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Globalization, Culture, and Online Distance Learning

Charlotte N. Gunawardena

Globalization, the Internet, and access to telecommunication networks have increased the demand for education and educational quality across the globe. The reasons for this demand explains Carnoy (2005) are two-fold: The first is economic, the rising payoffs to higher education in a global, science-based, knowledge intensive economy make university training more of a “necessity” to get “good” jobs, which in turn, changes the stakes at lower levels of schooling and the demand for high-quality secondary schools. The second reason is socio-political: Demographics and democratic ideals increase pressure on universities to provide access to groups that traditionally have not attended university. In this context, online distance learning (ODL), which can transcend local, state, and national borders, has the potential to reach out internationally to enhance learning for diverse learners in varied geographical and socio-cultural contexts and increase inter-cultural awareness and communication. In addition, demand is propelled by rising awareness of the potential for online education to provide services to nearly any location on the planet.

Although distance learning can transcend geographical boundaries, differences in sociocultural contexts, values, and expectations of diverse educational systems and learners may prove to be its greatest challenge (Hanna,

2000). While distance educators proclaim an international focus with international content and learners, instructional design, teaching methods, and learning activities frequently carry Western bias (defined for this chapter as Eurocentric and North American). Moore, Shattuck, and Al-Harthi (2005) point out that American and European distance education is guided by certain theories, which are derived from American and European culture, and that it is important to raise questions about how the views of teaching and learning based on these theories might come into conflict with the values that underpin the cultures of students taking courses from or in other countries. They further note that the potential of online distance education to become a global phenomenon will be frustrated as long as educators in more technologically developed countries fail to understand the needs and perspectives of students in other countries, and that the potential to learn from the perspectives of people in other countries will be lost for students in more technologically developed countries. The promise of a global e-learning system, they observe, can only be realized by better understanding the views of learning in different cultural contexts. Therefore, in order to provide quality education to diverse audiences, distance educators should be sensitive to hegemonic perspectives, “the imposition of cultural values and practices” (Latchem, 2005, p. 189), educational differences, and the social, cultural and language assumptions embedded in courses.

This chapter explores issues related to the impact of globalization and culture on online distance learning. It is organized into four parts. In Part I, I begin by taking a closer look at what *globalization* means and then explore some of the debates that surround this term and the impact of globalization for online distance learning design. In Part II, I attempt to define *culture*, specifically culture for the online context, and explore several theoretical dimensions that can be used to explain cultural variability. Part III is focussed on examining research on how culture influences online education related to four selected areas: diverse educational expectations; learners and preferred ways of learning; the sociocultural environment and online interaction; and language and issues related to second language speakers. Part IV concludes with a discussion of issues related to researching cultural factors in online distance learning. I address issues of culture from a review of literature, as well as from my own previous discussion of the topic (Gunawardena, in press; Gunawardena & La Pointe, 2007; Gunawardena & La Pointe, 2008), and research conducted in China, Mexico, Morocco, Spain, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and the United States.

Globalization is a difficult concept to define. Generally, it means global interconnectedness and interdependence, but there are many interpretations about what this really means. Block and Cameron (2002) define *globalization* by citing Giddens's (1990, p. 64) definition: "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distance localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton (2003) after discussing many concepts related to globalization, define it as:

a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions—assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact—generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power. (p. 68)

In this context *flows* refer to the movements of physical artifacts, people, symbols, tokens, and information across space and time, while *networks* refer to regularized or patterned interactions between independent agents, nodes of activity, or sites of power. Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton (2003) emphasize that globalization is not conceived as in opposition to localization, regionalism, or nationalism, which are more spatially limited processes, but on the contrary, as standing in a complex and dynamic relationship with them. For example, processes such as regionalization can create the necessary kinds of economic, social, and physical infrastructures, which facilitate and complement the deepening of globalization. This definition, therefore, affords us the opportunity to see the complex and dynamic interplay between localization and globalization.

While the concept of globalization is debated from many perspectives related to economics, culture, identity, politics, and technology, one debate in particular is relevant here. According to Block and Cameron (2002) this debate concerns the extent to which globalization is a homogenizing process. While some view it as promoting standardization and uniformity, others discuss concepts such as *hybridization* (Pieterse, 1995) and *globalization* (Robertson, 1995) to make the point that globalization involves a synergetic relationship between the global and local as opposed to any necessary dominance of the former over the latter. They further point out

that while some see globalization as hegemonically Western, and above all an extension of American imperialism, others make the point that the process is more dispersed and that it is unhelpful to frame the discussion in terms of Western dominance over “the rest.” “Arising from such debates about Western hegemony and the relative strength of the local is the question of whether globalization is on balance a ‘positive’ or a ‘negative’ phenomenon” (p. 3). For those who consider globalization as an unfortunate (or fortunate) fact of life, it is better to engage with the present, forging new identities, organizations and ways of life, rather than dreaming of a return to the past.

“Globalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 1). The reciprocal relationship between these two is an important one; globalization needs to be understood through the lens of culture and cultural identity. While nationally shaped cultures such as those in the USA, India, and Japan still exist, the global flow of information and migration of people make it possible for persons to construct their own identities. Block and Cameron (2002) point out that the continuing and relatively intense interaction between diaspora communities and ancestral communities elsewhere in the world made easier by the communication technologies that accompany globalization, spur the development of plural or hybrid identities, challenging the assumption that people must identify with a single imagined community or geographic region.

Demographics change as technologies and transportation connect people. Cultural migration influences the formation of new communities as people cross borders, creating multiple cultures. We are becoming members of a planetary community as evidenced by transnational cultures that are not wholly based in any single place (Heaton, 2001, p. 221). International distance education caters to those individuals who are unable or unwilling to reside in one single location.

