

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND TRANSNATIONAL FLEXIBILITY DELIVERY

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Abstract

This paper considers the cultural issues associated with the use of flexible delivery in offshore international education. It discusses the work of Lyn Henderson and Betty Collis, who argue for 'culturally-flexible' instructional design for diverse student populations. These approaches to online pedagogy are valuable, but local face-to-face teaching remains crucial.

Introduction

Technology is increasingly shaping the nature of offshore educational delivery as information and communications technologies now allow educational institutions to extend their reach well beyond the commuting distance of students and staff. (Bates and de los Santos 1997; Blight 1999) 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 many universities are establishing campuses overseas. (Blight 1999) **There were over 20,000 students enrolled in offshore campuses of Australian universities in 1998, and around two thirds of those students were in Singapore and Hong Kong.** (Australian Education International 1999) 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.

Offshore distance education has also been transformed by new information and communication technologies. (Bates 1997; Bates and de los Santos 1997) 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 globalising the market for distance education, since it is now possible for prospective students to choose from a wide range of Web-based courses offered by providers based in many different nations. From the student's point of view, there is often little difference between these courses in terms of modes of delivery or ease of access. Many commentators have mistaken this technological possibility for a dominant social reality, failing to take account of the factors that limit cross-border study (for example, Knight 1994; West 1998). Glen Farrell's assessment

of the development of virtual education institutions in global context avoids this common technological determinism by examining both the forces driving the development of virtual institutions and the forces opposing their development. (Farrell 1999) He reminds us that 'it is not the technologies themselves that are at issue, but the purpose and manner of their use'. In this paper I want to look at the manner in which cultural differences can be accommodated in such transnational technologically mediated educational delivery.

Cultural diversity in online learning

The use of online learning in offshore delivery raises a number of cultural issues. International online learning environments bring together, in an unfamiliar environment, students and educators whose experience of teaching and learning stems from very different cultural traditions. Educators who have taught international students in classrooms come to understand that students from different cultures bring with them different experiences and expectations of teaching and learning. A number of useful guides to teaching international students have been published in Australia recent years. (Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Metzger 1992) In the scramble to get online courses up and running as quickly as possible, the fact of cultural difference seems to have been often overlooked so far. In order to ensure longer-term sustainability in the delivery of offshore education, such issues are increasingly pertinent. (Farrell 1999; Latchem 1997; Rizvi and Walsh 1998) Students' experience of learning in virtual environments is a critical area of concern for educators throughout the world (HIS 1995) but little research has been conducted into the cultural bases of such experiences.

International students who travel to another country expect a different type of education than they are used to and such 'international exposure' is part of the appeal of study abroad for many students. (Rizvi, forthcoming) Australian educators expect international students studying in Australia to adjust to local cultural and educational norms, to a certain extent. However, as Kelly and Ha have pointed out, the situation is very different for students who are studying Australian courses in their home countries, while remaining embedded in their own language, family, work, peer and social groups. (Kelly and Ha 1998) For these students, an imported curriculum and pedagogy is transplanted independently of its social context. Students who travel overseas and who are temporarily living in the culture out of which the course emanates—and whose values it reflects—can make more sense of a foreign form of educational than students who do not know much about the culture from which the educational provider emanates. For this reason, institutions providing courses to offshore international students have a greater responsibility to make their courses culturally appropriate and relevant to international students.

In Australia, there is now considerable experience in designing culturally appropriate educational multimedia for Aboriginal students, and this experience provides valuable lessons for developers of international cross-cultural online education. The Yanardilyi–Cockatoo Creek CD-ROM was developed through a strong partnership between the Yuendumu people in Central Australia and a multimedia production company in Melbourne. At each step of production, extensive cooperation ensured that the information was presented in a way that maximised value for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences alike. (Hinkson 1998) Edith Cowan University has

developed pre-university bridging courses on the Web for Aboriginal students. This incorporates instructional design features that are responsive to both Aboriginal and academic cultures. (McLoughlin 1999) The most thorough, and successful, attempt to develop culturally responsive multimedia learning material for Aboriginal students is James Cook University's Remote Area Teacher Education Program. In this program, educators with considerable experience in teaching Aboriginal teachers went through a long-term development process to ensure that every aspect of the course was tailored to the needs of their student group—from hardware choice and course structure to choice of photographs and pacing of study modules. (Henderson and Putt 1993)

