

La Dimensión Intercultural de los Cursos Globales en Línea:
Intercultural and Linguistic Issues in Global Online Learning

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Abstract (English/Español)

In this paper we investigate some of the ways that cultural and linguistic differences manifest themselves in global online learning environments. Our research is based on experiences of an MA Programme in Open and Distance Education currently offered by the Open University, United Kingdom. We start from the position that the providers of educational opportunity across national and geographic boundaries have a responsibility to consider how their materials and practices can help to promote cross-cultural understanding.

En esta ponencia se informa acerca de algunas de las formas en que se manifiestan las diferencias lingüísticas y culturales en entornos de aprendizaje global en línea. Nuestra investigación está basada en las experiencias de una Maestría en Educación Abierta y a Distancia ofrecida actualmente por la Open University del Reino Unido. Partimos de la premisa que los organismos que proveen oportunidades educativas cruzando fronteras nacionales y geográficas deben asumir la responsabilidad de considerar en qué forma sus materiales y prácticas puedan servir para promover un mejor entendimiento trans-cultural.

Key words: 'Cross-cultural understanding', 'cultural otherness', 'perceptions of globality', 'linguistic difference', 'academic conventions.'

Area: “Universidades Virtuales”

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Notas:

-El texto de la ponencia se ofrece en inglés, si bien la presentación durante el Congreso será bilingüe (español e inglés).

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Introduction

Intercultural aspects of distance education are emerging as an important focus of research, arising from the globalisation of learning via communications and information technologies (CIT), (Edwards & Usher 2000, Mason 1998, Collis & Remmers 1997, Gayol & Schied 1997). We use the term global to mean without regard to national or geographic frontiers. There is a prevalent rhetoric of opportunity for the providers of education around the notion of global online (or e-) learning, with the size of the potential market being estimated to reach 160 million students by 2025 (MacLeod, Guardian Education 28.11.00). But financial

opportunity for e-universities will not automatically translate into educational opportunity for the global student. Moreover, some voices are warning of the perils of cultural marginalisation inherent in the adventure. In particular, the spectre of pedagogical imperialism in the virtual classroom:

Content selection, visual design, central planning, language, teaching-learning routines, accreditation, academic prestige of the originating site, are all centralized textualities which might work together as an assimilationist or exclusionary pedagogy. (Gayol & Schied 1997)

The UK Open University's rationalisation of the extension of the sale of its courses to areas outside the UK is in line with its stated mission to expand educational opportunity.

The Open University now has the potential to extend educational opportunities to a much wider body of learners...more widely in the world. (OU 1995 mission statement, quoted in Mason 1998).

It is true that there is a global demand for OU courses and that this is premised on a combination of reputation for quality, qualification status, flexibility of study methods, and English-medium teaching (Manning and Mayor 1999). However, our attempts to take advantage of the demand for our educational services carry with it a twofold responsibility to take into account, firstly, how intercultural issues manifest themselves within these global learning communities, and secondly how we can develop sites and practices that are specifically created for cross-cultural communication. The authors of this paper, themselves involved in the design and delivery of an online MA programme have undertaken, as a first step, a critical examination of our own practice. Our courses obviously reflect our own UK and Higher-Education-based assumptions and understandings of knowledge and assessment, which may conflict with those held by students. Although we will never be able to get away from the complexity of cultural issues involved in learning we still believe that we have a responsibility to make our own, often hidden assumptions, as explicit as possible. Our aim is to identify aspects of the learning experience that students perceive as culturally-marked, and to identify the steps we need to take in order to fit the courses, and their virtual realisations, specifically for cross-cultural participation, rather than simply to transmit our own cultural and academic norms.

Background to the study

The MA in ODE

The OU's MA in Open and Distance Education programme was designed with professional educators, in mind. MA-level study in the UK specifies an 'academic' profile of some kind, usually expressed in terms of outcomes such as 'critical reflection', 'argumentation', 'mastery of a body of literature' etc. The vocational nature of the subject (ODE) focuses the courses on practice, rather than theory alone, and determines that knowledge is created through reflection on own practice, as much as through familiarity with the relevant literature. Added to this mix of theory and experiential reflection, we have the particular pedagogies of ODE that the OU has developed (supported, independent learning, media-based materials etc.), and the more innovative practices that are associated with CIT-based teaching (peer group collaborative learning, resource-based learning). What results is a suite of courses which demonstrate a range of pedagogical designs.

