PRACTICING LOW-CONTEXT COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN ONLINE COURSE DESIGN FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

A myriad of cultural differences can take educators in a multitude of directions when planning intentional design strategies in an online course to become more inclusive of international student needs. The topic of cultural diversity is a complex discussion. Nevertheless, there are ways educators can begin to practice culturally inclusive strategies. Using Hall's (1976) low-context communication style, this paper addresses two components of the online course, the syllabus and the learning management system, and offers suggestions for beginning the journey toward culturally inclusive pedagogical practices to address barriers in the curriculum for international students.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive teaching, international learners, global learners, online course design, cultural, curriculum

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2013/2014, higher education in the United States saw a growth of international students by 8.1% for a total of 886,000 students. Specifically, undergraduate student enrollment increased by 9% and graduate student enrollment increased by 6%. A large number of international students are entering U.S. higher education from all over the world with the majority of enrollments from China, India, and South Korea (Open Doors 2014). This continued growth places international students "as central players in intercultural exchange and diplomacy between nations" (Lee & Rice 2007, p.385) The opportunities for increased global participation in US higher education is due to the nature of online instruction. The ability to take courses from anywhere in the world from the comfort of one's own home, office, or coffee house entices potential students. Online instruction has increased and there is no stopping its capabilities.

New avenues for instruction require inclusive teaching philosophies in curriculum design and teaching practices (Hellstén & Prescott 2004). This paper briefly discuss cultural complexities but will focus on language proficiency as a major challenge for international students in online instruction. Following the discussion, recommendations are made to assist educators in leveraging the technology afforded by an LMS to adapt curriculum to be more inclusive of international students.

2. CULTURAL FACTORS

When we think of the diversity of our learners we consider a number of learner characteristics described by gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, physical and cognitive disabilities, and culture to name a few. As we look at culture, a myriad of lenses come to the forefront. In online courses, however, it is often difficult to determine the nationality or even the gender of our online students. Online students begin as raceless and genderless. As a result, it is imperative that we design our courses with sufficient cultural

competence so that we might better prepare to meet the expectations of international students (Bista & Foster 2011; Cartledge & Kourea 2008; Zhang & Kennedy 2010).

We can take a look at a number of intercultural factors from works of Hofstede (1980), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) and Faiola and Matei (2005) to provide us with a lens in which to study cultural phenomenon. In the interest of brevity, some intercultural variables include individualistic or collectivistic cultures, specific or diffuse cultures, low- or high-context cultures, and power management. In addition, the use of technology offers an opportunity to leverage what we know about international students to reduce the barriers experienced by international students.

Universal design for learning (UDL) is an attempt to design curriculum with all learners in mind, however, suffice it to say that the goal is a lofty one. Nevertheless, the results of keeping a broad perspective in mind by applying UDL principles to course design is that if we design for the margins, we are actually more inclusive of many more learners. Take for example, a built-in design to provide a virtual office meeting for students who wish to understand an assignment with an optional attendance requirement. A virtual meeting is 'live' which gives students an opportunity to connect with the instructor, ask questions and get clarifications. If the session is recorded, other students who could not attend the live session would benefit by viewing the recording at a later opportunity. This flexibility supports students with language barriers, traditional students who cannot attend at a time specified, and even students who feel uncomfortable seeking answers to questions they think they should know.

2.1 Learner Experiences

Learner experiences in other countries conflict with the unfamiliar educational culture in the US.
In many countries, the educational system requires little participation in the classroom and offer limited critical thinking opportunities. The teacher is the holder of knowledge and acquisition of knowledge is described as memorization. As a result, student challenges include language barriers, weak critical thinking skills, differences in cultural communication, and rote learning (Hellstén & Prescott 2004; Yeboah 2011).

International students experience both educational and non-educational challenges (Chen and Bennett 2012; Yeboah 2011). The responsibility is often left to the student to adapt to the host culture (Bevis 2002; Lee & Rice 2007) rather than to institutions to accommodate their unique needs. According to Yeboah (2011), these challenges result in significant transformations in both education and non-educational settings.