These examples, only briefly sketched here, represent some of the most thorough attempts at culturally responsive educational multimedia development in the world. Lyn Henderson's work at James Cook University, especially, is attracting international attention (Wild 1999). Those using new media in offshore education can learn two things from these examples: responding to the cultural needs of students and designing for cultural flexibility. It is important that institutions providing offshore education support research on the social dimensions of students' experiences in such novel courses. Such research can build on studies of students' experience of distance education in various countries that give an insight in to how local providers have adapted Western models to suit local conditions (for example, Idrun and Atan 1997) and studies of international students' experiences in the Australian education system. (For example, see Rizvi, forthcoming.)

Responsiveness

In each of the cases mentioned above, educators had considerable understanding of their audience—a necessity for effective communication in any medium—and members of the Aboriginal community were involved at each stage of development. This is a necessary first step. Educators must be familiar with their students' backgrounds, assumptions and expectations. In international education it means having some familiarity with the student's county of origin and the educational practices that the student would be used to in their home country.

This responsiveness, while important, faces two major limitations in international education. Firstly, there is always a multiplicity of cultural formations (however defined) in any educational context, including distinct cultures of the institution, the subject discipline, the teachers and the students. (Collis 1999) The examples cited above all aim to help the students and teachers move between different cultures. Any course must be responsive to a number of demands for cultural inclusion, emanating variously from students, teachers, governments, employers and so on. The second qualification to responsiveness is the issue of increasing diversity in student and teacher populations. It becomes difficult to tailor a course to a student body who may be living in different countries, speak many different languages at home and who may never meet in person. Most of the transnational courses now being offered by Australian tertiary institutions appear not to have been designed for a specific student group. Based on the examples I have seen, most subjects offered transnationally were initially developed for local students and have been internationalised by removing culturally specific content. The degree of localisation of transnational courses surely

varies between subjects, disciplines and institutions, and more research on the processes used by institutions in internationalising courses for transnational delivery is needed, both to illuminate current trends and highlight effective approaches. It is reasonable to expect a greater degree of localisation in courses that are offered to a small number of distinct student groups, however courses offered transnationally are increasingly offered to students in many nations, making responsiveness to local cultures more difficult. For this reason, a parallel strategy of cultural flexibility is also crucial in developing sustainable uses of new media in international education.

Flexibility

Recently, several writers have encouraged the development of ‘cultural flexibility’ as a way of catering to cultural difference in online teaching and learning. Lyn Henderson (1996) advocates courses that manage to allow multiple forms of teaching and learning simultaneously. She suggests that rather than imposing a pre-determined style of engagement, courses should be flexible enough to cater for diverse approaches. In spelling out the features of courses that should remain open, she lists several aspects of teaching and learning in binary pairs, including pedagogical philosophy (instructivism vs constructivism), role of instructor (teacher-proof vs equalitarian facilitator), value of errors (errorless learning vs learning from experience) and motivation (extrinsic vs intrinsic). Her point is that any course should be designed with these continuums in mind, and aim to allow students and teachers to choose their own style of learning or teaching as the course progresses. Such courses, she argues, would be able to accommodate multiple cultural perspectives in an *eclectic paradigm*.

Henderson has effectively put out a challenge to design courses that are capable of being all things to all people. This is a tall order. In these times, it is very difficult to mount an argument against the idea of ‘flexibility’, in any sphere of life. To be flexible is to be able to change constantly in order to cater to needs as they arise. I would suggest that in labour markets this most commonly entails employees being required to adjust to the needs of employers, and in education requires the student to adjust to the needs of the institution. I would argue that, in practice, flexibility delivery is never as flexible as the institutional rhetoric suggests. Henderson’s argument, that the institution and teachers must be able to change constantly to suit the needs of students, fits in nicely with the rhetoric of flexible delivery but it is a long way from the practice. Given the constraints on money and time in universities, lecturers are under pressure to choose strategies that most efficiently cater to most of their students. Individual customisation would seem to work against the economies of scale that universities are currently pursuing.

In a recent paper, Betty Collis (1999) has responded to Henderson’s call by putting forward design guidelines for the development of such culturally flexible online course-support sites. She lists the following ten principles.

