Students' Online Learning Experiences in Collectivist Cultures

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Abstract: This survey research investigates online facilitation strategies in collectivist cultures within the "Community of Inquiry" framework. Four hundred and ninety-five students registered in a Southern European online university participated in this study. Preliminary findings show that online students in collectivist cultures value reflection within the online learning community, long for affective expression and group cohesion, value collaborative activities and are able to self-organize to increase presence in online programs.

Background

Online education is on the rise in higher education. The Online Learning Consortium reports (Allen & Seaman, 2013) on online education in the United States that: (1) the number of students taking at least one online course is 7.1 million, which represents 33% of all higher education students; and (2) sixty-six percent of academic higher education institutions identify online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategy. While this scenario offers challenges to higher education, it also offers opportunities to widen access to education, enhance the quality of teaching, and reduce the cost of higher education.

In the study of online education within higher education, much has been discussed about the value in creating communities of inquiry in general, and in online environments in particular. Communities of inquiry are "where interaction and reflection are sustained; where ideas can be explored and critiqued; and where the process of critical inquiry can be scaffolded and modeled… [a] community of inquiry must include various combinations of interaction among content, teachers, and students" (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p. 134). It is also argued that online students should attain high levels of critical thinking and knowledge construction as result of well-designed online learning experiences (Aviv et al., 2003; Wu & Hiltz, 2004). Online learning experiences reach their potential when they aim to support knowledge construction as a process of creation and innovation developed collaboratively.

With the growth of Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and video sharing sites), consumers of information transform into producers of information. This trend is invading the educational arena (Downes, 2006), expanding the role of the learner, and shifting the role of instructor. Members of an online learning community rely increasingly on trust and reciprocity to support their own and one other's learning. Such evolution in online education leads to alternative ways to facilitate online learning.

According to Goodyear, Salmon & Steeples (2001), facilitators need to perform a plethora of roles ranging from process facilitator (facilitating the range of online activities that are supportive of student learning) and content facilitator (concerned directly with facilitating the learners' growing understanding of course content) to adviser/counselor (working on an individual/private basis, offering advice or counseling learners to help them get the most out of their engagement in a course) and researcher (concerned with engagement in production of new knowledge of relevance to the field).

From a social constructivist perspective, it is expected that the facilitator be an active promoter of the learning community as well as a content expert. The sustainability of an online learning environment is a direct result of an increase in reflection within the community, which in turn increases the levels of participation and trust among its members (Salmon, 2000). Online discussions create opportunities for students to construct meanings together and integrate new knowledge into their prior experiences (Rourke & Anderson, 2002). Online discussions can serve as a platform for students and instructors to interact in a social environment without boundaries of time and distance, promoting students' critical thinking and helping students reflect on their ideas (Brooks & Jeong, 2006; Hew & Cheung, 2008; Wang, 2008).

Research has identified several problems related to online discussions, such as limited student participation (Hewitt, 2005), inadequate critical analysis of peers' ideas (Rourke & Anderson, 2002), lack of motivation, commitment, and time, and failure to communicate effectively (Brooks & Jeong, 2006). To address some of these

pitfalls, a number of facilitation strategies, mostly focusing on the instructor as facilitator or moderator, have been described in the literature (Anderson et al., 2001). Although tutors and instructors play a critical role in online discussion environments, their domination may result in an instructor-centered discussion, suppressing students' active participation (Rovai, 2007). For example, instructors may not be able to fulfill all the facilitation responsibilities because of the high time commitment required (Rourke & Anderson, 2002). Managing a large discussion group online may be overwhelming.

Although instructor-led discussions do not necessarily result in instructor-dominated discussion, having the instructor at the center of the discussion may create an "authoritarian presence" (Rourke & Anderson, 2002, p. 4) not conducive to genuine conversations. While in Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry framework, the authors give most of the moderation activities to teachers, they acknowledge that teaching presence can also be achieved through meaningful interaction among students. In this line of reasoning, facilitation is a shared responsibility among instructors and students, changing the traditional role of the instructor from having much of the control in the instructional relationship to becoming more of a participant and fellow learner. Baran and Correia (2009) examined student-led facilitation strategies as a way to overcome the challenges of instructor-dominated facilitation, enhance the sense of learning community, and encourage student participation in online discussions. In this naturalistic study, three facilitation strategies – inspirational, practice-oriented, and highly-structured – were identified

