Cultural Differences in Online Learning: International Student Perceptions

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ABSTRACT
This article reports the findings of a case study that investigated the perceptions of international students regarding the impact of cultural differences on their learning experiences in an online MBA program. The study also revealed that online instructors need to design courses in such a way as to remove potential cultural barriers, including language, communication tool use, plagiarism, time zone differences and a lack of multicultural content, which may affect international students’ learning performances. The study indicates that a culturally inclusive learning environment needs to consider diversity in course design in order to ensure full participation by international students.

Keywords
Cultural differences, Online learning, Instruction design, Case-based learning, Diversity

Introduction
The advancement of computer-mediated communication and Internet technology has shaped the landscape of higher education and allowed universities and educational institutes to expand their global outreach through transnational collaboration with multiple institutions. Developing countries in Asia, including China and India, have been the most attractive destinations for offering online degrees because of their rapid rise in economic development and enormous demands for higher education access.

Although modern communication technologies have afforded increasing flexibility that can be used to conduct transnational course design and delivery, concerns exist regarding the social and cultural dimensions of task design, the cultural adaptability of the learning materials and the re-engineering or transformation of courses (Collis, 1999; McLoughlin, & Oliver, 2000).

Existing research suggests that cultural differences can have a negative effect on students’ participation in online courses. Shattuck (2005) observed that international online learners felt a “sense of marginalization, or, sometimes even alienation” from the American learner group even in a highly interactive communication learning environment (p. 186). Reeder, Macfadyen and Chase (2004) found that different cultural communication patterns increased miscommunication, and that the greater the perception of cultural differences between the participants in an activity, the greater the incidents of miscommunication.

Interestingly, other studies have indicated that cultural differences may be mitigated in online education through the “external identities” (Walker-Fernandez, 1999) or “cultural negotiation” (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009) of the online participants.

In general, the growth of cultural concerns in regard to online learning has not been accompanied by a growing number of studies in the field. Although a handful of researchers have begun to explore cultural issues in online education, very few formal studies have been conducted and the results of these studies have been inconclusive. As the Web-based learning market becomes increasingly global, it is important for online education providers to have an understanding of the different educational values and cultural expectations of the participants as well as the impact of those differences on learning in order to maintain a competitive advantage in today’s e-learning world. As such, there is a need to develop new theories and conduct empirical studies in order to provide guidance for the successful design and delivery of cross-cultural online courses.

The purpose of this case study is to examine the perceptions of international students in an online MBA program regarding their transnational learning experiences. Given the limited research in the cross-cultural design of online
education, such a study is important in order to identify potential cultural barriers that may affect the performance and satisfaction of the international student population. Three questions were addressed in this study:

- Do international students perceive cultural differences in their online learning courses?
- How do the international students perceive the impact of cultural difference on their learning?
- What features do international students prefer in the design and delivery of an engaging global course?

**Literature**

**Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions**

One of the most widely used frameworks for studying cross-cultural communications is based on work conducted by Hofstede (1986). Hofstede developed a four-dimensional model of cultural differences, which can be used to characterize cultural behaviors that originate from different societies. A detailed description of each dimension is displayed in Table 1.

He further stated that many perplexities could arise when teachers and students come from different cultures. These perplexities can occur due to differences in the social positions of teachers and students in the two societies, relevance of the curriculum within each of the societies, profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations of the two societies and expected teacher/student and student/student interactions (Hofstede, 1986).

**Table 1. Hofstede’s 4-dimension culture model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power Distance (PD)</td>
<td>The degree to which people accept the unequal distribution of power and wealth in a society. In countries with high PD, individuals with high social status exert great power and influence (Gunawardena et al., 2001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism -collectivism</td>
<td>The tendency of members of a society to act as individuals or members of groups, and to which a culture values individual versus collective achievement or well-being (Mercado, Parboteeah, &amp; Zhao, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)</td>
<td>The degree to which the individuals of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. Individuals from a culture with high UA are uneasy with unstructured ideas and situations. (Hofstede, 1986).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity- femininity</td>
<td>The degree to which the society prefers distinct gender roles. (Hofstede, 1986; Mercado, Parboteeah, &amp; Zhao, 2004).</td>
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According to Hofstede’s research, both China and India rank very high on the PD index, while the US has a very low PD. In addition, the U.S. exhibits very high individualism when compared to China.