1. ‘Plan for flexibility and adaptation when the WWW-based course-support system is first designed.’

2. 'Design for a variety of roles for both instructors and students; allow roles to be interchangeable or modifiable. Within the same system, offer support for an eclectic variety of types of learning experiences....'
3. 'Do not assume students will use the course-support site as a primary source of course content.... Books and print materials are better for primary study materials in terms of portability, ease of use and cultural fit than computer materials.'
4. 'Use the course support site to supplement study materials, and to integrate and manage student study activities. The course-support site should initially be as empty as possible, to be filled by the instructor and students in their own ways as the course proceeds....'
5. 'Design the WWW site so that students and instructors can input and make use of variety of combinations of supplementary media and other resources...'
6. 'Design for minimal technical levels...'
7. 'Reduce fixed text on the screen to a minimum...'
8. 'Offer a flexible assortment of tools that can be combined for different communication configurations....'
9. 'Design for organisational flexibility: so that courses of different lengths, offered at a variety of times, and with different types and levels of prerequisites and examination/assessment requirements can be supported....'
10. 'Be realistic about what instructors can and will do...' (Collis 1999)

With these guidelines, Collis has begun to develop practical suggestions to assist instructional designers and lecturers to take account of cultural difference in flexibly delivered courses. These are very valuable, helping to specify the types of flexibility that may be useful. The practical value of such principles in course design is an open question, and evaluative research on various models of transnational flexible delivery is needed to ascertain the usefulness of Collis's suggestions. I would like to make a couple of general points about the pursuit of flexibility as a generalised solution.

The first issue I want to raise is the practical limitations on the flexibility of the institution. As discussed above, I am suggesting that institutions claim to be much more flexible than they really are. The language of flexibility will find many supporters but implementing such policies will face many practical obstacles. The requirement for organisational flexibility will may run into opposition from bureaucratic institutions that have developed procedures enabling them to treat students as a mass in order to achieve administrative efficiencies. If making an institution more responsive to students needs increases administrative costs, there is likely to be resistance from institutions and the extra workloads may well fall onto teaching staff themselves. Such an approach would also require a considerable commitment of time on the part of teaching staff throughout the semester in order to interact with students and build the online resources as the course proceeds. The

current trends in distance education seem to be pointing in the opposite direction—universities often use flexible delivery as a means of increasing economies of scale by increasing student numbers while deskilling those responsible for ongoing instruction. (Noble 1998) There is a widespread tendency to invest in the preparation of teaching materials before a subject is offered and then offer less ongoing contact and support to students as their study proceeds.

Secondly, as well as facing obstacles within the institution, increasing flexibility may encounter resistance from students. In the context of international education, we must remember that the desirability of flexibility is itself culturally weighted. While flexibility is a buzzword in Australia and many other Western countries, in South East Asia, where much Australian offshore education is taking place, students and their families do not like being required to make choices about their course. Choices are seen as the role of the teacher, who should know what the most appropriate choices are. (Ballard and Clanchy 1997) In this case, being responsive to the desires of students would mean accepting that not all students want to study ‘flexibly’. Collis does propose that students and teachers should be able to relate to each other in a range of different ways, and this is clearly necessary to cater to student diversity. For example, there is a tendency for Australian instructors to assume the role of a peer in a reciprocal relationship. In many Asian educational traditions, teachers are held in high esteem, making this egalitarian approach foreign and at times uncomfortable. In many parts of Asia, teachers interact less with students in class than do Western teachers, but have stronger and more informal relationships with students outside class. This is counter to conventional Western notions of professionalism in teaching. (Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Kelly and Ha 1998) Teachers need to understand that different students will have different expectations of them and be able to interact with different groups of students differently in online interactions. Sometimes this requires teachers to accept situations in which students express a clear desire for teacher-centred learning. Collis does recommend designing courses that cater to different learning styles. Kelly and Ha describe the style of education in ‘Confucian Heritage Cultures’ such as Hong Kong as a step-by-step approach in which memorisation and repetition are seen as the first stages in learning. Unlike in the West, where students are encouraged to experiment and explore first, then develop a deeper and more thorough understanding, in much of South East Asia, the teacher decides how much information to give to the students as a basis for later analysis and exploration. (Kelly and Ha 1998) The degree of flexibility of the teacher will be constrained by many factors, so as well as being adaptable to students’ preferences, it is important that teachers are able to explain their teaching styles, and the presumed learning styles, that will be used during the course.