Research Purpose

Even though much research in online facilitation has been conducted, most of it has occurred in North American contexts of practice, which are defined by Hofstede (2001) as individualist cultures. Hofstede's extensive work on comparing values, institutions, and organizations across nations has established a four-dimensional model of differences among national cultures. The four dimensions are:

1) Power Distance – describes the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a nation expect and accept that power is distributed unequally;
2) Individualism / Collectivism – describes the ties between individual members of a society. In individualist societies, the ties between individuals are loose, and everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family; in collectivist societies, people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty;
3) Masculinity / Femininity – describes the degree to which dominant values of a society are distinctively "masculine" or "feminine," and the degree to which social gender roles are distinct or overlapping;
4) Uncertainty Avoidance – describes the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations and try to avoid such situations.

The Individualism / Collectivism dimension, which is particularly evident between collectivist cultures (e.g., Portugal, Brazil, Chile, and Costa Rica) and individualist cultures (e.g., USA, Canada, and other English-speaking countries) is addressed in this study. Such differences within the Individualism / Collectivism dimension impact teaching and learning (Hofstede, 1986). According to this author, Individualism / Collectivism describes the ties between individual members of a society. In individualist societies, the ties between individuals are loose, and everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family; in collectivist societies, people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

This research study aimed at investigating online facilitation strategies in collectivist cultures within the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). The following questions guided the research:

1. To what extent are online students engaged in online learning (levels of teaching, social and cognitive presence)?
2. How often do students engage in online collaborative activities (e.g., online discussions or online teamwork – two or more peers)? What types of collaborative activities are used in class? Which role(s) do students perform in these activities?

Online facilitation is identified here as one of the most important roles of the online instructor. By facilitating the online experience, the instructor helps to bring about learning outcomes through unobtrusive assistance, guidance, and monitoring.

The Community of Inquiry offered a framework to analyze online learning experiences through the development of three interdependent components, as follows:

- Social presence– "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, 2009, p. 353);
- Teaching presence– "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001, p. 6);
- Cognitive presence– "the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001, p. 9).

Methods

A survey research approach was used, which is "aimed primarily at tapping the subjective feelings of the public" (Fowler, 2013, p. 2). The study took place in a Southern Europe online university, refereed here as Aurora University (AU). AU offers education to more than 12,000 students in 33 countries over five continents, including migrant communities and Portuguese-speaking countries that are home to over 240 million people across the globe (e.g., Brazil, Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau).

The Community of Inquiry survey has been extensively tested (Arbaugh et al., 2008) and validated (Swan et al., 2008). Swan at al. report that Cronbach's Alpha equals to 0.94 for Teaching Presence, 0.91 for Social Presence, and 0.95 for Cognitive Presence. The Community of Inquiry survey consists of 34 Likert scale-type items (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree). The items are organized under three categories: teaching, social and cognitive presence. A translated version into Portuguese of the Community of Inquiry survey was used as data collection instrument. A section on demographics and one open-ended question about online collaborative activities were added to the survey. The survey was administered online to AU students over 21 years old who were asked to complete the survey in reference to the online course(s) in which they were enrolled. Previously to this full-blown study, a translated version of the Community of Inquiry survey was filled out by a group of 30 students and yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.885.

Analyses and Results

Out of 495 respondents, 53% were female and 47% male with ages ranging from 22 to over 65 years old. Forty-one percent of the participants were between 35 and 44 years old. The majority of the respondents (90%) lived in Portugal. Sixteen percent were unemployed at the time of the survey and pursuing a degree at AU as an opportunity to advance their knowledge and skills, shift careers and/or finding a job. Sixty-six percent of the respondents were pursuing a Bachelor's degree while 23% were graduate students. A small group of 55 students were attending courses in the Lifelong Learning program. Ninety percent of the students were experienced online learners who have taken more than three courses at AU.

Since levels of social, teaching and cognitive presence determine to what extent online students are engaged in an educational experience the data analysis focused initially on determining these levels. For example, high levels of these three interdependent dimensions indicate cognitive and social development as well as the facilitation of meaningful learning. In regards, to the extent online students were engaged in online learning the following results were obtained (Table 1). The survey items followed the categorization proposed by Swan et al. (2008). Examples are, Design & Organization, Facilitation, Direct Instruction, Affective Expression, Open Communication, Group Cohesion, Triggering Event, Exploration, Integration and Resolution.

