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Cultural Considerations in Online Learning

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**Abstract**

Globalization is a key word found in many communication programs. What is interesting to note is how the word is defined. Some view globalization as being associated with technology, as in globalization through the Internet, while others view it as being related to multiculturalism, a more personal or cultural connotation. When it comes to exploring globalization in the classroom, online education is a natural association because there are few, if any, constraints to where technology can “take” students. Furthermore, if students are to be prepared to enter a global workforce, which most will experience through electronic means, then online educators need to rethink globalization from both a technological and pedagogical standpoint and from more than one cultural perspective. In this paper, I will discuss globalization in regard to online education, specifically how culture influences interaction in online environments, such as approaches to using the technology and being part of a community in an online classroom.

Understanding the cultural dimensions associated with the technology used for online education will enrich our perception about what globalization is, how we can foster effective intercultural experiences in the online classroom, and how instructors can best prepare students for global experiences in industry.

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## Cultural Considerations in Online Learning

As the world becomes more connected electronically, interaction between cultures is not the exception, but very much characteristic of mainstream communication practices today. For example, customer service phone calls routed to India are common for many American companies, as are online helpdesk queries. National boundaries, while still physical, are crossed virtually every day via Internet technology. In essence, global boundaries have become quite permeable. This is evidenced most especially in economic terms in many societies, but cross-cultural exchanges are also becoming regular occurrences in higher education. Online education has grown at exponential rates in the past few years where the “12.9 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population” (Allen & Seaman, 2008, p. 1); consequently, online education plays a critical role in the globalization of higher education as a whole because of the masses of people it reaches and serves within and across national borders.

Educating people from different cultures is a trying prospect. Even today where access to people in different countries is relatively easy, and we engage in cross-cultural activities on almost a daily basis, we still know very little about other cultures and how to educate students from countries outside of our own. To further complicate matters, when dealing with online education, we must also address the unique relationship each culture has with technology, as well as varying degrees of access and an assortment of hardware and software products.

Ultimately, our goal in understanding other cultures is to have respect. In education, we further that notion of respect from mere understanding (education) to fostering effective and harmonious working relationships. To begin this process, we must learn the basics about how other cultures teach and learn. We also have to define globalization. Globalization is a term that

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is commonly used, but it has multiple meanings that can confuse attempts to be globalized. It is also important to study the challenges that emerge as we try to institute globalization into our classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the complexity of defining globalization and explore issues associated with globalization in online education.

### Literature Review

When it comes to studying globalization in higher education, it is beneficial to first define the term itself. While some authors and researchers attempt to define the word, others imply a definition through issues surrounding the concept of globalization. The literature also shows that two main categories emerge from the discussion on globalization: culture and technology.

One of the most interesting and illuminating points about studying globalization, especially in an online environment, is that the term often conjures up images of classes that have students scattered throughout the world interacting with one another in a common setting – the online classroom. But what is interesting to note is that students do not necessarily have to be geographically placed all over the world in order to experience cross-cultural interactions because of the high rate of immigration worldwide. Suárez-Orozco (2007) explains it like this:

The United States is in the midst of the largest wave of immigration in its history, with over a million new immigrants per year for a total foreign-born population of over 35 million people, equaling 12 percent of its total population. In Canada, Switzerland, and Australia the rates of immigration are nearly double the US rate. (p. 9)

Thus the mobility of the world's population is providing opportunity for global instruction even within a country's own boundaries. In an effort to further understand and define globalization, some researchers try to explain globalization through the goals they see it bringing to education and ultimately the world, as with Boix Mansilia and Gardner (2007) who stated that the goal of

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*Be selective about the block quotes you choose for your writing. Overuse of long quotations indicates a problem with research integration and shows the reader that the writer is not an authority on his or her subject matter within a composition.*

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globalization in the classroom is to have students be “reflective agents and actors – citizens of today and tomorrow” (p. 56). According to the authors, this goal can be achieved through a global consciousness that entails sensitivity, organization or global understanding, and self-representation.

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Gärdenfors (2007) reminds us that simply teaching students about other cultures does not necessarily equate to learning and understanding, which, to him, is the ultimate goal of globalization. One cannot simply feed facts about another culture or country to students and expect them to understand, much less internalize, the differences and similarities between cultures; they have to learn to perceive the patterns of other cultures, such as patterns evident in language. Gärdenfors suggests that one of the best ways for students to learn about another culture is to learn the language and immerse themselves in the culture. An incredible and exciting challenge for online education is to explore ways to allow this immersion to take place.