The third issue is more fundamental, and concerns flexibility as a generalised response to the abstraction of relationships that accompanies the technological mediation of interaction. While information and communications technologies are able to connect people all over the world, making transnational education practical, the resulting connections are very different from the connections established by people in the same place. In offshore international education, the availability of technologically mediated communication does not alter the fact that distance and borders separate teachers and students who often have different languages, cultures and histories. The relationships that ensue across this distance are much more abstract than traditional teacher-learner or learner-learner relationships. Without mutual co-

presence, the participants have access to little information about their interlocutor compared with face-to-face interaction. The fundamental problem is that teachers and students cannot know much about each other across this distance, whether they use e-mail or not. This makes tailoring a course to students' needs difficult, because students and teachers are far removed from one another's social context. Market research tends to replace local knowledge and experience. It seems to me that flexibility in online education is an attempt to acknowledge this lack of mutual understanding, and developing curriculum and pedagogy 'on the fly' during delivery rather than predetermining these.

Collis is optimistic that online teaching can allow responsiveness and interaction between disconnected participants. While the course materials that are produced in advance will be generic and standardised for all students, the online environment, Collis believes, can allow localisation. The Web-based component of a course can be used to supplement the generic print-based study materials with local input, allowing the particularistic experiences of students in different places to be expressed. By being initially empty, the course-support site provides an opportunity for students and teachers to localise the course to suit their own needs as the course proceeds. Students and teachers in different locations should be able to add to the course by inputting URLs, notes, presentations and images. In a culturally diverse classroom, study materials must focus on issues of international significance that are thus relevant to all students. Students will approach this material from their own perspective, based on local conditions. The course-support site can act as a forum for students to reflect on the generic material from a distinctive position. Collis advocates allowing students to create the space rather than enter a pre-formed set of resources. Limiting the amount of pre-set text and imagery in the site minimises the risk of an inappropriate tone and style being used. As the course proceeds, the style of online communication can be developed through interchange between participants. The rationale for Collis's suggestions is understandable. These suggestions are worth trying out, but this openness runs the risk of further alienating students rather than reassuring them. In such an abstracted learning space, increasing the openness and flexibility of the interaction may mean that the experience of students is less clearly defined and less predictable.

A more effective way of overcoming the abstraction caused by mediated teaching and learning relationships is by relying more on face-to-face relationships with teachers. Local teaching staff in offshore campuses play a more important part in localising generic international courses and can help their students participate in an international online environment. However, they commonly have little control over the content and form of generic study materials, which are often produced in the central campus by teachers with little familiarity with offshore students. Teachers who are distant from their students should be open about their remoteness and attempt to transform the outlying peripheries into multiple creative centres as much as possible. Building on the local knowledge of face-to-face teachers in this way requires coordination between a geographically dispersed teaching team.

This is not to deny the value of Internet-based approaches in offshore education. For students studying in a language other than their native language, online courses may present fewer language barriers than face-to-face courses. Unlike the face-to-face lecture, transcribed, videotaped or audiotaped lectures allow the student to review

material that is difficult to understand. Asynchronous discussion forums allow students as much time as they need to prepare questions and comments. Students who are studying in a second language often prefer to contact their teachers via e-mail because they can work on expressing their questions in advance. (Kelly and Ha 1998) Collis advocates letting students and teachers choose from a variety of forms of communication, and to participate in these in their preferred manner. Let the users set use the form of communication they are most comfortable with—anonymous or visible, synchronous or asynchronous, private or public.

Conclusion

As flexible delivery of tertiary education internationalises, 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. In delivering culturally appropriate online education to offshore students, developers must ensure that their course both responds to the cultural perspectives of the student population and is flexible enough to allow for multiple ways of studying. In both cases it is crucial that distant instructors are familiar with their students' cultural contexts. But this understanding is no substitute for face-to-face relationships between students and their local teachers, and efforts to improve cultural sensitivity in flexibly delivered courses must work towards strengthening rather than undermining the close relationships between students and local teaching staff wherever they may be.

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