From an economic perspective, educational systems are judged by their contributions to the development of goods and services, quality human resources, and national development goals (Panda, 2005). The need for education extends beyond the individual’s desire to learn serving as an economic resource for national growth, competitiveness, poverty reduction, and quality of life (The World Bank, 2005). Nations look for education to assist with the development of socially and economically useful skills (Day,

2005; Badat, 2005), addressing the needs of those at the margins (Panda, 2005), addressing the whole person (Visser, 2005), and contributing to a peaceful globe. Since all nations can potentially gain from incorporating the knowledge of other countries and cultures into their thinking and actions, international learning networks should be conceived as horizontal (localized), vertical (globalized), and bottom-up as well as hub-periphery (Afele, 2003).

While the new information and communication technologies that connect us in a globalized world have their advantages and attractiveness, the problems of education are always more complex than solutions provided by technology alone. Technology connects us but it is not culturally neutral. Solely focussing on the technology and the view of learning that it facilitates influences the designer and instructor to look at learning in prescribed ways, usually ignoring alternative, cultural views (Visser, 2005). With technology, come the questions of who will use it and what meanings the users will assign to it (Heaton, 2001).

The affordances of the technologies are constrained by the traditional forms of expression people use. Thorne (2003), after analyzing three case studies, observes that Internet communication (like other technologies) is not neutral media. She notes, "The cultures-of-use of Internet communication tools, their perceived existence and on-going construction as distinctive cultural artifacts, differs interculturally just as communicative genre, pragmatics, and institutional context would be expected to differ interculturally" (Thorne, 2003, p. 38).

One of the main criticisms of globalization is the perception of an underlying tendency to colonize and import dominant paradigms into contexts that are either unfriendly to those paradigms or that can be harmed by those solutions (Carr-Chellman, 2005). Inherent within what some naively perceive as a value neutral tool—the Internet-based technologies used for online learning—are culturally biased amplifications that have their roots in the Industrial Revolution, which according to Bowers (cited in Carr-Chellman, 2005, p. 9) are: (1) context-free forms of knowledge; (2) conduit view of language; (3) Western view of autonomous individuals; (4) Western ways of experiencing time; (5) Western value of anthropocentrism; and (6) subjectively determined moral values. Carr-Chellman (2005) argues that making a single online course that is available worldwide is efficient but culturally and contextually bankrupt. In order to make a product truly marketable globally

it is necessary to homogenize it, or to allow for its radical customization by end users. Carr-Chellman argues, "Isn't learning necessarily contextualized in our own cultures and contexts?" (pp. 9–10). Globalization should not blind us to the need to help individuals and groups build on their own cultural traditions and unique strengths (Mintzberg, 2003).

Block and Cameron (2002) point out that distance is not an issue in a globalized world with advanced telecommunication systems, but language remains an issue of practical importance. Global communication not only requires a shared communications channel such as the Internet but also a shared linguistic code. For many who engage in global communication, the relevant linguistic codes will have been learned rather than natively acquired. This means that members of global networks need to develop competence in one or more additional languages and/or master new ways of using languages they know already. "Globalization changes the conditions in which language learning and language teaching takes place" (p. 2). The new technologies demand new literacies and new communication skills.

One of the most important reasons for understanding cultural factors is the awareness it raises of our own cultural identity (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). "The reason man does not experience his true cultural self is that until he experiences another self as valid, he has little basis for validating his own self" (Hall, 1973, p. 213). A better understanding of one's own self as well as alternative approaches to learning lies in exposure and study of new ideas, techniques, strategies, and methodologies (Muirhead, 2005).

In discussing the implications of globalization for distance learning in the United States, Boubsil, Carabajal, and Vidal (2011) ask two fundamental questions: Will the academic programs of American-model institutions reflect American cultures and values or will they adapt to reflect local culture? And "what does adaptation mean?" (p. 10). They note that there is no quick and easy solution to these issues. While face-to-face programs have to reflect the host country culture, values, and customs to be successful, international students and host country governments that sponsor students insist on getting the same programs and content as in the United States. Finding such a balance requires effort and capital outlays that universities may not be ready or willing to embark on. While online distance learning expands curriculum and delivery opportunities for improving the quality of the learning experience, these curricular choices also present a host of challenges when considering international distance education programs.

According to Boubsil, Carabajal, and Vidal (2011) these include several factors: (1) Linguistic plurality: To what extent do English-dominated learning platforms disadvantage those for whom English is the second language and how does one address instructional examples, idioms, writing style, and so on that does not easily transfer across cultures? (2) Innovations in pedagogical methods: To what extent should online curriculum continue to impose Western approaches to learning on students from other cultures for whom debate, critical questioning, collaboration, and discussion may prove alien and difficult? (3) Localized cultural character of online programs: To what extent does the curriculum encourage local initiatives, which value local culture and promote national, regional beliefs, skills, and knowledge? (4) Relevant content: Does the content of online courses fit local needs in terms of applicability and job-related skills? and (5) Teaching models of faculty: Who will teach what to whom and with what effect? Some of these factors are also echoed in Sadykova and Dautermann's (2009) four domains that are critical to address in international online distance education: (1) host institution, (2) technology, (3) learning models of students, and (4) teaching models of faculty.

Mason (1998) recommends three approaches to globalizing education: beginning in areas of curriculum that have global content so all participants have an equal status and an equal contribution to make; trans-border consortia, where each partner contributes courses to the pool to avoid the trap of the dominant provider and the dependent receiver; and focussing on developing resources and international contacts to enable one's own students to become global citizens and not focussing at all on exporting courses.

Developing international distance education also presents ethical challenges. Very often ethical principles are culture-bound, and intercultural conflicts arise from different perspectives of ethical behaviour. Understanding the sociocultural context helps us to distinguish ethical from unethical behaviours given differences in cultural priorities and to develop guidelines for ethical behaviour within our courses. Boubsil, Carabajal, and Vidal (2011) conclude that these issues will shape the dialogue of transnational curriculum delivery in an era when cultural and linguistic plurality could well become a hallmark of transnational distance education. Recent interest in the development of massive online open courses (MOOCs) will provide fertile ground for addressing some of these issues related to globalization.