'Foundations of Open and Distance Education' (H801) is a traditional print-based distance learning course with 'add on' electronic tuition. In contrast 'Applications of Information Technology to Open and Distance Education' (H802) expects students to be proactive in their learning and engage in a constructivist model of learning. Much of the focus of teaching and learning is on online and collaborative peer learning with the tutor acting as a facilitator. The tutor-marked assignment (TMA) questions also differ from other courses in the programme since they invite more personal reflection upon the experience of the course. H803 is a dissertation module adopting an educational research model for assessment. Here the tutor adopts a role as guide, and communication with peers is minimal. 'Implementing Open and Distance Education' (H804) lies somewhere between H801 and H802 with a focus on both on-line collaborative work with peers but also a requirement that students engage with a number of course set books. All 4 courses use summative TMAs for assessment, most of which are broadly based upon a social science essayist genre.

Although each of these courses takes a different approach to teaching and learning, all rely on the same basic assessment-for-credit strategy – the combination of 50% marks awarded for specific individual written assignments submitted at pre-determined points during the course, with 50% marks awarded for a single individual written assignment submitted at the end of the course. This is in line with an over-arching strategy laid down by the university for the validation of the degrees it awards. The strategy is intended to ensure that students who pass the individual courses, however they may have been taught, can be recognised throughout the UK as having qualified at a certain level, as academic/practitioners in their field.

The Programme is marketed globally, through the World Wide Web. At present the entry requirement for overseas students wishing to study with the OU is that they should demonstrate the required proficiency in English - students are advised to self-test with IELTS equivalent, but there is no requirement to do so (Manning & Mayor 1999). However, even this criterion does not take account of the difficulties that students might encounter with online interaction, and with the more implicit assessment requirements of our courses; these require students to have an understanding of what being a student in a UK based higher education institution means in terms of our culturally specific practices of teaching, learning and assessment. Until recently there has been no pre-course preparation of a general 'academic-cultural' kind for any of the courses. The study described here was also part of an attempt to take a pro-active approach to providing focused support for those students on the MA in ODE for whom an absence of regard for geographic frontiers might result in some disadvantage, compared to those who have familiarity with both the language and the culture of UK academia.

The Study

Selecting the Target Group

One of the main difficulties for the research team was how to determine the group to be studied. We decided to focus on the complete 1999 cohort of MA/ODE students. Of this entire year group we needed to determine which students were in some sense culturally and linguistically 'other'. Very broadly there were two elements to our definition. We believed that, first, they were not native speakers of English and, second, that their previous educational experience was in countries with different pedagogical traditions from that of the UK. Identifying a group as 'other' raises all sorts of methodological issues of categorisation. Creating distinctions between students in this way, and then using this distinction for data analysis is inherently problematic. Despite these reservations, we identified our 'other' group through the following process:

1. Identification of all 1999 MA/ODE students.

2. Identification of students, by name and country, for the culturally and linguistically 'other' group.
3. Reading the 'Introductions' of those identified students, in the online tutorial conferences, to check whether they fitted our broad criteria.

This process of identification led us to define 32 students from the 1999 cohort of 147 students as belonging to our 'other' group. The remaining 115 we referred to as 'the rest'. To validate the distinction we had made between these two groups, we compared their performance in the course assignments, by looking at assessment scores. These figures show that, without exception, the 'Other Group' students gained lower average assessment scores across the MA programme. The highest variation was -13.42 and the lowest was -0.24 (for a detailed account of this analysis see Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez & Mason 2001). Those identified as linguistically and culturally 'other' appear, as a group, to be gaining lower grades than their colleagues in the rest of the cohort. The discrepancy in the average performance figures lends support to the intuition we have as tutors on the MA, that some of our students may be disadvantaged by our assessment processes.

Experience of Cultural Difference

Having determined that the group we had identified might reasonably be regarded as experiencing in common the effects of some aspects of cultural difference, we set out to establish what, in their view, these aspects might be. To investigate this we carried out a qualitative study, based on telephone interviews with 12 of the 31 students in the 'Other Group', who had responded to an email inviting their participation. 4 of these 12 were from the Netherlands, 2 from Greece, 1 each from Portugal, Norway, and Austria, 1 from Columbia, 1 from Pakistan (resident in UK) and 1 from USA (resident in Denmark). The tapes of the interviews were transcribed and then reviewed by the interviewer and checked for accuracy.

