Cultural influences on online learning in Japan:
A research proposal

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Abstract

This paper examines how cultural differences between teachers and students in online distance education contexts, if ignored, can negatively influence educational outcomes. Initially, distance education courses were often designed for a known, fairly homogenous group of students from the same culture as the course designer, however, with the increased use of networked computers, distance education has become more globalized and transnational educational exchanges more common. The question arises whether the principles and practices that have evolved for use in asynchronous learning networks in western context are effective when used with students from other cultural contexts. The main body of this paper will examine how assumptions about effective practice in online distance education may turn out to be faulty when applied in educational contexts where learners from other cultural backgrounds study. The paper will conclude by examining some possible approaches to doing research to learn more about, one specific group, the Japanese online distance learner.

Introduction

Instructional practice and research in asynchronous learning networks (ALN) has been informed by discussion of basic theoretical concepts such as "transactional distance", "social presence", "constructivist learning", " communities of inquiry", leading to a greater understanding of educational processes and outcomes in the context of the ALN (Moore and Kearsley, 2005, Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2003). Instructors new to the online mode of delivery can find a great variety of books and articles with advice on how to conduct classes, i.e. to increase "teacher presence", engage students in "collaborative learning activities", etc. Initially, distance education (DE) courses were often designed for a known, fairly homogenous group of students from the

same culture as the course designer, however, with the increased use of networked computers, distance education has become more globalized and transnational educational exchanges more common. Theorists have asked whether this evolving set of principles and practices for use in the ALN are effective when used with students from other cultural backgrounds (Bates, 2001, Gunawardena, 2001, Henderson, 1996, Swan, 2004). The main focus of this paper will be look at the various ways that assumptions about effective practice in online distance education may turn out to be faulty when applied with learners from other cultural backgrounds. This paper will conclude with an examination of possible approaches to learning more about one specific group, the Japanese online distance learner.

Culture – Why it is important

It would certainly be simpler to ignore cultural differences and develop courses for all groups assuming that "one size fits all". I will argue that for both practical and ideological reasons it is important for educators to become more aware of their own culturally based beliefs and values in regards to education, as well as try to understand the beliefs, values and practices of our students from other cultural backgrounds. This increased awareness of cultural differences can then be applied to course design where necessary.

Practically speaking, this increased awareness of cultural differences is important because increasing trends towards globalization are combining with rapid growth in computer network capacity to facilitate education from a distance. This puts universities all over the world into an increasingly competitive global environment. Attracting students from other countries to your programs and keeping them satisfied will be increasingly advantageous.

For years universities in developed western countries such as the US, Australia and England have enrolled students from both developed and developing countries. Asian countries in particular feature prominently in American foreign student enrollment. In 2003-4 Asian countries, lead by India, were the source of 56% of foreign students in the USA (Institute of International Education). China, the number two provider, is also a major "exporter" of students to American universities. In China particularly, according to Olsen (2003) we will see increasing domestic demand for higher education and a lack of places in Chinese universities during the first half of this century. Japan is the 4th largest provider of students to the US overall, but the largest provider of foreign students to American community colleges. Hezel Associates, an independent company that specializes in the study of distance education, ranked Japan "among the hottest targets for universities seeking to market their distance education offerings", number two only after South Korea (Carnevale, 2005). As distance offerings increase and hybrid classrooms gain popularity, we are likely to see increasing numbers of contacts online between Asian students and American faculty. Understanding the beliefs, values and typical educational practices of this group of students would make practical sense.

Looking from an ideological point of view, increasing awareness of other cultures' beliefs, values and educational practices in regards to education is important because to not do so potentially allows dominant western cultures to impose their cultural values and practices, leading to decreased diversity. The argument can be made, however, that students from other cultures need direct undiluted contact with western cultural beliefs and practices to learn about western values, if they are to take part in the global business environment. Dillon

and Green (2004) make the point in regards to student learning styles that students need to learn to be flexible, and having tasks and evaluation designed to meet their learning style may not encourage cognitive growth. Nonetheless, instructors and course designers should also understand that if they design a course that is in conflict with students' beliefs and customary practices, this may result in less student satisfaction with the course and less than optimal learning outcomes, potentially leading to students dropping out of a course of study. Not taking students' needs into consideration can function as a way of excluding learners from educational participation and keep them "on the margins". Consequently, course design for distance education has far reaching social, economic and political consequences (Lauzon, 1999).