Many of the studies that have examined the role of culture in ODL (Gunawardena, et al., 2001; Moore, Shattuck, and Al-Harhi, 2005; Uzuner, 2009) have defined *culture* by employing the four dimensions of nationally held cultural values: individualism–collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity–femininity, developed by Hofstede (1980, 1986) based on a factor analysis of business-oriented cultural values; and dimensions of contextual information, high- and low-context communication styles advanced by Hall (1973, 1990).

Ess (2009) provides a considered critique of the applicability of Hofstede's framework to the online context and notes that what interests CMC researchers is how national as well as other cultural identities, such as ethnicity, youth culture, and gender, and so forth, interact with intercultural communication online, which is already removed from the face-to-face setting. Very often those who communicate online identify with multiple frames of reference. They note that Hofstede's framework (1980) and to a lesser extent Hall's (1973, 1990) conceptualization of culture appear to be limited to national cultural differences and thus less well-suited for understanding and researching the multiple cultural differences within nation-states, including the third or hybrid identities that are themselves fostered by the cultural flows facilitated by the Internet and the Web.

Our research (Gunawardena, Idrissi Alami, Jayatilleke, & Bouacharine, 2009) supports this view by showing that, although Sri Lankan and Moroccan societies would be classified in Hofstede's framework as high-power distance societies, participants from these countries look to the online medium as a liberating medium that equalizes status differences, thereby providing them with a level playing field. Therefore, their interactions online will not necessarily reflect high-power distance communication, even though their culture would be classified as high-power distance. On the other hand, we found Hall's (1973, 1990) conceptualization of high-context and low-context communication styles, and implied indirect and direct communication styles, useful for analyzing cultural differences in communication online. Context is important to understanding a message and its connotations in both Moroccan and Sri Lankan cultures. Many Moroccans and Sri Lankans adopt indirect communication styles in face-to-face communication. Therefore, Hall's conceptualization helped us to analyze if there were

changes in communication styles when participants interacted online, or whether they were using the same communication styles online as they would use face-to-face (Gunawardena et al., 2009).

Goodfellow and Hewling (2005), and Goodfellow and Lamy (2009), like Ess (2009) critique the essentialist frameworks developed by Hofstede and Hall to describe national cultural characteristics as inappropriate for understanding culture in transnational online learning contexts. Goodfellow and Hewling (2005) move from an essentialist to a *negotiated* perspective to conceptualize culture as being negotiated in online discussions. This stance on seeing culture as negotiated is similar to Hall's definition of *culture* as communication: "Culture is communication and communication is culture" (Hall, 1990, p. 186). Raffaghelli and Richieri (2012) note that "Networked learning should emphasize Bruner's idea about education as *forum* where culture is not transmitted but generated through interaction" (pp. 102-103) leading to new learning cultures.

Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) undertake the task of problematizing the very notion of culture in connection with online learning environments and move on to develop the concept of *learning cultures*, which takes account of the emergence of new cultural and social identities in virtual learning communities that draw on cybercultures of the Internet as well as from systems of cultural relations inherited from conventional educational or corporate settings. They note that the emergence of learning cultures might transcend both the institutional cultures of learning in which the resources originated and the cultural learning styles predominant in the sites where they were taken up:

It is characteristic of online learning cultures that the negotiation of personal and social identities is integral to learning, just as a critical awareness of culture is integral to a nonhegemonic model of online learning. . . . The identities of participants become part of the knowledge constructed as well as the means of construction. (Goodfellow and Lamy, 2009, p. 176)

Therefore, one can come to terms with the complexity of culture in online courses by defining it from the perspective of the Internet as a culture in its own right, blurring the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds. Creating and participating in new communities is one of the primary pleasures people have interacting online, and these communities develop their own conventions for interaction and for what is acceptable

and not acceptable behaviour online (Baym, 1995). "This web of verbal and textual significances that are substitutes for and yet distinct from the networks of meaning of the wider community binds users into a common culture whose specialized meanings allow the sharing of imagined realities" (Reid 1995, p. 183). Ess (2009) expands this line of thought further by exploring the notion that technology itself is culturally produced and thus is also a culturally shaped artifact, in contrast to the notion that technology is culturally neutral or just a tool and hence its design and implementation requires no attention to its cultural origin. He discusses how digital environments can create *third cultures* where identity can be constructed and negotiated through interaction with other participants.

Thus, subscribing to a view of culture as negotiated online, I have adopted the definition of *culture* as an "idioculture," a concept developed by Gary Alan Fine and cited by Cole and Engestrom (2007), in my own work (Gunawardena et al., 2009) as an appropriate definition of culture online:

An idioculture is a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation they will be understood by other members, thus being used to construct a reality for the participants. (Fine, 1987, p. 125)

This definition accommodates the idea of culture as a locally emerging activity system involving a briefer stretch of history (Cole & Engestrom, 2007), and it includes multiple cultural selves and hybrid identities on the Internet that interact with each other cross-culturally to form unique cultures of their own. The definition allows for the development of culture through dialogue, negotiation, and the sharing of experiences. The definition fits well with the ephemeral, fluid nature of the Internet, which fuels the development of cybercultures, cultures that emerge among those who use the Internet to communicate, developing its own etiquette, norms, customs, ethics and mythology, just as an idioculture does.

With this definition of culture online, I next explore a selection of research studies on culture and online distance learning.