Despite the popularity of Hofstede’s model, his work has been challenged with strong criticism. In addition to challenging the external validity of his work (Shattuck, 2005), other researchers have labeled his work as the “essentialist” models of culture emphasizing fixity of identity over the reality of identity fluidity (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005, p355). In spite of this criticism, Hofstede’s work has proven to be a valid framework for analyzing cultural differences in teaching and learning (Wang, 2007). Therefore, this framework was considered useful when interpreting the findings of the present study.

**Design Culturally Inclusive Technology-Mediated Learning Environments**

Collis (1999) and Henderson (1996) proposed the “flexible” approach, which suggests that the courses should be flexible enough to cater to diverse cultural perspectives, rather than simply containing pre-determined content. The central notion of the flexible approach is that the key aspects of course design should be contingent on the cultural dimension of the course, and should be flexible enough to allow the students and instructors to choose their own learning and teaching styles as the course progresses.

Reeve (1992) developed a model which consists of 14 pedagogical dimensions of interactive learning. Each of these
dimensions represents a continuum from one extreme to the other (See Figure 1). This model is used in order
to evaluate where the instructional practices in a culture are located on a continuum with contrasting values at both
ends. However, Reeve’s model was criticized for being culturally biased toward the right end of the continuum,
meaning that his critics felt that he was assuming that the right end of the continuum was the superior way of
learning (Henderson, 1996).

In order to overcome the limitations of the existing paradigms, Henderson’s (1996) multiple cultural models promote
the idea of culture profiling and integrating multiple cultural perspectives into instructional design. He advocates that
courses be designed in order to allow variability and flexibility in learning so that the courses can reflect the
multicultural realities of society and the multiple ways of teaching and learning. This model requires a deep
appreciation of culturally different pedagogical objectives and philosophies as well as the design of multiple learning
activities and assessment strategies in order to accommodate cultural diversity (McLoughlin, & Oliver, 2000).

Empirical Research Related to Eastern Culture in Online Learning

Numerous studies that have examined the cultural differences between Western and Eastern education have provided
a consistent picture that describes Eastern education as a group-based, teacher-dominated, centrally organized
pedagogical culture with examinations as the essential way to define performance and compete for higher social
status (Zhang, 2007). In Eastern education, teachers have absolute authority and the students are not encouraged
to question or challenge a teacher's knowledge (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). On the other hand, in Western education, to
challenge a teacher or tutor is seen as part of the self-development process as dialogue and interaction are
encouraged in the learning process (Robinson, 1999).

A number of studies, which have investigated the differences between Eastern and Western cultures in online
education, mostly echo the differences found in traditional settings (Liang & McQueen, 1999; Thompson & Ku,
2005). Chinese participants were found to be less critical and opinionated in online discussions than their U.S. peers
(Thompson & Ku, 2005) and unwilling to post messages that conflict with the instructor’s view (Zhao & McDougall,
2008). Liang and McQueen (1999) observed that the Eastern students preferred to have more direction from their
teachers, even in the interactive online learning environment. In contrast, most of the Western students desired more interactions among the students.

The tendencies of collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and the high power distance of Eastern cultures have been found in online learning environments (Kim & Bonk, 2002; Ku & Lohr, 2003, Wang, 2007;). Bonk and Kim’s (2007) study shows the dominance of social interactions among Korean students at the outset of their online collaboration, which demonstrates their cultural inclination toward emphasizing relationships over tasks.

Ku and Lohr (2003) found that the Asian students felt uncomfortable with the nonlinear nature of their online courses, which the researchers attributed to the uncertainty avoidance dimension of Asian cultures. Ku and Lohr’s study also found that Chinese and Taiwanese students liked the idea of building an online community among their peers and instructors, which reflects the collectivist-femininity attributes of their cultures.

Language, which mediates an individual’s ways of thinking and speaking, is an important cross-cultural variable that is often neglected in existing cultural frameworks. Inadequate language competencies tend to magnify other cultural problems when attempting to complete a Web-based course (Ku & Lohr, 2003). Language barriers for non-native speakers tend to detract from equal participation in computer conferences (Gunawardena et al., 2002). Ku and Lohr’s (2003) study indicated that language barriers can be alleviated in an asynchronous online learning environment with the use of written communication as the dominant form of communication.