Culture – What is it anyway?

In the previous section I presented a rational for considering the cultural backgrounds of students when designing online DE courses. Before going into details about how cultural differences between course designers and students can affect educational experiences, I should explain how I am using the term "culture". By "culture" I am speaking of the patterns of behavior and values that members of a groups share. Hofstede (1997, p. 5) defines culture as the "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another", and he distinguishes it from two other major influences on human behavior, personality and human nature. Since culture is learned from our environment, we may belong to different cultural sub-groups (work groups, hobbies, family groups). Also, within countries we may find different ethnic sub-groups with distinct customs, languages and values, which is one reason the use of the nation state as the unit of analysis in

cultural studies is criticized (Morse, 2003). But for example, there are 56 different ethnic groups in China, which at first glance seems to make it difficult to talk about "Chinese culture", but the largest group are the Han who comprise 91.9% of the population (China's Population Mix), and it also may be that the different ethnic groups within the region, to some extent, share core assumptions that are uniquely "Asian" if not "Chinese". America is another interesting example, with wave after wave of immigrants arriving on American shores, the question arises as to what extent American culture is changed by the influx, or how much immigrants themselves adapt to American cultural values.

The study of culture is also made difficult by the fact that culture exists on different levels. Trompenaars (1998) writes of 3 layers of culture, 1) external products such as language, food, educational practices, 2) a middle layer of norms and values and 3) a core of assumptions about existence and how to solve basic life problems. Edward Hall (1976) observed that an interesting feature of culture is that people are often unaware of the core assumptions of their own culture. Hofstede (1997) states that those culturally based values and beliefs we are aware of are not seen with any sense of relativity. Hence, we cannot just ask people to tell us about their culture, instead, we must find less direct ways to learn about culture, such as observation, interviews, questionnaires etc.

Initially most theorists relied on observation and personal experiences as the basis for their ideas about cultural differences. Hall's experiences with other cultures, particularly the Japanese, led him to develop a theory that some cultures (Asian cultures, for example) favor a "high-context" communication style, and others such as America favor a "low context" communication style. "High context" cultures prefer communication that is context rich, and takes

place between people with high levels of mutually understood information that provide context, where information about the social status of participants, for example, is available. "Low context" communication requires communication to be more explicit because mutually understood context is not available. Clearly these differences in communication style preferences might influence students' experiences in the ALN. Students accustomed to high context communication might find a low context environment like an ALN difficult to work in.

The other theorist that is often cited in discussions of cultural differences is Geert Hofstede. Unlike Hall, Hofstede's conclusions about culture are based on robust questionnaire data obtained from 116,000 questionnaires given to employees of a multinational corporation in 40 countries. Hofstede (1997) found that national cultures differed in 4 different dimensions:

1) Individualism/Collectivism – In Individualist cultures, "a person looks primarily after his or her own interest and the interest of the immediate family"(1986, p. 307). In collectivist cultures there is more identification and allegiance to groups such as the extended family, clan and organizations. Hofstede used his data to spread countries out on an Individualism/Collectivism continuum. The USA, Australia, Great Britain and Canada end up at the individualistic end of the scale. Japan, Korea and China end up in the other half of the continuum towards the collectivist end of the scale. This dimension and why it might exist, has been much discussed by other theorists and corroborated with data by Trompenaars (1998) who has more recently done a major questionnaire study in 44 countries with 30,000 participants.

2) Power Distance – Hofstede considers this to be, "the extent to which the less powerful persons in society accept inequality in power and consider it normal".

(p. 307) As with the previous dimension, the four English speaking western countries above find themselves in one half of the continuum (small power difference) and the three Asian countries above in the other half (large power distance).

3) Uncertainty avoidance – Hofstede defines this dimension as the "extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear or unpredictable."- Again we find the two groups on either end of the continuum, with the Asian countries having a greater uncertainty avoidance index than the English speaking western countries.