Several researchers (Edmundson, 2007; Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007; Uzuner, 2009; Wang & Reeves, 2007) have noted the dearth of research in the field of culture and online learning. This could be partly because developing definitions of *culture* for the online context, framing questions related to culture, and conducting cross-cultural research studies is challenging. Zawacki-Richter (2009), in his Delphi study of research areas in distance education, noted that the role of culture and cultural differences in global distance learning programs should receive much more attention. In this study, globalization of education and cross-cultural aspects were deemed by distance education experts to be important areas for distance education research. In this light, an editorial in the *American Journal of Distance Education* by Moore (2006) and the research review by Uzuner (2009) addressing questions of culture in distance education are noteworthy.

Discussing recent research that addressed issues of culture, Moore develops a list of questions on cultural factors in cross-border distance education that future researchers should address. Uzuner reviewed 27 studies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) that addressed questions of culture and distance education and called for continued research that is grounded in sound methodology. Other areas of hope for research addressing culture and online distance education are recent international conferences that have begun to address the issue, and noteworthy among them is the Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication (CATAc) conference held biennially (<http://www.cataconference.org/>) since 1998.

In the following section I address research studies on selected factors, such as diverse educational expectations, preferred ways of learning, the sociocultural environment, and language, where cultural differences can affect online education.

DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Different cultures bring different attitudes toward education and its purpose. In Uzuner's (2009) review of studies on questions of culture, researchers express broad agreement that the diverse cultural assumptions students bring to online learning concerning how teaching and learning should be

done bring about conflicts, disagreements, and frustrations. Consider the philosophical differences reflected in the following two statements by learners whom La Pointe and Barrett (2005) interviewed: “I don’t know what I’ll do with my education; I’m basically purposing my degree to meet a personal goal I set for myself” (Joan, an American student). “The purpose of my education is to learn as much as I can and share that knowledge with others, so our nation can become great” (Luming, a Taiwanese student). The American student chose to pursue education for self-benefit while the Taiwanese student’s purpose focussed on economic well-being and serving the nation. One could doubtlessly find many other distance students who are studying for purely instrumental or vocational reasons. Students have very different motives, and likely they are culturally as well as individually linked.

Traditionally, teaching in Mainland China and many other countries involved the teacher standing on a raised platform lecturing and interrogating from the front of the room to large groups of students. Choral responses in teacher-led recitations reflected the traditional value on the collective, the community consensus, and the uniform conduct in social interaction (Hu, 2004). Memorization is the most reliable and desirable attribute a student can have to ensure school success, for “The Chinese cultural tradition has always stressed memorization in education to ensure the transmission of culture from one generation to the next” (p. 637).

Today in Asia e-learning is used to explore innovative strategies to promote engagement through active and independent learning, self-assessment, digital libraries, and just-in-time learning. There is emphasis on (a) designing authentic learning tasks to facilitate learning engagement and (b) providing support and media-rich resources (Hedberg & Ping, 2005). This model is, of course, markedly different than the pedagogical model described earlier, leaving room for challenging adoption and potential confusion.

Many online courses being offered in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and India offer video lectures online and on demand, so learners can continue to “see and hear” their instructors giving lectures. Eye movement, gestures, gaze, and the human voice provide the contextual information learners from high-context cultures rely upon to interpret meaning. Thus ODL is sustaining rather than challenging traditional understanding of formal education.

Turkey's culture and oral traditions have emphasized the sacredness of the text, honour the responsibility of the professor to interpret the text, and expect students to memorize the professor's words (Gursoy, 2005). In many developing countries, the quality of education is not seen as a property of the system or the intelligibility of materials but as a property of the students measured by their performance on examinations. In such environments, assessment of student performance by group work presents a challenge. The paradigm of flexibility, openness, and the self-paced, independent learner is not a value-free, neutral idea. Likewise, a teacher who functions primarily as facilitator, learning designer, organizer, and friendly critic (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998) is not a global ideal. The cultural values of individualism, secularism, and feminism are not recognized as desirable in many cultures that place higher value on religion, group efforts, and well-defined gender roles (McIsaac, 1993).

Most Western learners and instructors, believe that each learner (a) is a distinct individual, (b) controls his or her behaviour, (c) is responsible for outcomes of behaviour, (d) is oriented toward personal achievement, and (e) frequently believes group membership compromises goal achievement (Nisbett, 2003). Many learners from Asian countries, on the other hand, believe success is a group goal as well as a national goal. Attaining group goals is tied to maintaining harmonious social relations. These differences in expectations have implications for designing the online learning environment and learner support systems to meet the needs of these diverse learners.

LEARNERS AND PREFERRED WAYS OF LEARNING

People reared in different cultures learn to learn differently (Merriam, 2007). Some do so by following behaviourist theory—pattern drill, memory, and rote; some work in groups by learning through interaction with others to cross the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). In today's learning environments, whether face-to-face or distance, one will encounter diverse learners and preferred ways of learning. As Moore (2006, p. 4) asks, "how to set up a course and manage it so as to induce the different forms of understanding that lie in the culture represented by each student, to the greater benefit of the whole class?"

Facilitating learning for diverse learners requires putting learner needs first rather than institutional or national needs. Generally, the primary theory of knowledge construction underlying most emerging online course designs emphasizes the exchange of ideas, expressions of agreement and disagreement to construct meaning. Biesenbach-Lucas (2003), in her survey of the differences between native and non-native students in their perceptions of asynchronous discussions, found that both groups of students tended to avoid challenge-and-explain cycles where they had to do more than demonstrate knowledge by also agreeing and disagreeing in non-abrasive ways. She notes that non-native speakers, particularly students from Asian countries, consider it far less appropriate to challenge and criticize the ideas of others. In addition, they may not know how to express disagreement appropriately in English. She cites similar findings of the absence of challenge to the input of others in Wegerif's (1998) study and in Curtis and Lawson's study of asynchronous discussions (2001), attributed to lack of sufficient exchanges among students, but which is likely linked to culturally induced reluctance to debate.