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Globalization in online education is not complete without a discussion about technology. Olaniran (2007) discusses challenges we face with globalization in terms of cultural differences and approaches to technology. For instance, individualistic and collectivist cultures approach confrontation differently and may not use discussion boards, for instance, in the same manner as the institutional culture. Furthermore, some cultures rely on oral tradition and may see e-learning as being problematic in solving problems. McCarty (2007) posits that to be global means one has to interface with more than one country and with representatives from developing and developed countries. He claims that the goal of the globalized classroom is to empower students with new ideas and technology, not to change the culture of the learners. However, Olaniran points out that “Some cultures adopt technology only as long as it does not conflict with their cultural norms” (Heaton, 2001)” (p. 26). Thus, online education may be introduced in some countries, but it most

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certainly may not be received in the same manner as the culture that created and hosts the online courses.

The term globalization is therefore not concrete in any fashion. It is a Pandora's Box, but the assortment of definitions and issues that this concept brings to discussions about global education does not have to equate to chaos. The diverse issues and questions that arise simply from the definition of this term present our future with opportunity. One way that opportunity is evident is that through online education, we can explore how to use technology to connect cultures in ways that physical barriers prevented us from exploring in the past.

#### **Challenges of Globalization in Education**

Globalization means that we must look at the term, challenges, implementation, and assessment and effectiveness from a truly global perspective. To make determinations about how to globalize a classroom without studying other cultures or relying on stereotypes is culturally-centric and does not allow for a global perspective. Furthermore, globalization is not an isolated subject; it is an interdisciplinary effort that affects every aspect of higher education today, including finance, language, curriculum, faculty, and post-graduate prospects.

Dillon, Wang, and Tearle (2007) state that the online environment distorts cultural understanding because the origins of online education are grounded in Western thought and design, which supports Olaniran's (2007) claims as well. While other cultures and marginalized populations are served through this medium of learning, "culture and language privilege particular forms of knowledge and ways of learning" (Dillon et al., 2007, p. 155). When culture and language between students and instructor are different, then the idea of internationalization poses significant challenges, thus bringing to light issues of exclusivity, dominance, and overall student experience. Contrary to my original claim that online distance education may be a more

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ideal setting to explore culture on a global scale, Dillon et al. state that “virtual environments are seldom designed to accommodate cultural diversity” (p. 153); however, that does not mean that we cannot learn about culture in effective ways in an online class.

For instance, Olaniran (2007) states that we must create equitable learning outcomes by accommodating different cultures, and one way we can do that is to acknowledge that while curriculum goals may be universal, “the process for accomplishing those goals must be pluralistic” (p. 28). In other words, the way we help or teach students to achieve learning goals may have to be modified from the culture that prepared the course content or the culture of the instructor.

Scarino, Crighton, and Woods (2007) acknowledge the complexity of globalization, although they use the term “internationalisation” and state the intention of internationalization is to “extend the reach of programmes that are made available in the context of the increasing international movement of people, programme delivery, providers and projects” (p. 219). They posit that internationalization implies crossing borders and that collaboration is the best way to facilitate this movement.

The challenges of creating globalized classes are numerous, and the responses to these challenges are just as varied as they are inconclusive. Economics, some contend, is the driving force behind globalization (Friedman, 2006), and technology is the enabler; however, no one country has the monopoly in this area. Thus, higher education around the world is tasked with preparing masses of people to continue the recent tradition of technological progression and global interaction. This task cannot be achieved by the traditional model of education in any country. Our globalized world, thus globalization in higher education, calls for a re-examination of “curriculum, pedagogical practices, and the organization of learning” as well as a

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“reallocation of education and training resources... and ministries will have to cooperate with one another, as none will have the power to adjust the economy on its own” (Hogonier, 2007, p. 140).

Europe is undertaking major steps towards globalizing higher education through the Bologna Process that began in 1999 and debuts this year. The Bologna Process is an educational initiative by 46 countries (at the time of this writing) to promote mobility, attract students and faculty worldwide, and be internationally competitive with other higher education systems (“The European Higher Education Area,” 2009). In other words, “It aims to do this by facilitating greater comparability and compatibility between the diverse higher education systems and institutions across Europe and by enhancing their quality” (“The European Higher Education Area,” 2009, p. 3). It seems reasonable that by studying this initiative we can learn a great deal about cross-cultural education.

In order to better understand how we can overcome the challenges of globalization in education, it is incredibly important that we learn as much as we can about the ways that different cultures teach and learn. Attempts to teach about culture through generalizations are ineffective models because there is no engagement with or true understanding of culture. Although the online environment allows us to cross borders and interact with one another, we still have plenty of work and research to do in order to understand how this medium can be used to best foster respect and harmonious working relationships across the globe.

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