

International Graduate Student Perspectives & Experiences within an Instructional Design & Development Program: An Exploratory Examination

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Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of international students in a doctoral instructional design and development program at a public university in the United States. Instructional practices differ globally, which present challenges as students become accustomed to the new concepts and applications of their host country (Zhu and Flaitz, 2005). The study addresses the effectiveness of blended online coursework for international students, the ability to acquire professional competencies, the perceptions, and realities of experiences in the academic program. Findings suggest that degree of social and academic challenges for international students in the IDD program are reflected by motivations for enrolling, specifically autonomous and non-autonomous motivations.

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to reveal the experiences and changes in international students' values and beliefs as they engaged in a doctoral instructional design and development (IDD) program at a public university in the southeastern United States (U.S.). The research included participants from diverse backgrounds and cultures who have different motivations for selecting instructional design (ID) as their field of study.

The increasing number of books and academic articles published about the experiences of international students, as well as the appearance of the *Journal for International Students* dedicated to research on international students, is evidence of the growing academic interest in this population (Hackett, 2014). The data for this study were collected from international students currently enrolled in the program, as well as program alumni, to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and expectations of international students and will allow for the investigation of how to meet those specific needs and expectations.

Regardless of the country of origin, international students in higher educational institutions in the U.S. share similarities in the challenges they face (Geary, 2016). For example, the delivery of instruction can be quite different than what they were accustomed to in their home countries, as are the academic demands and expectations for students. A lack of awareness of support services, if such services are available, can decrease motivation or overall satisfaction in a program of study for this population (Perry, Lausch, Weatherford, Goeken, & Almendares, 2017). The language barrier tends to be one of the biggest obstacles leading to adjustment issues. The nuances of American English lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings, affecting not only friendships with peers but also academic success (Leong, 2015). American students sometimes misinterpret behaviors of international students which may lead to isolation and embarrassment, especially in the context of online learning.

There are issues associated with international students' learning experiences that were not as prevalent until the emergence of web-based courses. Technological advances have made it more accessible for individuals of diverse populations to attend graduate courses in the U.S. For example, web-based instructional content may be a major

convenience for international students. However, self-expression of the understanding of course content in an online format could cause complications for individuals when English is the second language (Lui, Lui, & Magjuka, 2010).

A new international student's level of perceived competence come from feelings of frustration or feelings of effectiveness of one's efficacy. Feedback of success or failure influence the new international student's sense of competence. Language skill and cultural adaptation are anxiety-provoking factors for many international students which can decrease the international students' sense of competence.

To help build a sense of competence for someone from another culture, there are several approaches that can be taken. Teachers can make a concentrated effort to monitor the international students' progress, strengths, and weaknesses and provide timely, informative feedback about their performances. International students should be encouraged to voluntarily participate in class and give rationales about their educational experiences, expressing their ideas freely. Also, collaborating with other students enhances the learning experience for students from other cultures as well as local students. Collaborative activities provide opportunities for international students to express their ideas, receive feedback from peers, develop global competencies for local students, and allows the international student to develop relationships necessary for cross-cultural understanding. The actions support effective-relevant feedback, allow students to grasp the meaning and worth or external goals, and provide the understanding and relevant skills conducive developing a sense of motivation.

The IDD program provides a trajectory for scholarship through online research, forming relationships with academic advisors and peers in the field, and on-the-job learning through graduate assistantships. As graduate assistants, many these students work in teaching and learning centers which provide instructional design assistance to faculty. Such assistantships allow for a deeper engagement with the content of their coursework through hands-on experience. The IDD program provides opportunities to gain knowledge of the academic culture of their host country. Yet some international students lack experience with instructional practices that, in some cases, differ greatly from what they accustomed to in their home countries. There exists a potential to impact ID practices in their home country from the experiences with technologies related to learning and teaching that the IDD programs provide. Also, for those who plan to stay in the United States, the diverse backgrounds and academic experiences that international students bring with them can lead to unique contributions to ID research and practice in this country.

The existing research on international students enrolled in American universities is vast, however, the global diversity of students in ID programs is mostly overlooked. When IDD students complete a doctoral program, a set of standard competencies are expected to be met (Koszalka, Russ-Eft, & Reiser, 2013), but does a gap exists in regard to international students? Our study addresses this gap and provides international perspectives on research in educational technology.