Biesenbach-Lucas notes that this lack of challenge and disagreement of ideas is troubling as it is the "resolution of such areas of agreement and disagreement that 'results in higher forms of reasoning' because 'cognitive development requires that individuals encounter others who contradict their own intuitively derived ideas.'" (p. 37). The point we need to consider here is whether such challenges to ideas expressed by others and discussion of disagreement at the level of ideas in online discussions is a necessary condition for higher forms of reasoning or knowledge construction, or whether it is merely an expectation from a Western point of view, particularly American. Going further, we need to consider whether higher cognitive reasoning and knowledge construction can happen without such open disagreement of ideas. The following discussion of studies from Mexico and Sri Lanka provides a different perspective from two different cultural contexts.

Lopez-Islas (2001) analyzed knowledge construction in online discussion forums at Monterrey Tech-Virtual University in Mexico using the Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM). The IAM describes five stages in the process of knowledge construction: 1) sharing, comparing, and agreement; 2) cognitive dissonance or disagreement of ideas; 3) negotiation of meaning and co-construction of knowledge; 4) testing and modification of proposed co-construction; and 5) application

of newly constructed meaning. Lopez-Islas observed that open disagreement with ideas expressed by others is not appropriate in the Mexican cultural context; therefore, participants moved to knowledge construction without moving through the cognitive dissonance phase as described in the IAM model.

We found a similar result in our studies, which employed the IAM model to examine the impact of cross-cultural e-mentoring on social construction of knowledge in asynchronous discussion forums between American e-mentors and Sri Lankan protégés (Gunawardena et al., 2008; and Gunawardena et al., 2011). The Sri Lankan participants did not openly disagree at the level of ideas but moved to negotiation of meaning and co-construction of new knowledge based on consensus building. Therefore, we had to redefine *dissonance* as specified in the IAM model in cultural terms. Sri Lankan learners were often very polite before discussing and disagreeing about a point with another learner. In the following quote, a learner acknowledges the work done by another person before providing a suggestion to make it better:

The suggested outline seems to be ok. I think, if possible it's better if we all can contribute to all the topics because different persons will look at an issue in different point of views. So we will be able to gather more information and later we can decide what to include in the final report.
(Gunawardena et al., 2008, p. 7)

This quote exemplified the way in which Sri Lankan participants built consensus online as they interacted with each other and an international e-mentor. In further exploration of the online asynchronous interactions, we found that while the academic discussion was very polite and lacked open disagreement of ideas, strong opinions and disagreements were expressed by the same participants in the informal online virtual cafe, where they engaged in a heated debate about gender issues. This finding made us reflect on the role of culture in academic online discussions. It is possible that collectivist traits in both the Sri Lankan and Mexican cultural contexts may have transferred to online group interaction in an academic setting where open disagreement of ideas would make the participants uncomfortable. Yet, it also shows that these very same participants as noted in the Sri Lankan context would engage in a heated debate in an informal discussion space. So, the context of the discussion, whether it was formal or informal, is key in the expression of open disagreement. This is an interesting cultural

difference that should be explored further in online cross-cultural communication contexts.

From his study of a global e-mail debate on intercultural communication, Chen (2000) showed that differences in thinking patterns and expression styles influence student reactions to teaching methods. The debate format caused orientation problems for some participants, as the debate is a product of low-context culture that requires a direct expression of one's argument by using logical reasoning. Many students who come from high-context cultures in Asia and Latin America find an argumentative format uncomfortable in an academic context, and this discomfort is exacerbated when the debate is facilitated through a medium devoid of non-verbal cues. Further insight into this cultural difference is provided in Covey's DVD (2005), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, when an interviewee who identifies himself as predominantly Anglo-Saxon and American makes a comparison between Western and Asian ways of looking at life in the context of Mauritius, a predominantly Asian society. He observes:

I have a very Anglo Saxon upbringing and which I think is also very American. And we have a confrontational system in the West. Two ideas confront, they fight it out, and the best one wins. Now, what I have learned here where the majority of the population is Asiatic, now the Asiatics have a completely different way of looking at life. Their way of looking at it is you look at what your opponent's, what his position is, and you try to get as close to his position as possible. (2005, no. 6)

In this same video, another interviewee, discussing the Asian perspective, points out the importance of listening to others, considering their opinions, and accepting them. The idea is to take a little bit of everything to get a better end result.

Fahy and Ally (2005), in their study of online students at Athabasca University, point out that when students are not permitted to participate in CMC in accordance with their individual styles and preferences, the requirement for online interaction ironically becomes a potential learning barrier rather than a liberating opportunity for self-expression.

Kim and Bonk (2002), in their cross-cultural comparisons of online collaboration between Korean, Finnish, and US students using the Curtis and Lawson's (2001) coding scheme, found differences in online collaborative behaviours: Korean students were more social and contextually driven

online; Finnish students were more group-focussed as well as reflective and, at times, theoretically driven; and US students more action-oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions.

In Shattuck's (2005) attempt to understand how non-American students perceive the values related to study in an American distance learning program through in-depth online interviews primarily with Asian students, she found that these students felt marginalized within the e-learning environment. She notes that online learning designs based on constructivist pedagogy and a high level of interaction can be a lonely and uncomfortable place for an international online learner whose cultural experiences are different than the dominant educational culture (cited in Moore, Shattuck, & Al-Harthi, 2005).

In our study using nine instruments to analyze Hispanic learning styles (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998), we found that Hispanic adult learners in a Northern New Mexico community college showed a preference for collaborative over competitive activities; reflectivity in task engagement; and a preference for an action-based, active approach to learning. For these learners, we recommend designing real world problem solving or case-based reasoning tasks in asynchronous learning environments that provide opportunities for reflection and active collaborative learning. In general, it is best to design alternative activities to reach the same objective and give students the option of selecting activities that best meet their culturally adapted ways of learning.

