Canada). Based on data collected from two survey instruments, the Adapted Multicultural Efficacy Questionnaire (AMEQ) and the Col questionnaire, this study proposes a revised 37-item Col survey instrument for measuring instructor multicultural efficacy in an online community of inquiry.

2 – The Study

This study was guided by two theoretical frameworks: the Col framework and the Multicultural Efficacy Scale (MES) framework. The MES was finalized as a 35- instrument, with subscales to measure experience, attitude, efficacy and instructors' views on multicultural teaching [11]. As the MES was originally developed for traditional face-to-face classroom environments and was applied to undergraduate and graduate teacher education students from several geographic regions across the United States, it underwent adaptations and was transformed into an open-ended survey questionnaire, the Adapted Multicultural

Efficacy Scale (AMEQ). This enabled verification of the scale's applicability and reliability in a different context.

3 – Methodology

The main research question leading this research is: How do instructors accommodate and make provisions for cross-cultural learners in an online community of learning? To better understand this phenomenon and build on the existing Col framework, this study applied a sequential exploratory strategy in which the level of mixing was partially mixed, time orientation was sequential, and greater emphasis was placed on the qualitative phase of the study than on the quantitative one. The sequential approach enables the researcher to obtain themes and specific statements from participants in an initial qualitative data collection, and then use these statements as specific items and the themes for scales to add on to an existing survey instrument [¹²].

3.1 – Participant's Demographic Information

Ten instructors from two Alberta higher education institutions who were currently teaching predominantly asynchronous text-based online undergraduate or graduate courses in which there were individuals who may or may not be currently living in Canada but were born in another country and whose native language is notably not English or individuals who identify with a culturally distinct group (e.g., Aboriginals, French Canadians or a new immigrant group now residing in Canada) constituted the context of this study. The demographic data shows that seven of the instructors were female and three were male. Four instructors were in the 35-44 years age bracket; one in the 45-54 years age bracket; four in the 55-64 age bracket; and one in the 65-74 age bracket. Seven of the 10 instructors were Canadian. One instructor was Indian, one Greek, and one Dutch.

4– Data Collection and Analysis for Phase 1

Data for the qualitative phase (phase 1) of this study was collected using the Adapted Multicultural Efficacy Questionnaire (AMEQ), designed to assess instructors' perceived multicultural efficacy in teaching cross-cultural students

online. This survey contained fifteen open-ended survey questions. A “grounded theory” approach [13] to the analysis and interpretation of data was used. Ten cultural indicator categories (*accommodation(ACC); contextualization(CON); creation of safe spaces(CSS); encouragement(ENC); anticipation(ANT); prevention(PREV); adaptation(ADAP); identification(ID); knowledge of diversity(KOD); and supportive of diversity(SOD)*) were loaded into NVivo 9.0 to determine how they related to the Col elements of teaching and social presence. Cultural indicators were extracted from the AMEQ questions and were devised to be straightforward in meaning. Social presence was analyzed in the responses to the AMEQ questionnaire by coding for affective expression (SP-AE), open communication (SP-OC), and group cohesion (SP-GC) [14]. Teaching presence was coded for design and organization (TP-D), facilitating discourse (TP-F), and direct instruction (TP-DI) [15]. Evidence within and underneath the discussions about cultural differences was looked for to evaluate if social presence and teaching presence would emerge from the data.

4.1 – Building onto the Col instrument

Matrix coding queries that combined the Col presences with the cultural descriptors and indicators were run to cross-reference data. The objective of this was to determine frequencies and patterns in relation to the impact of the 10 cultural indicators and descriptors on the Col teaching presence and social presence elements. Cultural indicators that correlated highly with design, facilitation, and open communication generated a final coding scheme or a code family. In light of the matrix query results, three new indicators, two for teaching presence and one for social presence, which consider the role of instructors in an intercultural context, were incorporated into the original 34-item Col survey instrument. Namely: (i) question 35. *The instructor allows for adjustments to the design and organization when necessary to accommodate cultural diversity*; (ii) question 36. *The instructor supports interaction among culturally diverse learners*; and (iii) question 37. *Open communication in this community allows for culturally diverse presentation*. Consequently, the revised version of the Col instrument administered to the sample population contained 37 items.

