

Cultural Issues in Transnational Flexible Delivery

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Technology is increasingly shaping the nature of offshore educational delivery. (Alexander and Blight 1996; Farrell 1999) Information and communications technologies now allow educational institutions to extend their reach well beyond the commuting distance of students and staff. Multi-campus universities have become the norm, as it is now much easier for universities to establish numerous dispersed campuses that remain integrated into a single institution by umbilical cords of optical fibre cable. In Australia we have seen one phase of this development in the 1980s, when dozens of regional institutions around the country were compelled to amalgamate to form larger, multi-campus universities. Now we see a second phase in which several universities are establishing campuses overseas. Once the university is restructured as a technologically integrated multi-campus organisation, it is relatively easy to add new campuses as additional nodes to an existing network. Offshore delivery of international education typically uses a combination of face-to-face instruction delivered by local teaching staff and standardised teaching materials produced in the institution's home country. Universities are using the Internet to deliver these teaching materials to increasingly diverse student populations located at geographically dispersed campuses.

Simultaneously, distance education has been transformed by new information and communication technologies. In the earlier print/post phase of distance education, most students were located relatively close to the institution, and almost entirely within the same country. Internationalisation was difficult due to the cost, slowness and unreliability of international communications. Distance education has begun to internationalise rapidly with the popularisation of e-mail and the advent of the World Wide Web. Online delivery is rapidly creating a global market for distance education. Right now, students looking for Web-based courses can choose from a wide range of brands offered by providers based in many different nations. From the student's point of view, there is often little difference between them in terms of modes of delivery or ease of access. So far, most online distance education courses available for study by offshore students were initially developed for domestic students and are being offered internationally with minimal modification.

Issues

The cultural issues that arise in these new learning spaces can be grouped under three headings—learning styles, cross-cultural interaction and internationalised curriculum.

International virtual learning environments bring together in an unfamiliar environment students and educators whose experience of teaching and learning stems from very different cultural traditions. With the rate of development of international virtual education offered by Australian institutions to the Asia-Pacific region, such issues are increasingly pertinent. (Farrell 1999; Rizvi and Walsh 1998) Students' experience of learning in virtual environments is a critical area of concern for educators throughout the world but little research has been conducted into the cultural bases of such experiences. A central issue here is the degree to which the learner is required to be more pro-active and self-directed in flexible delivery as compared with face-to-face environments, where more teacher-directed modes of learning predominate. Students in many South East Asian countries are less familiar with the forms of independent learning assumed by much contemporary instructional design.

The second main issue is how to facilitate meaningful social interaction between students from diverse cultural backgrounds in virtual learning environments. How do cultural differences in communication styles affect interaction in such learning environments? Two bodies of existing literature are useful here: research on cross-cultural interaction in traditional learning environments and research on interaction in online learning environments (which often does not take account of cultural differences). Some research on students' experience of cultural difference in virtual learning spaces has been investigated in Europe (HIS 1995) but little such research has yet been conducted in our region.

Cultural and geographical differences also shape the reception of internationalised curricula in transnational education. Educators must be especially conscious of ensuring the local relevance of curriculum when offering courses to international students based in their home countries. (Kelly & Ha1988) Of particular interest is the difference in reception of curricula that have been designed for a non-specific, generic 'global' audience as compared to curricula designed with the learner's specific cultural context in mind.

Strategies

The design of flexibly delivered transnational courses needs to be culturally responsive, tailoring delivery to the learning styles and social context of diverse student groups. In order to do this, educators and instructional designers should become familiar with their students' educational assumptions and expectations, as well as the educational practices that the student would be used to in their home country.

This is sometimes difficult in transnational courses with very diverse student populations. A degree of 'cultural flexibility' is required to make a course appropriate to different students who might choose to interact with learning materials, teachers and other students in a variety of ways. (Henderson 1996; Collis 1999) There are a number of guides to teaching international students

that have been written for classroom teachers (eg. Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Metzger 1992), and similar publications are needed for teachers using flexible modes of delivery.

Outcomes

An increased awareness of cultural issues is needed in the development of transnational flexible delivery. Research is needed to inform the development of relevant, appropriate and culturally sensitive pedagogy for the virtual learning spaces that are increasingly being inhabited by students all over the world.

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