

How to Overcome Cultural Barriers to Spread Distance Learning Globally Using Mobile Technology

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Abstract The developments of multimedia technology and internet networks are getting very effective in the spread of distance learning all over the world. Still cultural barriers are an obstacle to proper spread of education in many parts of the world. While imparting distance learning the deliveries must be in line with cultural situations existing in the receiving country and have to be made sure it does not in any possible way hurt local sentiments and customs but modernizes the mindset of the people receiving the education. Unless we succeed in solving this problem of cultural barriers in different countries the goal of spreading distance learning globally could not be achieved. This paper studies the problems of cultural barriers existing in different societies and offer suggestions how to overcome these cultural barriers some of them very serious existing at present in various parts of the world to impart distance learning successfully and globally.

Keywords Distance Learning, Mobile Technology, Cultural Barriers

1. Introduction

Distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner. Because of the competing priorities of work, home, and school, adult learners desire a high degree of flexibility. The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education; however, it is not without problems. Loss of student motivation due to the lack of face-to-face contact with teachers and peers, potentially prohibitive start-up costs, and lack of faculty support are all barriers to successful distance learning[6]. Also the cultural differences existing in various societies at present provide challenges to reach students belonging to various cultures.

The concepts of distance learning are prevalent for last few decades[1],[3]. The basic philosophy was teachers would be physically away from the students and have to conduct the teaching process from distance[2]. With the development of computer industry and internet networks during the last three decades things have changed and global communication has reached an unprecedented height[1]. With these developments immense scopes have come to the surface to impart learning in a much more efficient and interactive way. Multimedia technology and internet networks have changed the whole philosophy of learning and distance learning and provided us with the opportunity for close interaction between teachers and learners with

improved standard of learning materials compared to what was existing only with the printed media. It has gone to such an extent to create a virtual class room where teachers and students are scattered all over the world. In this paper we investigate the various problems of delivering distance learning because of cultural differences existing in various countries which stand in the way of providing distance learning in any media including mobile technology. Towards the end we suggested some ways of overcoming the cultural barriers prevalent at present in various societies to impart distance learning in an effective way through mobile technology.

Section one gives an introduction of the area. Section two presents the advancements in defining various cultural problems prevailing in the global society and attempts made so far to overcome these problems. In section three author presents guidelines to overcome these cultural problems existing at present. The concluding remarks are put in section four.

2. Analyses of Works Done

Traditional learning environments may become sites of struggle for teachers and learners when there is a collision of different cultures. More often than not, it is difficult for the teacher to accommodate each and every student's culture. Therefore, the students are expected "to step out of their own culture and temporarily enter into the culture of the instructor"[14]. Within this process, problems arise if the instructor's pedagogical values are not compatible with students' assumptions about how teaching should be done[5].

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Basing teaching on one set of values, namely the dominant values, in culturally diverse settings usually results in what Gramsci called “cultural hegemony,”[15] a phenomenon that refers to the ways in which assumptions of a group/person achieve dominance and are viewed as commonsense understandings or interests that serve for all. Several scholars have remarked on the issue of cultural hegemony in traditional classrooms and have proposed theories advocating incorporation of multiple cultures in school curricula. Such theories include, but are not limited to, “culturally relevant pedagogy”[16], “culturally responsive teaching”[17], “culturally sensitive instruction”[18] and “multicultural instruction”[19]. These are valuable contributions that provide useful frameworks for understanding and dealing with issues of culture in traditional multicultural classrooms[5].

For the purposes of this review, the overarching questions become these: Does cultural hegemony also exist in distance education? Do conflicts resulting from cultural differences transfer from the traditional classroom to the distance learning environment? If so, how do teachers and students navigate different cultures of learning in these environments? These are the kinds of questions that need specific attention if our aim is to improve distance learning[5].

In a highly comprehensive meta-analysis, Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, and Tan[20] identified the factors impacting the effectiveness of distance education. Their analysis consisted of 423 empirical studies that compared face-to-face education to distance education. In the end, Zhao et al.[20] concluded that “distance education in essence is still education. The factors found to have an impact on the effectiveness of distance education are also factors that would affect the effectiveness of face-to-face education”. In view of this finding, it is hypothesized that distance learning environments are by no means immune to the problems arising from cultural differences. In fact, these environments may even be more prone to cultural conflicts than traditional classrooms as instructors in these settings not only interact with students who have removed themselves from their native culture, but they also interact with students who remain “physically and socially within the different culture, a culture that is foreign to, and mostly unknown, to the teacher”[14][5].

Some developing countries are reluctant to adopt programs originating elsewhere, despite their reputed quality, choosing instead to develop their own; unfortunately, many lack the expertise needed to produce high-quality materials and support structures. Considerable time and expense are required to produce quality programs, and countries with limited resources may put programs together that are inadequate[4].