Outcomes of the Study

We have identified 4 key areas which seem particularly relevant to the experience of cultural difference in these courses, and which we will discuss below, they are: the notion of 'cultural otherness'; the perception of 'globality'; the experience of language difference; and the awareness of academic conventions. For reasons of space availability we can only refer to the first two areas in this presentation 24 (for a fuller description of these areas see Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez & Mason 2001):

1. Cultural Otherness

We argued above that there are grounds in the assessment data to justify treating the participants in these interviews as members of a group whose participation in the courses is marked by factors relating to cultural difference. In doing so, of course, we also construct 'the rest' as a group in opposition - the students identified as being English native speakers, resident in UK or having some familiarity with the UK academic system. Whilst there will certainly be other factors which shape individuals' identities (gender, race, class etc.) and which impact on their experience of the courses, we did not introduce them as topics in the discourse of these interviews, and they were rarely brought in by the informants themselves. What arises from these discussions, then, is that the notion of cultural 'otherness' as being primarily about national and linguistic characteristics is relevant and willingly taken up. It is a common discursive resource in the description of interaction between people of different nationalities and linguistic backgrounds on these courses. For example:

FG (interviewer): I think there is the proverbial sense of reserve, isn't it¹, of the English temperament?

S1: Yes exactly. On the other hand, I am still not aware of many people who are not of Anglo origin in the courses. I know of a couple of persons from Brazil, Spain and [name] who was from Greece, but actually she was Australian and she was Anglo again.

In this exchange, interviewer and interviewee collaborate to construct 'Anglo' (which includes English and Australian) in opposition to other nationalities found on the course. Elsewhere in the interview, S1 speaks of 'barriers' that he found in communicating with 'Saxon' people. He also talks about the need to communicate 'fairly and properly' with people from other cultures, and proposes that there should be more tutors who are 'not necessarily Anglo'. Other informants also construct oppositions between 'English/British' and their own cultural groups:

FG (interviewer): In that case is it back to kind of reviewing your writing and processing it in a different way...on the EBBS [electronic bulletin board system] you also do that?

S2: I do that, but in a way, although I'm conscious that most people do not like to read long messages, one should attempt to be precise and objective, you know, the way the British are, it is a way which is difficult for the Latin...

Whilst in other exchanges, speakers use an opposition between 'Northern' and 'Southern' European, or 'Western' and 'Asian' to make points about cultural difference:

FG (interviewer): ...So, my question 3 is in which sense do you think that the MA takes a global view, a global perspective? How appropriate was it for people from different cultural backgrounds?...

S4: That's difficult for me to consider because actually I think Norwegian and British culture are very similar. I would think that people from other countries, Southern Europe...there was one from Greece, Spain perhaps, might find it more difficult with culture than I found, and I have studied English as a foreign language at university level for one and a half years....

FG (interviewer): What sort of thing did you value in meeting students from non-Western world?

S5: I think some of their ideas are thought-provoking, also the way they kind of behave in a tutor group. In my tutor group there was a lady who was from, I mean her background was Asian, and I really appreciated her, because she was so kind of responsible, she really showed lots of responsibility towards our tutor group, I don't know if this was a cultural aspect, but what I have experienced from lots of, I mean also chatting with people, it seems to be part of their culture to...to...if you start something you really give your best, it was my idea from face-to-face courses in Britain, meeting people from Japan or from different countries, other parts of the world.

Of the 12 interviewees, 6 engaged in this kind of contrast-talk at some point in the discussion, referring to styles of interaction as being cultural. (This is distinct from their discussion of cultural bias in the content of the courses, which is dealt with in the section on 'globality' below). The interaction they refer to is the text-based messaging that constitutes the virtual discussion environment which characterises these courses, and distinguishes them from conventional distance learning experiences. Interaction via text-based asynchronous messaging has many elements that impact differentially on individuals - the fact that it is written, that it is public, that it is recorded, the pace at which discussion proceeds, the

¹ Note that the Interviewer in these exchanges was also a non-native English speaker.

opportunity it gives for the display of intellectual and technical skills etc. That these elements are also capable of carrying broad cultural markers is of great significance to us, suggesting as it does that in our own functioning as facilitators and conference moderators, we still unwittingly embed cultural messages, however distanced from traditional tutoring roles we may feel ourselves to be.

2. Perceptions of Globality

Whereas people from different national and geographical backgrounds are contrasted in cultural terms by some of these informants in order to make points about their behaviour in interaction, the notion of 'globality' tends to be constructed around the coverage of the course material, ie: the extent to which it gives equal prominence to issues of Distance Education arising in different national contexts.

FG (interviewer): ...If we could go on to another question, it's how far the course takes a global view. You have already answered something on your email about not being perhaps taking account of Europe too much...

S6: Yes, in fact the European Union is multicultural, and as I am living in Continental Europe I was disappointed to see that the example given important distance education institutions were nearly always in the far East, and were nearly never in Continental Europe which is very near, and where there are interesting, important distance education institutions and also interesting experience in this field, you see.

FG (interviewer): ...Now, let me ask you did you feel that this MA is taking a global view, to what extent is it appropriate for a multi-cultural group of students, do you think?