This phenomenological study examined the perceptions of students from different countries in a blended ID program regarding their academic experiences. Three questions were addressed in the study:

- What are the perspectives of international students related to ID research?
- How effective is the blended nature of the ID program with this special population?
- How do the expectations for the program prior to the international student's arrival to the U.S. compare to the realities faced once immersed in the IDD program?

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were graduate students in an IDD Ph.D. program at a university in the Southeastern United States and alumni. There were seven participants. Five participants were female and two were male. There were two alumni and five current IDD Ph.D. students. The participants were from South American and Asian countries.

Procedure

The appropriate approach for such exploratory research was a comparative type of collective case study. We collected data from seven current students and graduates from different cultures to reveal the similarities and differences of their experiences. The complexities of the integration of the study of ID and the international experience were revealed with the use of qualitative interviewing, observations, and journal reflection. Each case was examined in total, and then the different cases were compared in a cross-case analysis for patterns that cut across the cases as well as differences.

Results

There were five themes in the qualitative analyses: Enhanced professional development and assistantships. Enhanced pre-arrival orientation materials, motivations for why the students enrolled in the IDD program, the relationships with advisors, mentors, and peers, and academic flexibility.

Quotes from Participants

Learning Contexts

“It was difficult at first. I was not sure what was expected of me. I didn’t know the appropriate amount to write on the forums and since the classes were online, I didn’t want to offend any of my classmates. Communicating online, I was afraid to use the wrong words or my tone might come off as aggressive. Also, my instructors assumed that I knew how to use the LMS and was accustomed to learning in an online environment. Even though I was an educator in my home country, we did not have access to the internet or most other technologies that are taken for granted. I wish the university would have provided some guidance or training for new international students so that we would not have to spend the first few months catching up and feeling lost. All new students would benefit from these training, especially international students.”

-IDD program alumnus, female, China, working as an instructional designer in the United States

Pre-arrival expectations, post-arrival realities

“Before I arrived in the United States, I expected that education was so much better than my home country, simply because it was... American, which is assumed to be superior. I found the education setting to be much different than what I was used to back home, which was no surprise, but I expected much more guidance in America. There is a lot of flexibility and independence, which is great for me. However, I could see there being problems for those who cannot adapt to the openness of American education. For instance, I took it up myself to find trainings and workshops at the university’s teaching and learning center. The workshops were intended for faculty, but knew I needed to understand the LMS so I could be a more efficient student. I found the trainings on my own, and asked permission to attend as a student. If I were not persistent, I would not have had that opportunity. Mentors are of the utmost importance for success, and I’m not just talking about your advisor; just someone who cares about your academic growth and a person whom you trust. To be successful international students need these relationships but not all know where to even start.”

- Current IDD student, female, Honduras, working as a graduate assistant

Learning Content and Learning Contexts:

“The online learning experience was easy. A little too easy, actually. However, I hold an MS for a university in the States. Even though my master’s program was an entirely face-to-face program and the IDD program blended, my previous learning experiences prepared me for what to expect. I believe the online learning experience in this program is ineffective because it requires so little effort and the instructors are hardly present. I have learned a lot about instructional design but mostly from working with my advisor, as well as what I learned through my graduate assistantship”.

-Current IDD student, male, India, working as a graduate assistant

ID Research

“There is a heavy focus on theory, which is very important, but the program could use more opportunities for student research in instructional design. I am the only instructional designer at this company. They highly recognize my expertise and are aware of the needs of ID knowledge and skills. Of the knowledge and skills that I acquired in this program, I use adult learning, needs assessment processes, qualitative analysis, and evaluation.”

-IDD program alumnus, male, Thailand, currently an instructional designer in his home country

The findings aligned with Deci and Ryan's (2017) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the theory defines autonomy as the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions. This self-regulation satisfies the need to feel that an individual is in control of their own behavior. Autonomous behaviors are self-endorsed with an individual's authentic interests and values. The basic psychological need of autonomy is associated with volitional, congruent, and integrated feelings. This means that the need for autonomy is satisfied when an individual makes decisions of their own will and takes actions that are consistent with one's ideal or actual self.

Ryan and Deci (2017) are careful to distinguish autonomy from the closely-related concept of self-reliance. While both autonomy and self-reliance influence an individual's decisions and behavior within a social context, autonomy is one's ability to *make choices* that follow an individual's personal will, and self-reliance is *negotiating* between the point where external forces and personal drive intersect.