This paper examines the longevity of foreign entries. Hypotheses are developed on the mode (start-ups vs. acquisitions) and ownership structure (wholly owned vs. joint ventures) in relation to cultural distance. The hypotheses are tested within a framework of organizational learning, using data on 225 entries that 13 Dutch firms

carried out from 1966 onwards. Results show that the presence of cultural barriers punctuates an organization's learning. Cultural distance is a prominent factor in foreign entry whenever this involves another firm, requiring the firm to engage in double layered acculturation. Locational paths of learning are also identified. The longevity of acquisitions is positively influenced by prior entries of the firm in the same country. Similarly, the longevity of foreign entries, in which the firm has a majority stake, improves whenever the expanding firm engaged in prior entries in the same country and in other countries in the same cultural block[7].

During the last decades firms have increasingly committed themselves to global markets. Globalization confers access to foreign markets, cheap labour, and other advantages. Yet, foreign entry does not come without costs. When firms diversify beyond their national borders, they have to adjust to a foreign national culture. Whenever firms draw other organizations into ‘the walk to the unknown’[21], for example through a joint venture (JV) or an outright acquisition, they have to contend with both a national and a corporate culture. However, over time, firms may learn from previous globalization efforts and reduce the barriers that prevent them from freely tapping cheap labour, new technology, and foreign product markets, and ultimately become veritable multinational enterprises (MNEs)[7].

Globalization raises other issues for countries. For example, instructional programs broadcast from abroad have heightened fears about the contamination of cultures and values. Competition between local and foreign education providers is another issue. While competition is usually good for the consumer, in that it often raises quality and reduces prices, local institutions typically resist foreign competition and, in some countries, are trying to block outsiders from operating in local markets[4].

This article reports responses to a survey of online teachers in higher education regarding the barriers they perceive to the success of their online classrooms. These barriers are placed within a policy development framework for distance learning suggested by Gellman-Danley and Fetzner[22] in *The Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. This was done as one way to validate this policy framework and as a convenient framework for discussing barriers to online teaching. One area not mentioned in the policy development framework by Gellman-Danley and Fetzner involved the fears of persons in the educational community, of faculty members or students, concerning the cultural changes for which technologically - mediated teaching and learning is often the catalyst. Institutional or organization culture here means the “way things are done at this institution.” It is the beliefs, values, expectations, language, motivation, and norms in place in the organization[23]. This was the largest category of barriers with twenty-two of the responses (31.9% of the total) indicating reluctance or inability to deal with the cultural changes often engendered by online teaching. Responses placed in this category included: faculty or student resistance to innovation; resistance to online teaching methods;

difficulty recruiting faculty or students; lack understanding of distance education and what works at a distance[8].

It will take leadership at the highest institutional levels-one of the most important ingredients in the diffusion of distance education, yet the most neglected-to have a significant, positive impact upon the faculty and the changes that are occurring in institutions[24]. Tinzmann[25] states: The reluctance people feel when asked to make major changes in the way they do things is clearly the most serious issue of those discussed here. Hardly a person exists who eagerly gives up familiar ways of behaving to attempt something that is unknown and is likely to have many challenges of implementation[8].

Access to online educational opportunities, while critically important and certainly concerning, seems to be improving. Online teaching and learning will fail without strong administrative leadership to support the many changes necessary to fully implement online educational activities and to overcome various barriers.

Distance education has a very important role in women's development. Women have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. Distance education can help them with its outreach to their homes. It enables them to learn at their own pace and take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It gives them a second

chance to step into the main systems of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfilling family responsibilities[13].

3. How to Overcome the Cultural Barriers

In Kenya for Maasai girls the economic, cultural and physical factors that combine to deny education are numerous and, taken together, almost impossible for all but the most determined girls to overcome. Even when possible, Maasai girls have the added impediment of cultural beliefs that prevent many from enrolling or completing school. They include:(1) economic incentives for early marriage, such as cattle and cash dowries, (2) the belief that the biological family does not benefit from educating a daughter, since the girl becomes a member of her husband's family when she marries, and they will reap the benefits, (3) family and peer pressure for early marriage, as women are valued by the number of children they have, (4) fear of early pregnancy, which is a disgrace prior to marriage and lowers the bride price, which perpetuates the practice of early marriage, and finally, (5) the distances that a girl must walk to the nearest school make it unsafe, and even impossible for a nursery-school-age child. However, MGEF a Washington D.C -based organization is working to get more girls in school by offering scholarships to those who would otherwise not be able to get an education and they are dedicated to keeping them in school until they have the knowledge and skills to enter the workforce in Kenya[9].

Attempts have been made to make distance education based on multicultural values available.

- Help Break down cultural barriers
- Extend your "people skills", as a counsellor, manager, business owner, etc.
- Work in a "helping profession" -welfare, immigration, international relations, etc.

Cultural diversity refers to the differences between human communities based on differences in their ideologies, values, beliefs, norms, customs, meanings and ways of life – in other words, differences based on cultural differences. These differences are expressed and exemplified in social practices, attitudes and values, family interactions and expectations, values concerning education, ways of defining and treating health (physical and mental), business and management behaviours and practices, political practices and our interpersonal relations[10].