S7: Well, I really think when I saw that question I answer no, because when I was reading I always had to transfer by myself all the knowledge to my situation, I think all the examples...most of the examples are from developed countries, and most of them are from the UK or Australia, and I think I never saw one from undeveloped countries, and I always had to try to read and transfer to my own situation, so I think it is not really global.

Although informants disagreed about the nature of the global coverage of the programme content (some felt there was insufficient focus on Europe, others that it was the developing countries that were under-represented) almost all interpreted the issue as having to do with the visibility of some part of the world when viewed through the perspective of the course content. To be 'global' is to be inclusive of diversity, especially of contexts which are outside what is perceived as the dominant culture of the course, in this case 'Western', or UK, Australian etc. Several interviewees spoke in approving terms of the experience of globality as being one of diversity - of 'friends all over the world', 'fellow students from completely different cultural backgrounds', 'extending consciousness of cultural diversity', 'understanding problems from different perspectives', 'feeling part of a global network' etc. In contrast to this we often found a parallel assertion of local visibility - an attempt to resolve the paradox of positioning one's own national or cultural importance within the global perspective. The informant below, for example, was a Colombian studying the course from an American university. At the same time he was feeding back what he was learning to his own institution in Columbia:

FG (interviewer): ...Had any of your tutors demonstrated an understanding, a prior knowledge a little bit, about the Colombian culture, or an awareness of its particular...?

S7: No, not really. Maybe it's not because of them but because of me, I always, I just told them I was from Columbia from the first introduction, but then I was always talking about [name of US university] and my...and from here, because I know that I

was not going to be able to send my work in Spanish, so I just tried to work from an American perspective...

The speaker below identifies the global trend with the internationalisation of English, and the consequent neglect of local languages.

FG (interviewer): How relevant do you feel the content of the course is for people from different cultural backgrounds?

S8: Obviously the literature is English, and it is being produced by English speakers, and increasingly, also, by non-English speakers, so in that sense, the literature is more or less international isn't it?...the tendency, as you well know, is of course, even for people from Holland universities, to publish in English, so this is a bit of a paradox, in fact, which you can't solve easily. We would like more literature in the native languages, but the international trend goes against it, doesn't it?

The juxtaposition of global and local narratives, which is exemplified in these informants' talk, has been discussed in a number of general accounts of the relation between technology, globalisation and culture (eg: Castells 1996, Hawisher & Selfe 2000). It is a complex issue which has given rise to the notion of 'third cultures' or 'third spaces' (eg: Pennycook 1999) which provides an alternative perspective to that of the 'centre-and-margin' view of intercultural interaction, and may help to describe what is constructed when materials from one culture are studied by people from another culture (Mason 1998 p.156). A full discussion of this concept is outside the scope of this paper, but it appears to offer a way to approach the issue of design for cross-cultural learning, and will form the basis of a further analysis of the data from the current study at a later date.

Conclusions

An important step towards cross-cultural understanding could therefore be the development of policies and practices which allow for an element of multi-lingual communication, making space for the expression of social behaviour free of the constraints of operating in a second language. It is difficult to see at the moment exactly how this might be done, as it implies parallel versions of some materials and activities in different languages. However, we do have models of what is possible, from work such as the European Community's 'Creating a European Forum for European Studies' project (Baumeister et al 2000).

The broadly positive discourse of 'globality' that emerges from these interviews also gives us grounds for optimism, that conflict between global/dominant and local/resistant conceptions of culture is not the only way to view the future of international online education. We need to explore further the concept of the 'third culture' and to study the practices are being enacted in these virtual spaces and the implications that these might have for both students and tutors in terms of learning and teaching. Work on communities of practice and learning (eg: Wenger 1999, Lave & Wenger 1991) can help us to understand more about non-participation and marginalisation in online communities and globally-delivered courses.

None of the perceptions of our student informants about culture, language or the academic norms of this programme adequately accounts for the generally lower-than-average scores for assignments that this group achieved, especially considering the fact that several of them had had some experience of studying in UK or US educational contexts. We intend, however, to use some of the views expressed to illustrate points in the supplementary material that is being designed to assist all future students on this programme (not just those who are non-native English speakers) to get to grips with the academic/linguistic cultural basis of the courses. The material is being designed with the aim of supporting learners in planning and writing assignments, familiarising them with the unique aspects of online study, and

supporting them in taking a full role in group interaction, through awareness-raising and confidence-building exercises.

We conclude with a quote from Jones et al. 'Students Writing in the University', which makes explicit the responsibility we have to engage with students in the pursuit of cross-cultural understanding.

There is now more negotiation to be held between the particular institution's processes and discourses on the one hand and, on the other, the uniqueness of the student's individual cultural and linguistic related histories.
(Jones et al 1999. pp.xvi)

This investigation has been a first step in the negotiation process.

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