

Culturally-Sensitive E-Learning Practices for Library Education

Abstract: With globalization, library educators should address culturally-sensitive instruction design and curriculum, particularly in online learning environments. Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Bigg's educational model provide frameworks for addressing cultural impact on library education. Specific techniques are suggested for handling language and online learning issues.

Résumé : Avec la mondialisation, les professeurs de bibliothéconomie devraient incorporer les différences culturelles dans leurs cours ainsi que dans le cursus, notamment en milieu d'apprentissage en ligne. Les dimensions culturelles de Hofstede et le modèle éducatif de Bigg offrent un cadre permettant de traiter de l'impact culturel sur l'éducation. Seront présentées différentes techniques pour aborder les questions de langue et d'apprentissage en ligne.

1. Introduction

As globalization impacts economies, it necessarily impacts librarian careers – and its academic preparation. Concurrently, people are seeking distance education delivery options in order to get the training needed from experts who may reside continents away. Particularly as Western educational philosophies do not reflect the preponderance of educational approaches worldwide, it behooves library educators to address cultural nuances, particularly in online learning environments.

2. Culture

Culture may be defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” and “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization” (*Webster's Dictionary*). In teacher education, cultural issues apply to the learner, the instructor, the intended workplace, and the profession itself. Hofstede's 1980 model of cultural dimensions provides a useful framework for examining culturally-sensitive library education implications: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Additionally, Biggs' 1978 3P model of teaching and learning (presage, process, products) illustrates how learner experiences are interdependent with situational elements such as teaching factors (style, institutional procedures, assessment) and the learning environment (e.g., learning activities, social climate). Biggs also differentiates surface approaches to learning (i.e., reproducing information), deep approaches (thorough understanding), and achievement orientation (i.e., focus on grades). Biggs, Kember, and Leung (2001) emphasize the importance of identifying which factors are universal and which are culturally-defined. Most significant are those practices that are imposed as if universal (e.g., outlining a report) that actually reflect specific cultural norms (e.g., North American); learners outside that teacher-centric culture may feel discounted or under-prepared.

As they work in cross-cultural settings, or at the very least work with learners from different cultures, teacher educators should strive for cultural competence. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) list several benchmarks that note progress in this endeavor: cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, cultural proficiency.

3. Instructional Design

In an e-learning environment, technology significantly impacts student learning, and also is subject to cultural influence. For instance, learners might have different degrees of access due to cultural attitudes about technology, socially-constructed gender role expectations, and socio-economic values. World experience and knowledge impacts learners' ability to locate and evaluate online information. Even social attitudes about language acquisition and attitudes about English can impact online use. Often cultural sensitivity is overlooked when designing e-learning curriculum and delivery. Not only should instructors be aware of the impact of culture in their training, but they should leverage those cultural differences to provide a richer educational experience.

Examination of the learner specifically leads to several contributing cultural factors that need to be considered when designing library education instruction (McMahon and Bruce 2002):

- Language (idioms): native/primary language skills of reading and writing; the quality and quantity of second language experience and skill; formal vs. informal language usage; vocabulary and idiomatic knowledge
- Educational philosophy and experiences: role of education; curriculum and instruction practices; student behavior norms (which might differ from the institution's expectations); learner-specific experiences
- Gender issues: sex-linked educational, career, and workplace expectations/norms that are culturally defined
- Age-linked cultural norms: generation-specific roles and expectations; familial roles and norms; roles and expectations impacted by global/social realities (e.g., digital natives)

In considering culture as they design training, instructors need to know where the learner intends to work. If learners are studying for a career that is close to them geographically, they are likely to know local cultural norms if they have lived in that area for a while, even if they personally do not agree with those norms or hold lower status (e.g., a societal caste system). Instructors of diverse students need to help those learners navigate within the dominant or target culture successfully. Instructors also need to find out their students' perceptions and experiences are relative to librarianship so they can build on prior knowledge and also address possible misconceptions or limited viewpoints.

4. Solutions to Language Problems

International students usually have taken English courses before they start teacher education, but that instruction is typically provided by teachers whose primary language is not English. British English (with a British accent) is more likely to be taught than American English, which can also impact the meaning of common terms, such as "bonnet" for car hood. Additionally, the English taught is unlikely to address technical educational vocabulary. Fortunately, e-learning tends to be text-based (with some visual

support), which enables learners to consult dictionaries and peers to understand concepts. Additionally, asynchronous discussion enables learners to take their time crafting their responses in their primary language and then translating their words with less time stress. The anonymity of online communication can also make females from masculine-dominated cultures feel more comfortable voicing their opinion. Specific tips, largely from Sarkodie-Manash (2000), apply across the board in library education.

5. E-Teaching Factors

Hofstede's 1980 model of cultural differences can aid teacher educators in creating culturally-sensitive online learning environments. Domer and Gorman (2006) offer several useful suggestions relative to student-teacher relations, topics of discussion, choice of resources, learner participation, learning activities, and assessment.

On one hand, technology enables learners from around the world to get library education at the click of a button. On the other hand, physical and intellectual access to technology remains uneven in different countries; learners in developing countries may be severely disadvantaged. Even time zone differences can be a challenge for students who have to log in at 3 am in order to participate in live chat. Furthermore, learners reflect a vast spectrum of technological experience and expertise because of age, culture, and personal expectations. Therefore, instructors need to find out what technological access their students have, and aim for the lowest common denominator. Application programs should be free and web-based. Learners should be able to get technical assistance at any time, hopefully, in a language that they can understand.

6. Conclusions

The following strategies summarize the key points for library educators to follow in designing culturally-sensitive e-learning.

- Provide clear information and expectations about library education, including content, technical aspects, procedures, participation, assessment, available support.
- Get to know the students, and help them learn about each other. Obtain and share demographic information. Provide opportunities for students to share their perspectives and experiences, thus enriching the course content.
- Create a positive class climate. Make learning safe and comfortable so that students who are not used to voicing opinions or do not want to take intellectual risks will be supported in their efforts.
- Structure learning for meaning. Bring in cultural differences rather than masking them. Help students to connect training content to their own environments.
- Provide access to resources, and give students choices about the types of resources to use. Offer instruction or other kinds of support if students are not used to locating resources independently.
- Provide support and scaffolding for students as needed: online tutorials, local expertise, peer assistants, translation tools, technical help, time management, etc.
- Give students time to process and evaluate information. Foster critical thinking by modeling analytical information processing.
- Help students clarify and justify their understanding. Encourage study groups and study buddies as a way to refine their knowledge.
- Give timely and specific feedback throughout the training.

- Help students self-monitor and express their learning. Give them opportunities to demonstrate competencies in several ways: written, visual, orally.

In any case, in order to provide meaningful online training, both teacher educators and their students need to become culturally competent: open to learning about other cultures and sharing one's own culture, able to change personal perspectives, and able to communicate effectively across cultures (Liaw 2006).

7. References

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