

DESIGNING CULTURALLY SENSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Karen Ngeow

School of Professional and Continuing Education
The University of Hong Kong, HONG KONG
yhngeow@hkuspace.hku.hk

Karen Y.S. Kong

English Language Department
CCGSS, HONG KONG
sanyee@ctimail.com

Abstract

The educational opportunities that global learning offers have stimulated a great deal of interest and initiatives from educational institutions all over the world. However, these institutions face significant challenges in programme design and delivery. Among the challenges are the development of teaching, learning and assessment modalities that recognise different learning styles and preferences of students from diverse cultural groups. This paper explores instructional design principles from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Based on the design guidelines, the authors look at issues related to the design, implementation and evaluation of courses and learning programmes offered by educational institutions in Hong Kong.

Keywords

Instructional design; cultural diversity; learning cultures; flexible delivery and learning

Introduction

As we enter the 21st century, educational institutions engaged in online education initiatives must continue to develop their awareness, competencies and learning structures to better meet the needs of students from a changing global society. Heightened awareness, recognition and appreciation of diversity among student learning groups can help educators - teachers and administrators alike – to be better informed of the cultural and institutional constructs that help shape student attitude and learning behavior. All of these can in turn generate better learning outcomes and more meaningful learning experiences for students involved in offshore or online learning programmes across the world.

Toward cultural diversity in course design

Recently, both theorists and practitioners in online education are paying increasing attention to the cultural dimension in the design process by emphasizing the need to provide culturally sensitive learning environments (Reeves & Reeves, 1997; Collis, 1999; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). This paper attempts to derive some useful principles to help course designers focus on meeting students' diverse needs in distance education programmes. In doing so, it draws insights from reviewing theories on learning and exploring curricular or best practices in online education.

Guidelines from teaching and learning paradigms

To design a culturally sensitive learning environment, online instructional designers need to follow certain principles that best ensure flexibility and the need to take learners' perspectives into account. Following this premise, the constructivist learning paradigm takes into consideration design principles that acknowledge and incorporate learner input and perspective-taking. Lebow's (1993) paper discussed

"Five Principles Toward a New Mindset" and presented these principles as constructivist values that might or should influence instructional design. These five principles support the use of opportunities for learners to engage in distance learning experiences as a means of challenging them to construct their own meaning with the help of others.

Principle 1: Maintain a buffer between the learner and the potential effects of instructional practices.

- Increase emphasis on the affective domain of learning.
- Make instruction personally relevant to the learner.
- Help learners develop skills, attitudes, and beliefs that support self-regulation of the learning process.
- Balance the tendency to control the learning situation with a desire to promote personal autonomy.

Principle 2: Provide a context for learning that supports both autonomy and relatedness.

Principle 3: Embed the reasons for learning into the learning activity itself.

Principle 4: Support self-regulated learning by promoting skills and attitudes that enable the learner to assume increasing responsibility for the developmental restructuring process.

Principle 5: Strengthen the learner's tendency to engage in intentional learning processes, especially by encouraging the strategic exploration of errors.

Henderson (1994) also studied several instructional design models and paradigms, each of which reflects certain cultural worldviews and values consistent with different degrees of acknowledging and appreciating the cultures of target learning groups. Henderson came up with three instructional design approaches that address the cultural dimensions of teaching and learning. These approaches are:

1. The inclusive or perspectives paradigm. This approach imports the social, cultural and historical perspectives of diverse minority learning groups, but does not at the same time challenge the dominant learning culture. It is therefore merely cosmetic in its impact on instructional design and delivery.
2. The inverted curriculum paradigm. This approach attempts to include a learning component from the minority or diverse learning group perspective. However, it fails to provide the same diverse learners with educationally valid experiences as it does not admit them into the mainstream culture.
3. The culturally uni-dimensional paradigm. This approach excludes or denies the existence of cultural diversity among learning groups. In other words, it assumes that all educational experiences are the same for minority diverse learning groups as they are for the dominant or mainstream learning groups.

The principles that can be derived from the above categorization of paradigms resulted in what Henderson (1996) later proposes as a "multiple cultural paradigm" for instructional design. This model takes on an "eclectic approach" that allows for variability and flexibility in the design of learning resources. This calls for the design of courses that enable students to learn through interaction with materials and engagement in activities that are designed to meet these goals:

- reflect the multiple and diverse cultural realities of both minority and mainstream societies;
- include multiple cultural ways of knowing, interacting, learning and teaching; and
- promote acceptance and equity of a variety of learning outcomes.