As we design, it is important to consider that within cultural groups individuals differ significantly from each other, and therefore, it is equally important to identify and respond to an individual's learning preference. While matching teaching and learning styles may yield higher achievement in test scores, providing learners with activities that require them to broaden their repertoire of preferred learning styles and approaches more fully prepares them to function in our diverse and global society. There is a need to provide a delicate balance of activities that give opportunities to learn in preferred ways and activities that challenge the learner to learn in new or less preferred ways. Gibson (1998) makes a plea for understanding the distance learner in context (for example, in relation to classroom, peer group, workplace, family, culture, and society) and the impact of their learning on those who share their lives in the multiple interacting contexts that contain them. "Our challenge as educators is to consider how the context might be

seen as a partner in teaching and learner support,” (p. 121), a point of view also supported by Rye & Stokken (2012).

SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND ONLINE INTERACTION

Wegerif (1998) argues that the social dimension—especially how students relate to each other—is important to the effectiveness of discussions and student learning. He provides evidence to support this view from an ethnographic study of a computer-mediated course at the British Open University. His study found that individual success or failure in the course depended upon the extent to which students were able to cross a threshold from feeling like outsiders to feeling like insiders.

We undertook a study in Morocco and Sri Lanka (Gunawardena, Idrissi Alami, Jayatilleke, & Bouacharine, 2009) to explore what happens when individuals whose self-images are characterized by a sense of group identity based on factors such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and socioeconomic status, use the culturally heterogeneous and technically ephemeral forums of the Internet to pursue personal communication goals. Through a qualitative ethnographic perspective and an inductive theory-generation process, we identified three major themes that constitute a conceptual framework to explain the sociocultural context of Internet chat users in Morocco and Sri Lanka. The three themes were identity, gender, and language, interacting with each other in their expression in synchronous chat. Identity is expressed through language reflecting the gender roles either real or assumed in the online sociocultural context. Three properties also emerged related to the expression of identity: trust-building, self-disclosure, and face negotiation. Gender differences were observed in the expression of identity, trust-building, self-disclosure, and face negotiation. These findings enabled us to suggest implications for the role of learning cultures and provide insight into how we can design online environments, which encourage the types of communication we are striving to support, especially when we may be addressing participants from high-context and/or multi-lingual cultures.

In the following section, I explore from a cultural perspective three factors that have an impact on the social environment in online distance education: social presence, help-seeking behaviours, and silence.

Social presence is the degree to which a person is perceived as a “real person” in mediated communication (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). One of our studies established that social presence is a strong predictor of learner satisfaction in a computer conference (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Richardson and Swan (2003), adapting this survey, replicated and extended these findings. They determined that students’ overall perception of social presence was a predictor of their perceived learning in 17 different online courses.

Studies have begun to examine cultural perceptions of social presence. Tu (2001) conducted a study of how Chinese students perceive social presence in an online environment and found that three dimensions affected student perceptions of social presence—social context (subjective perceptions of others), online communication (technological attributes), and interactivity (how we engage students in interaction). He noted that engaging Chinese students in a more interactive online learning environment would increase social presence. In addition, online privacy and public/private issues impacted the level of social presence. Chinese students perceived online communication as a more comfortable medium to express their thoughts due to lack of confrontation and face-saving concerns, but they were concerned that their messages may appear in public areas that may cause them to lose face and privacy.

In a cross-cultural study of group process and development in online conferences in the United States (US) and Mexico, we (Gunawardena et al., 2001) found that social presence emerged as a theme addressed by both US and Mexican focus group participants. US participants felt that social presence is necessary to the smooth functioning of a group, to provide a sense that the group members are real people. Social presence built trust and led to self-disclosure. Building relationships enhanced online civility. The Mexican focus group participants, however, felt that having personal information about the participants was unimportant. For these participants, how peers contribute to the conference is more important than knowing their personal information. The differences in the way that US participants and Mexican participants perceived social presence could be attributed to cultural differences related to power distance (Hofstede, 1980) in the two societies. In a high-power distance society like Mexico, computer-mediated

communication was seen as equalizing power and status differences present in society. Therefore, participants did not want their peers to interject social context cues that would take away the equalizing power of the online environment.

To further examine social presence from a cultural perspective, we undertook a study (Gunawardena, Idrissi Alami, & Jayatilleke, 2006) that generated a theoretical model of social presence from the perspective of two sociocultural contexts—Morocco and Sri Lanka—by examining the communication conventions and processes employed by Internet chat users who develop online relationships with people they do not know. Employing qualitative ethnographic analysis and grounded theory building, this study explored cultural perspectives on social presence and properties related to the construct of social presence in online communication. Preliminary results showed that social presence played a key role in the communication patterns of Internet chat users. Properties associated with social presence in both cultural contexts include: self-disclosure, building trust, expression of identity, conflict resolution, interpretation of silence, and the innovation of language forms to generate immediacy.

Al-Harthi (2005) conducted in-depth telephone interviews with Arab students in order to understand how they perceived the values related to study in an American distance learning program, and found that for them the lack of physical presence in the online environment was seen as a positive feature because, in addition to accessibility advantages, it provided a reduced risk of social embarrassment. Female Arab students in particular felt more comfortable studying online as it allowed for an easy conformity with the separation of genders that is traditional in Muslim culture. Moore (2006) notes that this sensitivity to what other people think is more foreign to American students, but for people of more collectivist (as contrasted with individualist) cultures, a form of communication that gives ways of saving face has value that may outweigh some of what the Western student might consider drawbacks. Al-Harthi's study identified several ways in which Arab students dealt with problems differently than their American colleagues. These findings provide insight into the social dynamic of online education and the factors we need to keep in mind as we design.

Cultures differ in help-seeking behaviours. Help-seeking is a learning strategy that combines cognition and social interaction (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998) and involves the ability to use others as a resource to cope with difficulty encountered in the learning process. When learners do not seek help, performance and learning can suffer. In formal education contexts that emphasize competition and normative evaluation, students from other cultures are unwilling to seek help because they fear others will perceive they lack ability (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). Where the socio-emotional needs of students and learning for intrinsic reasons are emphasized over performance and competition, learners seek help.