According to Allen (2010), English language instructors might not know what problems international students are facing online. There is a mainstream approach that shoots for designing a curriculum to try to accommodate the majority of homogenous learner needs. In fact, international students can experience hostility due to their lack of English fluency (Lee & Rice 2007).

Martirosyan, Hwang, and Wanjohi (2015) indicate that self perceived language proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking is a key factor in academic success for international students. In a study by Zhang and Kennedy (2010), English language proficiency is the biggest challenge in online courses. Their results indicate that the English proficiency requirement needs to be raised to prepare students for online classes in the US. This increase in proficiency might be due to the fact that the mostly text-based online environment required in an online course requires too much interpretation.

2.2 Low-Context Communication Style

Language proficiency plays a significant role in online learning. Consequently, educators should incorporate pedagogical strategies that address language barriers in order to help students succeed academically.

Halls (1976) introduces low and high context communication styles to describe cultural differences. Low context is a method of communication requiring explicit and direct language. Low-context communication includes facts, words, verbal messages, tasks, directions, and explanations. An LMS where virtual learning is

occurring is not self-explanatory (Klein & Lalla 2011). While the user interface presents explicit buttons labeled in English such as Submit and Attach, there are numerous user interface designs that confiscate such as a course starting point and where to go to submit assignments. Other examples of low-context communication instances in an LMS include the syllabus, announcements, and the gradebook.

This author suggests that educators can begin to implement intentional strategies to address language barriers by focusing on the learning management system (LMS) and the course syllabus. By first focusing on low-context communication, we can concentrate on being intentional about using explicit language to improve clarity.

2.3 Low-Context Strategies

The syllabus is usually the first instructional material students access in the online course. As a result, the following suggestions about explicit communication are offered to improve clarity in the syllabus:

- Provide instructor email contact and varied virtual office hours using clearly stated time format
- Describe course structure and purpose
- Provide a graphic syllabus to visually represent learning objectives and assignments
- Describe teaching style and instructor-to-student and student-to-student interaction requirements
- Give students choice when communicating with instructor (e.g., email, Skype, web conferencing)
- Include the time zone for all support services, including tech support. Link to everytimezone.com
- Include academic support services (e.g., tutoring, librarian assistance, and the writing center)
- Describe and list dates for synchronous requirements if applicable (vary times morning and evening)
- Indicate instructor response times to communications and to assignments
- Indicate technology prerequisite skills
- Describe minimal computer, internet, browser, and technology required for the course
- Present assignment schedule in advance clearly identifying date/time format you will use

The LMS offers a range of tools and activities: Left to right menus, words used to describe buttons and hyperlinks, branding, and color usage offers mixed messages to the international student. The following low-context suggestions are offered to improve learner understanding.

- Provide the LMS URL prior to beginning of course
- Hide all LMS tools that will not be used
- Provide a Getting Started unit to tell students where to begin the course
- Use features that provide clear and consistent navigation (left to right flow can be confusing)
- Provide a video with closed captions to explain how to navigate through your course
- Offer and record an optional ‘live’ virtual meeting to meet students and answer questions
- Provide video and textual instructions on how to change the interface language of the LMS
- Provide video and textual instruction on how to use the tools you are using in the LMS
- Provide video and textual instruction on how to acquire prerequisite technology
- Provide instructions on how to add a translate button to your browser
- Use a quiz or writing assessment to evaluate language proficiency
- Use a survey to inquire about specific learner needs and interests
- Provide a glossary of terms

3. CONCLUSION

Effective teaching practices should be reflected in both designing for and delivering to international students. The complexity of intercultural variables makes it seem like a daunting task especially in an online class where visual cues offered by face-to-face instruction are unavailable. In addition, the modern learning management system is pushing its capabilities to include multiple multimedia tools and flexible user interfaces; however, these virtual environments are largely text-based which depend upon a solid proficiency in the English language.

This article focused on language barriers and suggests that educators begin by applying low-context strategies in the syllabus and to facilitate LMS use. By focusing on low-context communication issues, U.S. educators can take the first step toward designing a culturally inclusive online course that could potentially benefit all learners.

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