4) Masculinity/Femininity. – Hofstede defines this dimension by saying that cultures that are "masculine" strive for a greater distinction between what male and female roles are. "Feminine" cultures have overlapping roles in terms of what men and women are supposed to do. Here, interestingly, Japan breaks with other Asian countries and ends up on the Masculine side of the continuum along with the English speaking western countries.

In looking at Hofstede's four dimensions and Hall's ideas about high and low context cultures it is important to remember that cultural attributes form a normal distribution with a particular population. Hence, we can avoid stereotyping by keeping in mind that individual members of a cultural group will differ. However, the identification of these cultural differences has led to discussion and research into what the implications are for specific cross-cultural educational contexts. One issue I am skirting here is the extent to which there is an "Asian culture" or perhaps, an "East asian culture". Living in Asia, one can see distinct differences, and Asians themselves may resent being grouped together, however, Chinese culture has had a great influence on Korea and

Japan, via Buddhism, Confucianism, rice and tea cultivation, etc. In addition, Hofstede's study did find that Asian countries tended to group together at the opposite end of the scales he developed. The rest of the paper will focus on the kinds of problems that can arise if cultural differences are not considered when implementing online distance education courses across cultural boundaries.

Problematic Assumptions – Possible Consequences

In this section I will look at how problems can arise when English speaking Western course designers ignore cultural differences when devising online DE courses for students from other cultural backgrounds. I will examine some of the assumptions step-by-step beginning with the access and interface issues which were particularly emphasized during the 1990s. From there I will move onto assumptions that relate to beliefs and values about the roles of students and teachers, curriculum and learning in general.

Assumptions about Access

It is fairly obvious that assuming that students have access to computers when they don't can cause problems. In Thailand, for example, many students don't have access to computers at home and have to view course materials in school supplied computer rooms or in internet cafes, etc. (Thongprasert, 2004) Connection speed is also a big issue as some types of interfaces will take a long time to load, or may not load at all with a modem connection. It is easy to assume since many developed countries are now moving strongly towards broadband, that the rest of the world is too, but this may not be the case in less developed countries.

Assumptions about Interface Usability

There are those that posit that the interface used for an online course (Blackboard, WebCT, etc.) might be less usable for students from other cultural backgrounds. Less "usability" could lead to less comfort and more frustration with educational processes. Hedberg and Brown (2002) compared web sites done by one company for different national target audiences, and found differences in alignment (right/left orientation), contrast, proximity and repetition. In regards to alignment, Chinese and Japanese might naturally look to the upper right and then across to the left for important information and icons due to the nature of their writing systems. Advertising companies have long known that products need to be marketed differently in foreign countries, so it should come as no surprise to educational interface designers that attention to the culture of the student's country would lead to greater student satisfaction.

Rhetorical style could also be an area where cultural differences could cause trouble. The form that ideas are presented in has been found to vary depending on culture. In Japan, a less direct style is used both in formal speaking and writing, compared to America. In both cultures this is assumed to be the "correct" way to structure an argument. Americans often find Japanese writers spend a lot of time setting the context before making the point. St. Amant (2002) cautions that we need to be aware of how cultural rhetorical differences could "affect perceptions of the usefulness and credibility in online communications" (p. 289)

Colors for example have different connotations in different cultures. White is associated with death in Japan and China, but might symbolize marriage in America. Hedburg and Brown mention that Hofstede's ideas could

be applied to interface usability, and for example, it may be that university web sites designed for countries with High Power distance might best include pictures of the president and distinguished alumni, satisfying students' need for respected authority figures in their lives. Students in collectivist cultures may be attracted to school websites containing information about social groups on campus with photos of students involved in club activities and small group seminars.

The interface used for an online course would be an example of the outer layer of the culture, or an expression of inner beliefs and values. Next, I will move into these deeper layers of culture and explore how students' and teachers' views about their roles may differ in different cultures, and what consequences these differences may have if ignored.

Assumptions about Roles of Teachers and Students

Teacher's Role

The student/teacher role pairing is one of the primary role relationship structures in human societies, along with parent/child, wife/husband, boss/employee, and community leader/member (Hofstede, 1986). Patterns of interaction between these role pairs is conditioned by culture, and in cross-cultural situations, assumptions about what are appropriate behaviors and attitudes may differ. When a mismatch occurs, students or teachers may feel uncomfortable, frustrated or disappointed with the teaching/learning experience. Since we are not often aware of the relativity of our beliefs and how they are culturally conditioned, unmet expectations are rarely seen as cross-cultural confusion, but rather as deficiencies in the approach of the other person in the role relationship.