Self-reliance, or independence, differs from autonomy in SDT because only some intentional actions are truly autonomous. Self-reliance is the degree to which actions are influenced by external forces such as other people, rules, laws, and social environments. Autonomy is the sense that behaviors are self-endorsed, ego-centric acts, reflecting one's will. While self-reliance is the degree to which actions are not fully endorsed by the whole self and does not totally represent the preferences and values of the individual. Self-reliant behaviors are influenced by external influences which allow an individual to trust in one's capabilities, judgement, or resources. Additionally, autonomous behavior can be thwarted if the individual feels pressured or coerced by forces perceived to be outside one's self (DeHaan, Hirai, & Ryan, 2015).

For many psychologists, the concept of autonomy differs from what is defined in SDT. Cross-cultural psychologists define autonomy as independence or individualism. The SDT concept of autonomy relies on the volition and willingness of an individual as motivation for behavior; it does not refer to independence as autonomy (Chen et al., 2014). With this in mind, different cultural contexts can provide diverse world views by which the need of autonomy is influenced. For example, students from collectivist-oriented societies may feel autonomous when following the advice from others for whom they have respect. Students from individualistic-oriented cultures will feel autonomous by making their own decisions and expressing personal experiences.

It was found that the degree of social and academic challenges for international students in the IDD program are reflected by motivations for enrolling, specifically autonomous and non-autonomous motivations (see Figure 1.)

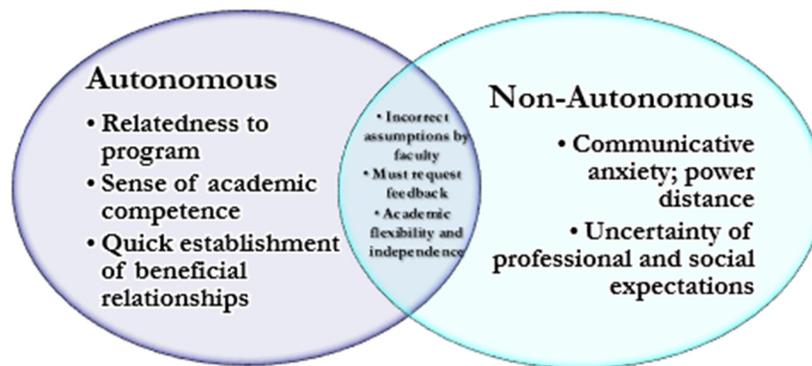


Figure 1. Motivations and Resulting Experiences of Enrollment

Discussion

To attract and maintain a talented and academically successful international student presence on campus, variability of the psychological needs across cultures must be explored. Professional development opportunities should be available to provide an understanding of underlying assumptions of SDT. These opportunities could be targeted for faculty and staff who work closely with international students so that they can be prepared to help build a sense of autonomy for international students as they adapt to their new academic environment. Development of trainings which deal with culture-specific perspectives of autonomy (e.g. the Hutsulian-Ukrainian concept of autonomy) may be too resource consuming. However, assumptions can be made about the social-cultural contexts across different cultures that can help international student support professionals facilitate internalization and satisfy the need for autonomy.

Involvement and the quality of interpersonal relationships with teachers, advisors, and peers will influence the need for affiliation and belongingness for international students in a new educational setting. Another influential factor is the cultural distance between the student's native culture and the dominant culture within the learning environment. Students from countries that are culturally similar to the United States may more quickly and easily feel more connected to their peers, academic practices, and course content in comparison to students from culturally distant countries. Also, pre-arrival expectations and post-arrival realities may also conflict, which could affect the sense of relatedness.

Teachers and advisors can help build a sense of relatedness only if they try to understand and acknowledge international students' feelings and perspectives. Building relationships that offer constructive feedback, but accept expression of negative reactions, allows the international student to feel that they are valued in the academic program. Empathizing with unpleasant feelings in a way that provides comfort can increase the quality of interpersonal relationships between international students and faculty.

Professional development and work opportunities (e.g. graduate assistantships) can increase a sense of relatedness by creating environments that facilitates affiliation, belongingness, and connection with others. This approach can integrate international students into the university system and establish formal or informal peer-to-peer mentoring. Such relationships can provide a constructive and positive connection through friendly and professional involvement, heightening the sense of affiliation and relatedness while mitigating relational exclusion and loneliness.

There were limitations to this study. More international students and alumni should be interviewed for a deeper examination of the perspectives, expectations, and the effectiveness of the IDD program. Faculty should also be interviewed and given a chance to reflect on what they are doing to improve relationships and learning experiences of international students, and data should be collected from multiple IDD programs to see if findings are similar across different universities and programs.

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