The socio-emotional needs of students are recognized as part of the classroom design in other cultures. Chinese students communicate with their teachers outside of class for guidance with personal problems (Zhang, 2006). Teachers in China assume responsibility for educating the whole person instructionally, cognitively, affectively, and morally and are expected to care about students' behaviours and problems inside and outside the classroom. The collaborative strength of home and school, of parents and teachers, works harmoniously toward the mutual goal of preparing learners (Hu, 2004) for rigorous national examinations and the country's economic development. In contrast, Western teachers are expected to perform academic duties and generally are unconcerned about or at least not responsible for students' behaviours and problems outside of school. Western students are advised not to bring personal problems to the classroom. Western students do not expect the warm interaction many Asian learners expect outside the classroom with their instructors.

In our study of e-mentoring across cultures (Gunawardena et al., 2008), we found differences in facilitation styles between US and Sri Lankan e-mentors in the way they provided guidance and help to their protégés. US e-mentors encouraged protégés and put them on track by asking questions to deliver the necessary message indirectly, while the Sri Lankan e-mentors appeared to provide more direct advice to solve a problem. This could also be related to the style and approach to teaching and learning adopted by individual e-mentors. Often, US e-mentors used indirect coaching to get the protégés to think through the problem and come up with their own solutions. Sri Lankan protégés often expected more direct guidance on how to

go about solving the problem. Feedback received from the e-mentors was always welcomed and helped reduce feelings of isolation. This helps us to be more cognizant of the expectations of diverse learners related to help-seeking behaviours and of the need to make our teaching and learning philosophies, procedures, and practices explicit in course design, the syllabus, and course outlines.

SILENCE

Silence, while frustrating for American and Western Europeans, is quite comfortable for Asian and Pacific Island cultures (Brislin, 2000). For Americans, silence indicates rudeness, inattention, or uncertainty. However, in other cultures, silence indicates respect (Matthewson & Thaman, 1998). Silence allows people time to collect thoughts, think carefully, listen to others, and provide opportunity for reflection, integration, and consensus of many diverse perspectives into a workable solution. LaPointe and Barrett's (2005) experience teaching English via Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) to Chinese students showed that, initially, American instructors and Chinese learners were both uncomfortable in the classroom. The American instructors expected the Chinese learners to speak at will as students do in American classrooms. American instructors were initially uncomfortable with the long, reflective pauses in the synchronous voice communication. The Chinese respect for authority conditioned learners to wait for an explicit invitation to speak rather than make the impolite gesture of raising a question or criticizing someone else's (and especially an instructor's) thoughts.

LANGUAGE LEARNING

Language represents a different way of thinking and speaking, and cognition is mediated by language (Gudykunst & Asante, 1989; Pincas, 2001). Language also reinforces cultural values and worldviews. The grammar of each language voices and shapes ideas, serving as a guide for people's mental activity, for analysis of impressions, and for synthesis of their mental stock in trade (Whorf, 1998). Those from oral cultures may not embrace written communication (Burniske, 2003) and the abstract discussions that permeate Western discourse. Learners from oral traditions such as the Maori

desire intimate connections with the instructor and a way to apply knowledge according to Maori customs (Anderson, 2005). Malaysia, strong in oral culture, uses storytelling while teaching history, culture, and moral values (Norhayati & Siew, 2004). Learners from visual and oral cultures expect that learning resources will be offered in media beyond mere text (Jiang, 2005) and prefer a great deal of detail and visual stimulation (Zhenhui, 2001). Chat may provide an outlet for interaction that more closely resembles spoken language (Sotillo, 2000). Learners from collectivist countries may refrain from contributing critical comments in text conferencing to avoid tension and disagreement in order to maintain interpersonal harmony (Hu, 2005). Limiting online learning to text-based expression restricts the voices and the richness that can be a part of the online class.

Although English is increasingly recognized as the international lingua franca, using English to learn rather than using one's native language puts learners at a disadvantage. Often English is a learner's third or fourth language with little opportunity to actually use English daily. Communicating in English requires Asian and Arabic speakers to enter individual letters, one stroke at a time, on a keyboard while frequently referring to online dictionaries. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners need additional time for reading and need content provided in a variety of formats—written lectures, audio recordings, and concept maps.

Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) note that research into telecollaborative projects for language learning carries many stories of full or partial failure, not in the use of code (French, Spanish or Japanese, and so on) but in the partners' understandings of each other's cultural styles and genres. When computer users from different cultures communicate with each other they may not be aware of each other's genre (discourse type or discourse style) that is appropriate for the exchange. Kramsch and Thorne's study (2002) offers a good example of how miscommunication in an intercultural asynchronous online dialogue between American and French students was caused, not so much by deficient individual linguistic styles, but mostly by a lack of understanding "cultural genres" in each other's discourse.

In our study of informal synchronous chatting in Morocco and Sri Lanka, (Gunawardena et al., 2009), one of the most interesting findings was the innovations in language forms to adapt to communication via chat. While the predominant language of chat in Morocco was French and in Sri Lanka, English, participants interjected the native language using the Latin

keyboard to increase their level of social presence and connectedness when they were chatting with people who understood the native language. One participant in our study noted that he examines the English used by chatters and the amount of mistakes made, especially if the person claims to be from an English-speaking country such as the UK or US. In this case, the level and type of language use can be a factor in creating credibility. In analyzing online communication conventions in this study (Gunawardena et al., 2009), it is evident that chatters have developed unique forms of textual language and visual expressions to communicate their ideas and feelings through a new medium. Users bring with them the conventions of their native language, which embody cultural traits as well as their prior use of the second language, English or French. This implies that as online learning cultures develop, students and facilitators have to adjust to new modes of communication and interaction.