One possible area for a mismatch in expectations to occur is in the dimension of Power Distance where Asians tend to have higher scores than Americans. According to Hofstede, High Power Distance brings a need for interaction with teachers who take on the role of respected authority figures. Students tend to expect to have the teacher's wisdom transferred to them, and are fairly passive in their approach to learning, waiting for the teacher to outline the best pathway to gaining the knowledge desired. Teachers' knowledge is not to be questioned, and communication is mainly initiated from teacher to student. In a study by Thongprasert (2004) that looked at the influence of Hofstede's four dimensions on the online learning experiences of Thai students (also high Power Distance), she found that both students and teachers felt that teacher-centered practices inhibited information sharing, one of her indicators of success in the ALN. Clearly, in an online learning context, the teacher's authority is more difficult to project, because lectures, a common way to establish oneself as a knowledgeable person, are not usually given. The idea of "teacher presence" and its importance in online classes is often discussed in literature on online distance education (Garrison et al, 2003). It would seem that establishing teacher presence would be particularly important in classes with Asian students.

A questionnaire study done by Jin and Cortazzi (1998, p. 752) with Chinese students found that, "good Chinese teachers are held to have deep knowledge, an answer to learners questions, and to be moral examples, whereas British teachers are seen more as arousing learner's interest, explaining clearly, using effective methods, and organizing a variety of activities." The Chinese emphasis on "character" and "moral authority" seems much more conducive to face-to-face classroom experience. Also relevant to the power distance dimension

is a recommendation sometimes made in the literature on online distance education for teachers to adopt a more informal style in online communication in order to encourage students to loosen up and communicate more freely. It should be remembered that with Asian students, this might be contrary to their needs for an "authority figure" in the classroom.

Hofstede's findings in relation to "Uncertainty Avoidance" are also relevant to the teacher's role in online classrooms. Japan, particularly, is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, and this would seem to place extra emphasis on teachers to give clear directions and be available for questions to clarify assignments. Preferring that teachers be available for questioning is related to teacher immediacy, an important aspect of teacher presence. Morse (2003) found that a majority of the Asian students in his study felt that "instructors need to promptly respond to student input to take advantage of the immediacy of the communication medium", whereas, only a third of western students in his study agreed with this proposition.

To conclude this section on the teacher's role in online distance education, it seems that when western teachers approach a situation with Asian learners, they need to be aware that Asian student's expectations for the teacher's role are different. Students may be expecting a more teacher-centered class, with the teacher clearly expressing his/her knowledge as well as strong moral character and a sense of presence.

Student Roles

Since teacher and student roles make a complementary pair, we can assume that in a culture with strong teacher-centered tendencies the students' role will typically be more passive. This could lead to conflict if teachers have

expectations for students to be active. It should be noted that the idea of a learner-centered curriculum, is fairly recent in American higher education, and in fact it may be that distance education, with its lack of lectures and a more mature self-directed student base, is one of the drivers of this trend. Also, networked computers are making collaboration and communication between students easier to accomplish, and the threaded discussion between students as a vehicle for learning in the new "constructivist" learning environment. Hence, western teachers in online distance courses may often have strong expectations that students be active and independent learners. Many studies show that independent students (Dias cited in Hiltz and Goldman, 2005, p.160) who operate from an internal locus of control (Wang and Newlin cited in Hiltz and Goldman, 2005, p. 160) are more successful in the ALN. This may be important in Japan where Mahler, Greenberg, and Hayashi (1981) found that Japanese were less likely to have an internal locus of control.

The study on locus of control relates to Hofstede's finding that Japanese, and Asians in general, were more collectivist than Americans, who were found to be more individualist. He states that collectivist students are less likely to raise their hands in class and ask questions, and in my classrooms in Japan I have certainly found this to be the case. The oft quoted proverb, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" aptly describes the Japanese approach to group situations that require communicative self-expression. It would seem that this learning style would be a disadvantage in the ALN unless cooperative learning activities were utilized.