Guidelines from institutional practices

McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) discussed the context of designing online learning for indigenous students in Australia and emphasized the need for instructional design to focus not only on constructivist,

conceptualized and culturally responsive learning but also on the importance of *minimizing* cultural misunderstanding among teaching and learning groups.

The two researchers advocated several design principles for a culturally inclusive curriculum for online learners. A summary of these principles is given below.

1. Adopt an *epistemology* that is consistent with, and supportive of constructivist learning and acceptance of multiple perspectives.
2. Design *authentic learning activities* that build on existing knowledge, values and skills of all learning groups in the learning community.
3. Create *flexible tasks and tools for knowledge sharing* to enable the notion of an online learning community. These tools include shared workspaces, discussion forums and other web-collaborative tools for study and social interaction.
4. Provide *different forms of support, both within and outside* of the learning community. This includes online help tools or provision for students to contact one another using web-based tools as well as providing flexible tutoring and mentoring roles. Another way is to provide various access means to different resources to promote students' efforts to obtain information from multiple sources and perspectives.
5. Establish *responsive student roles and responsibilities* to provide a sense of autonomy and ownership for students. This includes creating self-direction tasks and having methods that encourage students to take charge of their own learning paths.
6. Provide flexibility in learning goals, outcomes and assessment modes. Using learner contracts with mature students or guiding students to assessment requirements that more readily meet personal or organizational goals.

Culturally Sensitive Learning: Design, implementation and evaluation

The above guidelines can be used as design frameworks as well as indicators of success for evaluating a culturally sensitive learning environment. During the implementation and evaluation stages, course design teams should ask questions related to flexible delivery and flexible learning.

Designing for flexible delivery

- Does the course design embrace the cultural learning differences of all learner groups? For example, does it cater primarily to the needs of “mainstream learners” familiar with western pedagogy and learning approaches? The desired effect is that the revamped courses should serve “westernized” as effectively as non-westernised learners, enabling them to consider multiple cultural perspectives in viewing the world.
- Is there a need to review and revise course materials that are likely to have been written with a cultural and linguistic bias towards certain learning groups?
- Does the design incorporate the use of culturally sensitive intervention strategies? This may include strategies in learning, assessment, team building and conflict resolution.

Designing for flexible learning

- Does the course design cater for a diverse range of teaching and learning styles (for example, visual, verbal, global, sequential, inductive or deductive)?
- Education should be a dialectic exchange between students and teachers as well as among students. Does the design encourage genuine and meaningful communication between learning groups? Are there various means of creating opportunities for establishing cross-cultural partnerships and learning communities?
- Empowered students are motivated and autonomous individuals learning at their best. What strategies exist in the learning model that can assist in identifying and optimising the cultural diversity and sensitivity of students?

Conclusion

Because of the evolving nature of cultural diversity itself and of course requirements, there can be no single prescribed model for ensuring the design of culturally sensitive learning environments. This paper serves to remind us that recognising and then considering cultural diversity in our design, implementation and evaluation of learning programmes are critical first steps in meeting the challenges of a global learning society.

References

- Collis, B. (1999). Designing for differences: Cultural issues in the design of WWW-based course support sites. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 30(3), 201-217.
- Henderson, L. (1994). Reeves' pedagogic model of interactive learning systems and cultural contextuality. In C. McBeath & R. Atkinson (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Second International Interactive Multimedia Symposium*. Perth: Promaco.
- Henderson, L. (1996). Instructional design of interactive multimedia. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 44(4), 85-104.
- Lebow, D. (1993). Constructivist values for instructional systems design: Five principles towards a new mindset. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 41(3), 4-16.
- McLoughlin, C., & Oliver, R. (2000). Designing learning environments for cultural inclusivity: A case study of the indigenous online learning at tertiary level. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 16(1), 58-72.
- Reeves, T. & Reeves, P. (1997). Effective dimensions of interactive learning on the World Wide Web. In B. Khan (Ed.), *Web-based instruction* (pp. 59-66). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications.

Copyright © 2002 Karen Ngeow & Karen Kong

The author(s) assign to ASCILITE and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to ASCILITE to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) and in printed form within the ASCILITE 2002 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).