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Issues Paper

Diversity among Distance Learning Student Populations

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Introduction

Students who choose to participate in online or distance learning classes bring a variety of cultural backgrounds to the class (Anderson & Simpson, 2007). Traditions, values, beliefs, customs, and artifacts of a group of people all come together to make that group’s culture. Communication and language are a part of the culture and gives individuals a method to convey their culture to other groups (Rutherford & Kerr, 2008). Income level, location, gender and lifestyle also affect a person’s culture (Uzner, 2009). Students often come to class belonging to more than one culture group. It is this culture that gives the student his or her perspective and uniquely affects student learning.

The goal of distance education is to give equal access to all students, regardless of their location. Using the internet for communication allows students from different geographical, linguistic, and cultural communities to study together (Anderson & Simpson, 2007). The culture of both students and their teacher affects the learning of the students. In traditional classes, students are expected to behave within the teacher’s cultural system. Distance learning courses create their own culture and their own set of guidelines. Online courses give advantages to the students from the culture that created the course, since the student and teacher have the same cultural background. Studies have been done on groups of students, examining how their culture determines the way the group approaches the coursework. Most of the research has been on groups, not individuals, and most is on Asian cultures. There are few studies on different American cultures, such as African-American, Latino-American, or Asian-Americans (Uzner, 2009).

Cultures vary around the globe, but in a distance learning class all students participate in the same online “classroom”. These students have differences which affect their participation and eventual success in the class. Some of the differences have a positive effect on the student, others have a negative effect.

Examples of Cultural Diversity and Its Affect on Distance Learning

Socio-economic background is known to negatively affect student success in traditional classrooms. Students struggle with class work and are less likely to attend to college. Online technology is a disadvantage for communities without internet access. Those without access, such as low income students, lack the knowledge and availability of computers (Anderson & Simpson, 2007). However, online asynchronous distance education can help low-income students and other working undergraduate and graduate students succeed. Students can complete online courses while meeting family and job obligations. Students having difficulty with a course can repeat instruction as needed (Ebersole, 2008). Once the technology is obtained and utilized, distance courses can allow a student to obtain a degree in less time than traditional coursework.

Ethnic groups have many different cultural values that affect student success. In both traditional and online courses, Asian cultures give more value to opinions, instruction, and discussion by the teacher than discussion by classmates. Asian students also prefer structured assignments with clear direction, and do not complete student-centered learning activities easily. Many distance learning classes include substantial emphasis on participation in online discussion forums. Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian students are less likely to participate often in the discussions and place less value on them. They consider a lack of face-to-face communication a hindrance to their success. (Rutherford & Kerr, 2008, Uzner, 2009) Asian cultures believe “think more, talk less” and prefer asynchronous discussions, giving students time to form thoughtful answers. Non-English speakers tend to feel isolated and alienated, and are less successful in English-speaking universities. Arab and Chinese cultures promote modesty; these students tend to participate less so they do not appear “too smart” (Uzner, 2009). Arab women in particular have a fear of saying something inappropriate in an online discussion and losing the family’s honor. (Rutherford & Kerr, 2008)

American students, in contrast, enjoy online discussions. They are less concerned with theory in their responses, their thinking is more abstract, and their messages tend to be shorter. American students tend to be more critical and outspoken. In discussions with the instructor, American students are more comfortable since they are less likely to view the instructor as an authority figure and more like an equal. (Uzner, 2009)

Students in an online community need to keep an open attitude and develop skills to cross the language barriers they may encounter in an online discussion. Students need to be open and aware of each other’s cultures and customs (Rutherford & Kerr, 2008). When working in online groups, students need patience and to use individual student strengths to help all students succeed.

Implications for Distance Learning Course Designers and Instructors

Distance learning courses must be designed to be culturally inclusive. Know the learner, allow for their differences, and design courses so that students of all cultures can be successful. Give students choices in course materials, learning activities, methods of communication, and technology tools when possible. Set high expectations and motivate students to challenge themselves (Rutherford & Kerr, 2008). Instructors should encourage their students to get to know each other with pictures, background information and other interests online. Encourage them to communicate outside of class in social networks or other ways. Allow students to get to know each other before assigning group projects, and promote diversity in those groups (Uzner, 2009).

One advantage to online discussions is that students from many places can share their ideas with other students. Requiring online student discussion participation is common, but does not allow for student choice among those students who would prefer not to participate (Anderson & Simpson, 2007). Online discussions need to have guidelines, clear rules, and structured assignments to accommodate cultures which are hesitant to participate freely in student-to-student discussions. Instructors need to make sure that students understand that their opinions, beliefs, and knowledge are welcome and valued. Instructors should participate in discussions and model appropriate behavior for students. Students need to use language that is understood by all – the use of slang or conversational tones should be discouraged (Uzner, 2009).

Community college students do not typically live on campus, and many online courses take place within community colleges. Students tend to be very diverse in age, culture, and socio-economic background. One community college which has designed courses that are interactive, engaging, and meet the needs of all students is Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). Students communicate with each other and their instructor through a variety of Google applications and web conferencing. Students may use Google Chat to discuss issues, Google Docs to work on group papers, or Google Sites to create group websites. Blackboard is used for class sharing and discussion. NOVA recognizes that students have different preferences and so that school tries to offer options to meet all those needs. Students can then choose to use what works for them (Demski, 2009).

Culture affects everything a person does, including academic success in school. Traditional classroom techniques for students of many cultures also apply to distance learning courses, but attention must also be given to the unique needs of a diverse community that communicates online. Non-native English speakers have different values than Americans, and course designs should reflect the needs of all to insure success of all students. With careful design, distance learning course attendance will continue to grow and meet the needs of a diverse global population.

References

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