This paper discusses cultural barriers in educational assessment by comparing Japanese and German school report cards. The discussions on assessment fluctuate between two intellectual extremes: objectified selection or educational diagnosis. In Japan, many teachers make written comments on school report cards with ambiguous expressions to avoid negatively motivating their students. German school report cards, on the other hand, are objective, but may cause pressure through their focus on marks. An analysis of examples of German and Japanese report cards reveals that Japanese report cards give priority to educational diagnosis while German report cards focus on objective selection. It depends on the culture and, in particular, cultural barriers as to which dimension is given priority. A cultural barrier is unique to people of the same cultural group. Japanese cultural barriers are characterised by concern for others' emotions and as such they prefer to use indirect communication. German cultural barriers, in contrast, are characterised by honesty which makes it difficult to report anything but the truth. Therefore, it can be difficult for Germans to flatter by distorting the truth[11].

One of the issues that relates to Asian international students' perceptions about the quality of higher education is with regards to the difficulties and problems they face while studying in an Australian university. A survey was conducted with 78 First Year to Fourth Year Asian international undergraduate students undergoing a range of programs and courses at a South Australian University to determine their perspective of quality in higher education. Further interviews were carried out with nine Asian international students to gain insights into their difficulties and learning experiences.

Based on these interviews, the three main difficulties highlighted by Asian international students are: different learning styles, cultural barriers and language problems[12].

Defining the Cultural Self: Does everyone in a culture behave in the same way? Obviously, they do not. Other factors contributing to variety within a culture are human psychology, socio-economical differences, different situations and different human motivations. Every culture

contains within it all variations of human personality, different psychological attitudes, perceptions, ways of thinking and feeling, different kinds and levels of skill and so on. From outside a culture, we might see only what the members have in common, but from within, the people that make them are as varied as our own. However, we tend to share some fundamental aspects of our behaviour and attitude with other members of our culture, which are part of who we think we are. Some aspects of our cultural self we can consider are listed below:

What we value in ourselves and others, how we interact with others, how we communicate our feelings, what support we offer or receive from others, who we seek support from and to what degree, what we believe we should strive for or achieve, what kind of parent we become, how we relate to family and not-family, how we define or perceive ourselves as human beings, how and in what regard we express individualism, how we relate to authority, what potential we possess, what possibilities we can perceive for personal or social growth, how we understand or define psychological distress [10].

Any or all of these aspects of cultural identity can be expressed in very different ways, or not at all except through our perceptions of self, others, and our world and our responses to them. They may be apparent in our opinions and judgements, the stories we tell each other, what we say about ourselves, our status and our expectations, and in our interactions with others. We may communicate them non-verbally through gestures and actions, the arts, our clothing, where we live, the kind of house we choose, and our uses of the surrounding space. We also communicate our cultural perceptions and cultural identity through what we say, to whom we say it and when, and through what we do not say [10].

Some countries could be concerned if they buy study materials from overseas it would have an adverse effect on their cultures. But these countries can always sit with the people preparing those courses overseas and guide them how to design the materials which would not have any adverse effect in their countries cultures or societal setup. The pedagogical considerations also could be settled this way. Even in a particular country with multi-cultural setup there could be multiple versions of the study materials available.

Women participation through distance learning could be facilitated through lower costs of distance education, offering scholarships, raising the benefits of education like giving them trainings in professional child care or home teaching programs. These kinds of job could enable them to earn money which could bring in their empowerment in a strongly male dominated society of the world.

From the available literatures it seems more works needed to be done to clearly define how to overcome the cultural barriers to spread distance learning globally.

Language: Distance learning should be provided either through English or any other local language depending upon the region of the world. Qualified teachers could be involved to provide the distance education through mobile

technology.

Work cultures: Service provider must have through knowledge about the work cultures prevailing in the receiving society to understand student behaviour in preparation of assignments and pursuing academic activities. Each and every society should be studied individually as the cultures can vary and it's difficult to group them together onto one quite often. While preparing study materials at least one person aware of the culture and work ethics of the society under consideration should be included in the team.

Conflicting Theories: There could be conflicting theories, for example, on the creation of the universe there is Biblical theory propagated by Christianity as well as Big Bang theory propagated by scientists including Einstein. In those cases it would be wise to present both theories without presenting any opinion about which one is correct and leaving it to the students to decide which one they would accept.

Distance Learning Centres: Top business people through charities open centres all over the country where qualified professionals could communicate through mobile to students in the remote locations for both men and women.

Government Initiatives: Government initiative for the spread of distance learning is a necessity. Government should keep aside a fund for distance learning all over the state or country concerned which would be a very effective investment for the future of the country in many respects.

Women Education: Women could pursue studies staying back home through mobile technology if they cannot attend educational institutes.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we studied the problems of cultural barriers in imparting distance learning through mobile technology. We studied the various problems cultural barriers can raise for distance learning. We suggested guidelines which could help provide distance education through distance learning in many countries using mobile technology, a viable and affordable media through which distance learning could be imparted to billions of people in an efficient way. We presented some examples of achievements to break cultural barriers in this paper. More research needs to be carried out to improve the conditions required for spreading distance learning among billions in many countries through mobile technology and gearing up multimedia technology to be easily transported to those locations for a proper presentation of study materials.

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