

Cross-cultural online collaboration: Challenges and strategies

Larissa V. Malopinsky, Gihan Osman, Indiana University, P.O. Box 5877, Bloomington, IN 47407-5877 USA
Email: lmalopin@indiana.edu, gosman@indiana.edu

Abstract: In this presentation, we share the experience of a partnership project between two teams representing Azerbaijani and American higher education institutions. The researchers (a) examine the challenges of collaborative work in the context of cultural differences related to applying learner-centered pedagogy, sustaining collaboration and managing learning process, and (b) introduce the strategies developed for addressing those challenges. This study seeks to advance educators' understanding of the critical aspects of cross-cultural collaboration in online learning environments.

Introduction

Teaching and learning processes are seen as grounded in the unique social practice of the cultures involved. Epistemological dissonance can make it challenging for representatives of different cultures to establish effective communication and collaboration (Kanu, 2005). These challenges are often compounded when a partnership project takes place online. The three-year partnership project between Indiana University and the Azerbaijan Research and Education Network Association had two goals: developing online teaching capabilities in Azerbaijani universities and implementing learner-centered pedagogical concepts. The project was focused on offering an online certification program for a group of Azerbaijani faculty and staff who would lead the distance education (DE) implementation effort in the country. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan, has been seeking to reform and westernize its educational system (Bagirov, 2001). Although in its infancy, DE in Azerbaijan is viewed as the strategy for overcoming a rapid decline of participation in education and training due to increased societal difficulties (ANHD Report, 2003).

Research Project

Early project experience revealed the differences in the approaches to learning and collaborative work between the U.S. and Azerbaijani teams and suggested a systematic study of the challenges experienced by the partner teams from the cross-cultural perspective. A greater understanding of the role of cultural attributes in educational contexts can provide guidance for researchers and practitioners involved in international educational projects in terms of the design and implementation of instructional interventions. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What are the challenges experienced by the project partners in the process of collaborative design of learner-centered instruction for online delivery? (b) What cultural differences are relevant to understanding those challenges? (c) What strategies can be used to respond to those challenges to ensure successful implementation of the project goals?

The challenges were analyzed from epistemological, social interaction and learning management perspectives applying Hofstede's (2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) frameworks of cultural dimensions: high vs. low power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, high vs. low uncertainty avoidance, achievement vs. ascription, universalism vs. particularism, external vs. internal control and specific vs. diffuse orientation. The cross-cultural researchers find that these dimensions have an impact on learning situations (Chapman *et al.*, 2005; Paulus *et al.*, 2005). Language proficiency and difficulties using online technologies were also considered in our analysis as non-culture aspects affecting collaboration. The study utilized a case study approach (Stake, 1995) and used mixed methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2003). Study participants were four Azerbaijani faculty members who were students in the certification program and three U.S. facilitators (one senior faculty member and two advanced graduate students). The research project was led by the U.S. team. Several types of data were collected: (a) background survey (epistemological beliefs (Schommer, 1990), demographics, DE implementation strategies); (b) pre- and post-chat student surveys focused on individual work efforts, challenges, and learning needs; (c) pre- and post-chat facilitator surveys focused on assessment of students' design work, learning needs and strategies for upcoming chat sessions; (d) transcripts of 1.5 hour weekly chats focused on pedagogical and instructional design issues; and (e) semi-structured interviews with students focused on project experience and expectations for learning transfer. Data was collected during 12 weeks. Epistemological questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively. Qualitative data was independently coded by two researchers to identify emergent themes. These were subsequently modified upon reaching 96% agreement resulting in three categories and six sub-categories that reflected major challenge areas: (a) adopting a learner-centered pedagogy (concept of learning process, teacher-student roles); (b) communication and collaboration (teamwork and peer feedback, collaboration with a foreign partner team); and (c) managing learning process (independent work, time management). Every item was discussed from the cultural dimensions perspective and alternative causes were explored.

Findings

The Azerbaijani team demonstrated strong dependence on the U.S. facilitators as providers of “right” information and step-by-step guidance, which was characteristic of the beliefs grounded in high power distance, external control and high uncertainty avoidance. These findings were consistent with reluctance of the Azerbaijani students to reflect on facilitators’ performance and their frequent concerns with ill-structured learning tasks. The greatest difficulties in collaboration for the Azerbaijani students came in developing an instructional product as a team and having to critique each other’s ideas. While the students expressed strong competitiveness and preference for individual projects, they often hesitated to critique peers’ performance, regarding such feedback as a breach of peer-loyalty or disrespect to varying levels of expertise and positions in the team. The students’ explanations could be linked to a high-context, particularistic and ascriptive cultural tradition, where tasks are inseparable from personal relationships and individuals hesitate criticizing a friend, a senior person or a higher-ranking colleague. Azerbaijani and U.S. teams had different expectations regarding the amount of support required for students for organizing their learning process. The students’ comments indicated frequent confusion with guidance to set their own learning goals and establish a process for accomplishing them. Student expectations grounded largely in earlier experiences in didactic education were consistent with uncertainty-avoiding cultures where people feel uncomfortable in new learning situations and prefer direct guidance. Time management was another area where the teams’ approaches differed. An analysis of chat sessions revealed that socializing took approximately 30% of a chat session (Osman & Herring, 2007). While the U.S. facilitators expressed concerns with overly lengthy socializing periods, the Azerbaijani students felt that facilitators were too task-focused. This difference in managing the time planned for the task-related activity presents communicational difficulties between low-context (specific) and high-context (diffuse) cultures that can put a strain on cross-cultural collaborative work and lead to interpersonal conflicts.

In order to help students develop more learner-centered approach to designing instruction, facilitators presented materials in multiple ways, modeled the constructivist approach and encouraged self critique. Several strategies, such as using real life examples and real-life metaphors, encouraging peer facilitation, peer critique and self-reflection were implemented to both provide structured support and challenge the students to develop independent learning skills. Both teams continuously worked on implementing strategies for managing learning processes more effectively while addressing the needs for social interaction: providing forums and setting specific time for discussing personal matters during online learning sessions and developing structured agendas for face-to-face and online meetings. Although the differences between the teams challenged collaborative work in a number of ways, they provided useful insights into the importance of considering the values and beliefs of people working on cross-cultural educational projects. Awareness of the differences led both teams to discuss the feasibility of applying new pedagogical approaches in the Azerbaijani context and helped the U.S. participants consider the implications of cultural differences in the design and facilitation of cross-cultural instruction.

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