In the Thongprasert study with online Thai students, teachers found students' collectivist tendencies to be an inhibitor to participation because it

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"prevented them from pursuing an individual learning style, raising questions and presenting novel ideas"(2004). Reticence to express oneself online could lead to problems developing "social presence". If those students one studies with have difficulty projecting social presence, study in the ALN may feel isolating.

In the ALN, shyness and a tendency to not project social presence could also relate to Hall's ideas about high and low context cultures. High context cultures like the Japanese favor contextualized communication situations where information about interlocutor's gender, status, and social group membership are clear. In a text-based learning environment this information would likely be less salient, and students might feel reticent to express themselves, as doing so without understanding the context might lead to a loss of face for oneself or others.

In Morse's comparison study of Australian and Asian students, Asian students expressed the idea that one of the advantages of the ALN was the extra time they had to write responses. He took this to mainly be evidence of a culturally-based concern for presenting a good "face". Another possible interpretation that Morse mentions is that as these students were functioning in English as a 2nd or 3rd language, their appreciation of the extra time an asynchronous class offers may have been due to their needs for more time to craft messages in a second language. Actually, comparisons studies and anecdotal accounts involving student always need to take the possible influence of language ability into account.

To conclude, it would seem that Asian students would need to be encouraged to take a more active role in an online class, and particularly in the beginning weeks of a class, teachers would need to explain to students how to

best benefit from the online learning environment. However, teachers also may have to adjust their expectations for the student role with students from other cultural backgrounds.

Assumptions about the Learning Process and Curriculum

Just as the computer interface connects students to teachers at a distance, the curriculum attempts to connect students to the knowledge and skills they hope to learn or attain. In addition, as teachers and students have expectations for the roles each other will play, students have assumptions about how curriculum and learning will be structured. A mismatch between student and teacher assumptions and expectations for the curriculum, methods and materials could lead to less than optimal learning outcomes. Issues such as student passivity, previously discussed, are obviously relevant to instructional design in the ALN, but at a very basic level, how we view learning is shaped by how we view knowledge itself. If we see knowledge as objective, "out there", and possessed by wise teachers, this leads to different views on learning and instruction than if we see knowledge as socially constructed, with the learner as a member of a learning community as the focus. Although, higher education in America is only now slowly moving towards more learner-centered instruction, some say, aided by online distance education trends, instructors should be aware that learner-centered instruction might not seem as appealing to Asian students who have less experience with the views of knowledge and learning that underlie this approach.

Examples of learning activities that are prevalent in a constructivist learning environment are threaded discussions, and cooperative/collaborative activities, and one wonders if these methodologies might not be essentially

consistent with the collectivist orientation of Asian students. For example, in Japanese elementary education, there is a strong emphasis on building community and cooperative tendencies. It is mainly in the junior high and high school years that a distinctly objectivist orientation takes over as instruction becomes oriented to preparing students to pass entrance exams which are multiple choice and focus on discrete, testable facts. Japanese higher education has both streams, large teacher centered lecture classes, as well as the very important "zemi" (seminar class) where a small group of students work closely with a professor in his area of expertise for two to three years. Looked at from this perspective, it would seem that Japanese students might be amenable to a constructivist online learning environment if it were presented to them in such a way that teacher presence, social presence of classmates was emphasized. The problems of the lack of face-to-face interaction in a text-based online environment would still be there, but the affinity of Japanese for collectivist group experiences could offset the problem of isolation Japanese students if learning environments were set up to encourage group interaction.

Thongprasert (2004), for example, found that students felt that the collectivist dimension facilitated learning in the ALN because in the Thai context, students did not often have computer access off campus and this necessitated their working together with other students on assignments in large computer rooms on campus. There seem to be two main ways of structuring student learning experiences in online environments; One stresses student independence and the other cooperation and collaboration. It may be with Japanese students that the more fruitful approach would be to organize learning experiences that build on their "collectivist" orientation. In fact, in Japan this must be done to

some extent because The Ministry of Education, which accredits schools, will not accredit online distance programs unless they contain some degree of face-to-face classroom experiences done on the weekends or evenings or through a streaming video based "face to face" component.

