

Sociocultural Dimensions of E-learning in Emerging Nations

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The economic and sociocultural dimensions of e-learning are sometimes ignored in system and policy implementation in emerging nations. Many learning objects, systems, and courses (i.e. MOOCs) originate in Western developed nations and are presented in English, thus contain explicit and implicit cultural bias. Based on the author's experience in using cross-cultural e-learning systems in the emerging nation of Qatar and a relevant literature review, this contribution outlines sociocultural aspects of national and multinational online learning (with a focus on the Arabic-speaking nations) that must be considered for successful implementation.

Linguistic Register. In culturally mixed synchronous chat, not only the language of discussion introduces cultural concerns, but also discourse etiquette, which varies greatly according to culture as revealed by work by Grice and Leech – speech initiators, politeness modifiers, and indirect speech can be misinterpreted between cultures. Emoticons have expanded online speech capabilities to include subtleties such as humor, irony, and satire which are shared by all cultures. However, mixing registers (e.g., academic discourse with colloquialisms) is a common feature of online environments and is complicated by the differing use of registers in different languages; for example, misuse of polite and formal (Tu-Vos or T-V) language forms can cause insult or social distance.

Power Distance. Many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures exhibit high levels of deference to authority. This is an important consideration in designing online collaborative activity in deciding the level of peer direction and leadership, the amount of instructor intervention, and the inclusion of older or more experienced students. Introduction of non-peers may repress individual contributions as novices defer to older members of the group as per social norms, or neglect to challenge or correct incorrect information.

Gender Relations. In much of the MENA region and particularly the Arabian Gulf, education is gender segregated at all levels. Surprisingly, gender norms are reproduced in the more anonymous and socially-levelling online environments, as demonstrated by research by Al Jarf in Saudi Arabia. Language dominance by males is recognized in many cultures. Thus online educators should consider if female-only online spaces are in the best interests of learning. Although most developed nations strive for gender equality, the concept of 'separate but equal' male / female domains is still a common philosophy in many parts of the world. Although costly, many Muslim universities provide the same programs for men and women, but in segregated facilities with gender appropriate faculty.

Individualism. This factor impacts all forms of learning. Eastern cultures are generally more group oriented and less individualistic, which has profound implications for how e-learning activities are structured (group versus individual work, and how group work can be assessed and individual effort determined). Plagiarism is a Western concept not entirely applicable to the oral cultures of the Arabian Gulf, where helping struggling members of a group is seen as a higher value than following what are viewed as 'academic rules.' In the Gulf Bedouin cultures, knowledge is communally constructed, thus the concept of 'owning' knowledge (copyright, patents, etc.) is not fully embraced. Many Muslim knowledge systems are still based on the Quran, a public body of knowledge designed to create a better socially and religiously regulated 'ummah.'

Ambiguity. E-learning designers should take into account the level of ambiguity that a culture tolerates and this is related to a home country's reigning pedagogical paradigm. For example, some national educational programs encourage 'getting the correct answer' and test-based learning as opposed to exploratory learning or subjects such as history, philosophy or literature which foster equal and competing perspectives, which can generate anxiety in students who are trained to look for one right answer.

Privacy. Student data privacy has become a key concern of parents and educators with the rise of Cloud Computing and Social Media where student Personally Identifiable Information is collected on a large scale. Many educational hosted services are profit-based companies located in the U.S. and they collect a large amount demographic and user-behavior data from students. As developing nations migrate student and administrative records online, particularly when using Western-based cloud services, discussions will need to take place about the privacy and security of this data. Muslim cultures place a high premium on family and individual honor (*sharafa*), and will be uncomfortable with the level of data sharing that currently occurs between Western educational institutions and commercial companies.

Conclusion: The consequences of failure to acknowledge and plan for the cultural dimensions of e-learning environments can lead to catastrophic developments, such as pro forma- or non-compliance in online activities by students and even teachers, or lackluster performance in carrying out academic tasks since students will face some form of social or cultural discomfort. Designers of learning objects and online platforms should be thoroughly familiar with the language and culture of their target student population, as well as other cultures that students may interact with in online environments, and take each of the cultural factors discussed above into consideration. E-learning teacher training programs should add a cultural competency component to their graduation criteria.