Table 1 – Highest/lowest percentages on the three types of online presence (social, teaching and cognitive). For each type of presence the two highest (in *italics*) and the two lowest combined percentage of agreement (Strongly Agree +Agree) are reported.

Social presence	Strongly Agree + Agree = 79.59%	*I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants (Open Communication)*
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 76.22%	*I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium (Open Communication)*
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 69.87%	I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants (Affective Expression)
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 67.15%	I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants (Group Cohesion)
Teaching presence	Strongly Agree + Agree = 92.53%	*The instructor provided clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities.*
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 91.38%	*The instructor clearly communicated important due dates/time frames for learning activities. (Design & Organization)*
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 70.47%	The instructor provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses.
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 69.86%	The instructor provided feedback in a timely fashion. (Direct Instruction)
Cognitive presence	Strongly Agree + Agree = 91.96%	*I utilized a variety of information sources to explore problems posed in this course (Exploration)*
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 90.33%	*Reflection on course content and discussions helped me understand fundamental concepts in this class (Integration)*
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 78.79%	I have developed solutions to course problems that can be applied in practice (Resolution)
	Strongly Agree + Agree = 74.95%	Online discussions were valuable in helping me appreciate different perspectives (Exploration)

Social presence exhibits lower levels of agreement compared to teaching or cognitive presence. In terms of social presence, open communication (e.g., feeling comfortable when interacting and conversing with other online students) shows the highest percentage of agreement, but affective expression (e.g., forming distinct impressions about the course participants) and group cohesion (e.g., feeling their point of view acknowledged) obtained the lowest percentages. Teaching presence displays high agreement percentages in design & organization (e.g., clear instructions on how to participate in course activities; and, communication of important due dates/time frames for learning activities) and lowest in regards to direct instruction (e.g., feedback provided and timeliness of the feedback).

Finally, cognitive presence shows the highest percentage of agreement in relation to exploration (e.g., use of a variety of information sources to explore problems), but also the lowest one (e.g., online discussion and its value on helping students to appreciate different perspectives). This seems to evidence some contradiction within the Exploration category. Cognitive presence also shows the highest percentage of agreement in integration (e.g., value of reflection on course content and discussions), but the lowest percentage in resolution (e.g., course problem and its application in practice). Overall the percentage of agreement are high for these three types of online presence and it may be argued that this translate into a significant level of student engagement in online learning.

Sixty-three percent of the students reported being engaged in online collaborative activities ranging from program orientation to team projects and field work. Most of the students were part of self-organized groups to address questions and issues raised in their online classes and to serve as support group. Table 2 shows the types of online collaborative activities students engaged in and respective frequencies.

Table 2 -Types of online collaborative activities and frequencies

Online collaborative activities	%
Self-organized online groups led by the students to address questions / issues raised in their online classes and to serve as support group (synchronous and asynchronous communication)	40.2%
Online discussions moderated by the instructor to address course content (synchronous and asynchronous communication)	23.0%
Team projects and accompanying reports	13.5%
Class presentations (real-time and pre-recorded)	7.6%
Open-forums create and moderated by the course instructor to discuss course-related questions and issues	6.1%
Team projects (including presentations to the class)	4.5%
Field trips and accompanying reports	3.0%
Program orientation (for new students)	2.3%

Conclusions

Preliminary findings of this study bring some understanding about online learning within the Community of Inquiry framework in collectivist cultures. For example, a high percentage of students are engaged in online collaborative activities, occurring most of them in self-organized online groups led by the students. These groups do not only address questions and issues raised in their online programs, but as importantly they act as support groups. They might have been spurred out of the students' need for a higher level of social presence in the online courses.

The purpose of this study is not to look at online learning in collectivist cultures and compare it to individualist cultures. By the contrary, the contribution of this study is to offer a look into a phenomenon that has not been extensively researched since much of the research in online facilitation has occurred in North American contexts of practice, where individually constructed knowledge is more valued. Initial findings provide evidence that online students in collectivist cultures value reflection within the online learning community, long for affective expression and group cohesion, value collaborative activities and are able to self-organize to increase presence in online programs.

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