Methodology

This study was designed as an exploratory study aimed at understanding the emerging cross-cultural issues in transnational online MBA courses. The case study approach is considered appropriate for such exploratory research because it is considered to be the best in regard to explaining “how” and “why” issues in a complex contemporary social phenomenon (Yin, 2002).

Context

The field setting selected was an online MBA program at an accredited business school at a large Midwestern university. This program is designed for professionals who wish to continue their employment while earning their MBA. With the increased competitive domestic MBA market, the program has taken initiatives to explore partnerships with global companies in order to enroll increasing numbers of international students.

Except for the courses offered during the required on-campus visit, most courses were delivered entirely online through the ANGEL course management system. At the time of the study, approximately half of the courses used CBL and four-fifths used virtual teams. Online asynchronous discussions were used in four-fifths of the courses as well. Email communications, announcements and participation in the asynchronous or synchronous discussions were the methods most often used by the online instructors to communicate with the students.

Data Sources

International students from three global companies were solicited for interviews through email invitations. Table 2 summarizes the profiles of the three companies and the demographics of the interviews.

One-on-one Interviews

Seventeen international students from Nova Engine were solicited to participate in the study. Seven students responded to our invitations and agreed to be interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted via phone, email or face-to-face during the in-residence week as based on the students’ preferences. Fifteen semi-structured questions were asked about their perceptions of cultural issues regarding interactions with peers and instructors, instructional design, technology use and globalization of online courses. Each phone or face-to-face interview took approximately 45 – 75 minutes and was recorded with the permission of the interviewee.
Table 2. Profiles of the Companies and Demographics of the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nova Engine</th>
<th>Eastern Container</th>
<th>Xiangjiang Steel Limited</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A US company that provides services in design, manufacture and distribution of service engines and related technologies.</td>
<td>Chinese company dedicated to the manufacture and supply of containers, trailers, tank equipment and airport equipment. Has over 100 subsidiaries in China and worldwide.</td>
<td>State-owned Chinese iron making company, which is looking to globalize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven international students (four from India, two from China and one from Russia) were interviewed individually. The students did not have experiences in taking online courses in their home countries. Many students had experiences working with work colleagues from other cultures and/or exposure to other cultures.</td>
<td>Five Chinese students attended the focus group interview.</td>
<td>Seven Chinese students attended the focus group interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The students did not have any formal online learning experiences before studying within the MBA program.</td>
<td>Most of the students had experiences communicating with individuals from other cultures through their work.</td>
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</table>

Focus Group Interviews

Two focus group interviews were conducted face-to-face with five students from Eastern Container and seven students from Xiangjiang Steel. These interviews used an open, free-flowing interview format. The students were asked to describe their learning experiences in the two-week in-residence program and give their perspectives on the impact of culture-related issues on their learning in their courses. Each interview lasted two to three hours. The interviews were recorded with the consent of each group.

Data Analysis

Although this study does not use a grounded theory approach, Strauss and Corbin’s constant comparative method (1990) was used in order to triangulate the data from the different interview transcripts. According to Patton (1990), Strauss and Corbin’s constant comparison method was appropriate to be used in the analysis of the different question responses because we cross-case grouped the answers. We followed the below steps when analyzing the interview data.

- Each researcher reviewed the transcripts carefully and made notes of the important patterns, themes and categories that emerged from the data.
- The reviewed transcripts were later analyzed again to compare with previous summaries of key categories and themes. Similar themes or categories were grouped together. The frequencies of each theme or category were marked.
- After each researcher completed their independent analysis, three researchers validated and discussed their coding decisions until a common set of codes based on all of the transcripts was determined.

Findings

The emerging cultural difference themes are summarized in Table 3.