Smith (2005) found that a lack of awareness of cultural differences and generalizations about others who use English as a second language may enable learners from dominant cultures to *deauthorize* group members unknowingly with group coping strategies that, although well intended, limit opportunities for discussion. Groups assigned minimal responsibilities to their non-native English-speaking members because they felt these learners face unusual challenges of adapting to the United States and completing their studies. These non-native-English speakers then felt uncomfortable and unproductive. This crystallized the recognition of difference among group members: Non-native speakers were perceived as “others” and treated as a threat to the group in ways that mirror hierarchical structures within larger society, thereby creating unsafe learning spaces (Smith, 2005).

Bilingual teaching assistants and staff of the *Speak2Me* program (Ladder Publishing of Taipei’s web-based ESL program, which uses an *iTalk* synchronous platform), and La Pointe and Barrett (2005), who taught English at a distance, travelled to Taiwan and Mainland China to conduct face-to-face interviews with Taiwanese and Mainland China ESL learners in order to learn about their perceptions. They found that, although students recognize the need to study English through materials from the target culture, when they have no prior experience with the content of the materials they cannot participate. Students pointed out that, if neither they nor their families have prior knowledge about a topic, they find engaging in a conversation

difficult—they cannot participate when the “topic is too far away.” Such topics do not produce the intended level of critical thinking as much as topics that more directly affect students’ lives.

Many individuals have a fear of speaking English with native speakers. One student in their study observed, “We Taiwanese—if we can’t speak English very nice, very fluent—we want to learn English and speak, but we are afraid. We are afraid to talk with foreigners because we are afraid if I can’t speak the proper words or listen to it.” Students, particularly adults, seek a safe place to speak. The Internet provides that safe space through the removal of visual cues; informants have reported that they are more willing to try to speak English when they cannot see either other students whom they perceive to be better English speakers or the teacher’s dismay as they are speaking. They also feel safer participating from their homes.

Given the issues that emerged in this discussion, we as online learning designers need to pay special attention to cultural differences in communication conventions, which may be manifested differently in this unique space for communication devoid of non-verbal cues.

RESEARCHING CULTURE AND ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING

Bhawuk and Triandis’ (1996) review and critique of methodology for studying culture is a good starting point for the beginning researcher. They note that *emics* and *etics* are perhaps the two most crucial constructs in the study of culture because they emphasize two perspectives. Emics focus on the native’s point of view; etics focus on the cross-cultural scientist’s point of view. Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) observe that projects intending to research online learning cultures should not be conducted entirely from an etic perspective, which is by researchers who share a particular cultural perspective and who look at culture from the outside. They advocate that the emic perspective, or the insider view, should be adequately represented and recommend that future research be conducted by teams of researchers that are themselves culturally diverse “for whom the construction of their own learning culture would be an acknowledged outcome of the research” (p. 182).

Our own experience conducting collaborative cross-cultural research with teams of researchers (Gunawardena et al., 2001; Gunawardena et al.,

2008 March; Gunawardena et al., 2009, 2011) taught us a great deal about the research process, the value of emic over etic approaches for studying phenomena related to culture, and the challenges of conducting reliable and valid cross-cultural research studies. Reflecting on our research process, I feel that the greatest challenge to conducting cross-cultural research is finding equivalent samples for comparison in quantitative studies. This problem is echoed by van de Vijver and Leung (1997), who noted. "Cross-cultural studies often involve highly dissimilar groups. Consequently, groups can differ in many background characteristics, only some of which are relevant to the topic studied" (p. 32). Further, individual differences in cultural groups need to be accounted for so that we do not subscribe to the fallacy of homogeneity (that terms such as *American* or *Western* connote internal sameness) or the fallacy of monolithic identity (the assumption that individuals in groups have no differential identities) (Stanfield II, 1993). Therefore we recommend that future researchers use a more comprehensive model for comparison such as the one developed by Shaw and Barrett-Power (1998) to understand cultural differences. Future researchers need to conceptualize identity in cross-cultural studies to go beyond simplistic stereotyping or assigning a group identity, and use qualitative methods to understand how people define themselves.

We believe we were able to design our studies and interpret the results better because we collaborated with teams of researchers from the countries and cultural contexts we studied and would recommend this approach to future researchers. The research strategy was determined jointly. The research team simultaneously developed the instruments with the first version developed in English and then translated. One problem we encountered in spite of this was construct equivalence. For example, the construct "conflict" was perceived differently in the two national contexts we studied: American and Mexican (Gunawardena, 2001). The use of a mixed-method approach: employing both quantitative and qualitative data in one study (Gunawardena et al., 2001), and a qualitative design that used grounded theory in another (Gunawardena et al., 2009), helped us to avoid some of the pitfalls in analysis and interpretation of the data.

Bhawuk and Triandis (1996) advocate subjective cultural studies, which maximize the advantages of both emic and etic approaches and the use of many methods that converge. They noted that each culture is likely to have its own way of reacting to each method (each method has a unique meaning

in each culture), and therefore, a multimethod approach is preferable. They point out the difficulty of conducting experiments in cross-cultural settings as well as the difficulty of using tests such as ability, personality, and attitude, because a test usually measures one or, at most, a few variables out of context. Gradually, cross-cultural researchers are recognizing the value of interpretive and critical approaches to the study of cultural phenomena over logical empiricist approaches (Martin & Nakayama, 2004.)

“We have seen that with regard to intercultural communication online in general, and intercultural learning online in particular, the role of culture is both central (contrary to ethnocentric assumptions that one’s own views, principles, etc., may be universal) and profoundly challenging” (Ess, 2009, p. 26). We would like to encourage distance-learning researchers to take up the challenge of conducting sound theoretical research and empirical studies examining cultural issues in the online environment to guide our future practice.

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