Possible approaches for research in Japan

After doing this review of the possible ways mismatches can occur between teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds, I have become interested in learning more about the Japanese online distance learner. As a university educator born and trained in America, I have seen first hand how teaching methods and materials have needed to be adapted to work with Japanese students. My experience as an online distance learner has made me curious about how Japanese students would fare studying in this mode of delivery, and to what extent programs, methods and materials would need to be adapted to meet their needs.

To this end, I can conceive of several possible approaches to doing research to learn more about Japanese online distance learners, however, each has its potential problems. For example, it would be interesting to compare the attitudes and experiences of matched groups of Japanese and western students studying in the same or similar programs, however, I do not have access to such a teaching situation. Also, to study dissimilar groups would be possible, but the "comparing apples and oranges" problem would arise if the educational contexts were different. Another potential problem with this approach is that if both groups of students were in the same program, by necessity one group would be functioning in a second language, which would become a confounding variable.

A more general approach to understanding the Japanese learner would be to look at one or more of Hofstede's dimensions of cultural difference to see if Japanese distance education students were as collectivist or have as high power distance or uncertainty avoidance levels as indicated in Hofstede's original study. Matsumoto (2002) has studied the collectivist dimension and after reviewing the studies done with Japanese over the past 20 years concludes that only the original study by Hofstede finds Japanese to be collectivist. His opinion is that as Japan has developed economically over the past 35 years, the culture has become more individualistic. He concedes that since many studies are done with college age volunteers, these findings could by due to the age differences in the samples and point a more general generation gap than to mass cultural change.

Another interesting area of study would be to compare current Japanese online distance education students with regular face-to-face course university students to see if online distance education programs would attract different kinds of students, ie. more individualist, or result in different educational outcomes than would regular face to face programs. It is likely that there would be considerable differences, and age would certainly be an important factor, as regular course university students are predominantly 18-22 years old and distance education course students tend to be older adult learners.

Finally, to achieve the goal of better understanding the Japanese online distance learner, the approach I have chosen, is to study student's motivation, attitudes and views at one or more universities in Japan that have recently initiated online distance education programs. Due to the fact that online distance education is a recent development in Japan, little research has been done here,

and hence, an exploratory study would be probably be the best option. Ideally, I would prefer to do a qualitative interview study, but lacking the high-level Japanese language skills for such a task, I have decided to do a questionnaire study using a questionnaire translated into Japanese. Such a study could be informed by exploratory interviews, transcribed and translated in the initial stages of the study. In addition, there could be open questionnaire items asking students to explain or expand upon their answers to provide more student source data. Specifically, this study would seek to answer the following questions:

1) What motivates Japanese online distance education students to choose to enroll in an online distance education program?

2) Assuming that convenience is one motivator for students to choose to enroll in an online distance education program, what aspects of convenience are most important to Japanese online distance students?

3) What aspects of online distance education do Japanese students think enhances learning?

4) What aspects of online distance education do Japanese students think hinders learning?

5) What are the learning style preferences of Japanese students in online distance education programs?

6) What are the demographic characteristics of online distance education students in Japan?

Although this would primarily be a descriptive study, responses to questions on learning style preferences and the experience of distance itself could be discussed in terms of how they relate to the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede and Hall.

Conclusion

As Granger (1995) states, culture, in addition to time and space, is one of the distances to be covered in distance education. As educational providers we have the need and responsibility to understand how our students view their educational experience, and we can benefit from having a map of the pitfalls and bridges that exist in the middle ground between teachers and students. I have taken the opportunity in writing this paper to explore some of the problems that can arise when assumptions about teaching and learning are unexamined before being used with students from different cultural backgrounds. As the distance education market becomes more globalized, this situation is bound to arise more often. Specifically, I have looked at the differences between western teachers views and practices and those of Asian students, focusing particularly on Japan.

In reviewing the literature, I have found many articles based on personal experience, which have called for research to be done in this area, but only a few research-based articles were found. Certainly more research needs to be done in this area. To this end, I have concluded this paper with a proposal for a questionnaire study done with Japanese online distance learners during 2006. If permission for access to students is obtained, I hope to be presenting preliminary findings one year from now.

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