5 – Data Collection and Analysis for Phase 2

Data for the quantitative phase of this study (phase 2) was collected using the revised version of the Col survey instrument. Ordinal responses were scored using a Likert-like scale that ranged from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Frequency distributions, expressed as percentages, comprised 13 teaching presence indicators, 9 social presence indicators and 3 cultural indicators in the Col survey instrument (questions 35, 36, and 37 incorporated into the Col survey instrument after the qualitative analysis), and were calculated according to the total number of respondents. To calculate whether there was any degree of association among the variables, teaching presence, social presence, and cultural indicators, Spearman's rank correlation non-parametric measure was utilized. The null hypothesis was that there would be no association between the variables in the underlying population.

6 –Qualitative and Quantitative Results

Findings for the cultural indicator ACC when cross-referenced with teaching presence-design (TP-D) revealed that three instructors adapted curricula and instructional activities to cater to the needs of culturally diverse students, one instructor modified assignments to align with the student's context and four instructors stated that although they did not design instructional activities for non-Canadian cultures, learners were free to apply the instructional material to their own personal context or culture. Data for the cultural indicator CON when cross-referenced with TP-D showed that three instructors are sensitive to and take into account religious and demographic issues when adapting curricula and activities; two instructors take into account the gender of the student and five instructors take into account language limitations and barriers. Instructor responses for ADAP in regards to teaching presence – facilitation (TP-F) included: deciding on the appropriate choice of technology for international students, being flexible in relation to what the learner needs to achieve from a particular assignment, being flexible in due dates, acquiring knowledge on culturally diverse student populations, promoting collaborative

work between students from different cultures, and making adaptations or modifications in assignments based on the personal requirements and needs of the learners. Data for ENC revealed that eight instructors agreed that promoting cross-cultural collaborative engagement was important in the online environment. Findings for ID indicated that only four instructors were able to identify solutions to possible online cultural clashes in addition to presenting solutions to remedy these cultural clashes. Data for the cultural indicator PREV showed that instructors develop assignments and exams to be understood by all, check the “user profile” in Moodle and the “welcome forum” to detect potential cultural or language difficulties, offer extra support to students with language proficiency problems, encourage students with language limitations to proofread their work, and check language issues to make amendments as appropriate. Finally, datum for SOD revealed that instructors not only support diversity but also foster cross-cultural collaboration. Data for the cultural indicator *knowledge of diversity* (KOD) when cross-referenced with social presence - open communication showed that 50% of the instructors not only value the different perspectives and experiences of culturally diverse learners because it enhances their learning experience but also agree that these different perspectives contribute to the overall quality of the online discussions.

Data analysis of the frequency distributions of the teaching presence questions in the Col survey instrument showed that 52% of the respondents agreed and 43% of the respondents strongly agreed with the 13 teaching presence indicators. Frequency distributions for social presence questions revealed that 68% of the respondents agreed, 14% strongly agreed, 14% were neutral, and 4% disagreed with the 9 indicators for social presence. Frequency distributions for the three incorporated cultural indicator questions to the Col survey instrument showed that 45% of the respondents agreed, 40% strongly agreed, 7% were neutral, and 7% disagreed. Results for Spearman’s rank correlation test showed that there was a strong degree of correlation between the cultural indicators and the teaching presence indicators (0,86 r_s). The degree of correlation between the cultural indicators and indicators for social presence was a bit more moderate (0, 73 r_s). Findings demonstrate that the

variables have a strong relationship, indicating that the cultural indicator is first an artifact of teaching presence, but also a concept that relates to social presence.

7 – Conclusion

Qualitative data results revealed that: (i) instructors appear to be quite cognizant of cultural diversity and have strong multicultural efficacy in terms of their knowledge of diversity and the strategies that they use to promote learning and prevent conflict; (ii) in the absence of any cross-cultural design, instructors use facilitation activities that take into account cultural diversity when assigning group work that encourages learners to apply the course contents to their own personal contexts and that encourages multiple perspectives in online discussions; and (iii) open communication seems to be a strategy for promoting learning and preventing conflict. Quantitative data results indicated that: (i) most instructors are not only aware of the importance of design and organization in the Col context, but also willing to make necessary adjustments to accommodate culturally diverse learners; (ii) supporting interaction between culturally diverse learners via facilitation is a practice adopted by most respondents; and (iii) 56% of the respondents agreed that open communication enables learners to present themselves as culturally diverse.

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