Assessment

In general, the assessment methods used in the courses were perceived by the interviewees as fair, clear and easy to understand. The students noticed the different assessment styles used in the U.S. as compared to their home countries. For example, a student from Russia mentioned that Russia is an exam-oriented culture and, therefore, the students’ grades are based mainly on the final exam grade. He noted that in the U.S., the assessment was more
ongoing and process-oriented and that the focus was to sustain the students’ continuous involvement. He stated that “in [the program] the instructors assess not only the final exam/test results or assignment grades, but also, the level of the student’s participation in discussions. Even if you have good results on the final test, you may get a low final grade if you did not interact enough with your peers during the course.” When comparing the assessment methods used in the program with those typically used in schools in China, a few of the Chinese students felt that the assessment methods used in the U.S. are application-oriented as they focus on helping the students to understand and apply the theories while memorization is often the basis of assessment in their schools in China. However, the students still preferred multiple strategies to be used in order to improve both the memorization and application of the theories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Cultural Differences</th>
<th>Suggestions for Course Design</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Exam-oriented vs. process-oriented; Memorization vs. application</td>
<td>Multiple assessment strategies; Structured and flexible assignment schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction/Interaction</td>
<td>Lecture vs. conversation; Structured vs. less structured; Deductive vs. inductive</td>
<td>Incorporate features that accommodate different cultural pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(case-based learning)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asynchronous/Synchronous</td>
<td>Lack of visual cues caused communication barriers in asynchronous communication;</td>
<td>Balanced use of asynchronous and synchronous communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Scheduling issue for cross-cultural collaboration in synchronous communication; Time zone differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Collectivism and masculinity vs. individualism and femininity; Culture differences</td>
<td>Appreciate cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>visible, but did not negatively affect collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Learning</td>
<td>Lack of global cases; Lack of a relationship between U.S. case discussion and analysis and local issues of international students; Lack of international experience in regard to the online instructors</td>
<td>Balance the use of local and global cases; Provide more context for culturally specific examples or cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Conduct</td>
<td>Discrepancies between U.S. and other countries’ rules of academic conduct</td>
<td>More education and understanding, rather than pure punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Language barriers in reading, writing and communication</td>
<td>More planning and preparation; More audio/visual aids</td>
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A few Chinese students noted that a well-defined and predictable course assessment schedule with regularly occurring assessment activities (e.g. weekly discussions or quizzes) was important to sustaining their continuous engagement with the course amid their busy professional lives. However, the students also hoped that future instructors could be more flexible and considerate of the students’ cultural contexts in scheduling the assessment activities. A few of the Chinese students mentioned that in Chinese companies, employees sometimes were required to work after regular work hours without much or any notice. The interviewees mentioned that they would try their best to follow the course schedule, but hoped that the professors would understand when such situations occurred, and be flexible.

**Instruction and Interaction**

The students noted more student involvement in regard to the interactions with the instructors in the U.S. courses compared to those in their home countries. The students mentioned that the major difference between Eastern education and the U.S. education is that U.S. instructors require the students to interact on a regular basis with the peers during the course. Such a teaching method differs from that used in China, Russia and India where the dominant method of teaching is a one-way lecture in which the professor teaches and the students take notes. After the lecture, the students memorize the materials in order to pass the exams at the end of the semester.
The response from the students was positive in regard to the level of interaction between the instructors and students in regard to the more equalized roles of the instructors compared to those in the students’ home countries. For example, one student from India noted that “the students talked as much as the instructors, giving their opinions and sharing the experience” during the class discussion.

The Chinese students noted that differences existed in regard to the structure and sequence of the instruction when the U.S. instruction method was compared to that used in China. For example, one Chinese student commented on the highly structured nature of the course content. “In China, the structures are normally clearer, with clear logic, i.e. first is a general briefing, then the content is arranged from the easiest to the hardest, or most important to the least important, etc. While the [program name] courses are more case-based, the cases are not closely linked with the textbooks as [they are] in China.”

The conversation style of the online instruction and case-based learning added a level of difficulty to the learning for some of the Chinese students. They acknowledged that the interactions and cases were good ways of teaching, especially when an emphasis was placed on the application of the knowledge skills, but were also concerned with the information overload in the online discussions. For example, one Chinese student commented on the highly structured nature of the course content. “In China, the structures are normally clearer, with clear logic, i.e. first is a general briefing, then the content is arranged from the easiest to the hardest, or most important to the least important, etc. While the [program name] courses are more case-based, the cases are not closely linked with the textbooks as [they are] in China.”

Synchronous/Asynchronous Communications and Time Zone Differences

The students perceived that advantages and disadvantages existed in regard to asynchronous and synchronous communications in cross-cultural learning environments. On one hand, the students mentioned that one advantage of an asynchronous discussion is that it is “clear, free of the misunderstandings caused by accents and the impact of the time difference is less.” However, the delayed text-based communication of an asynchronous discussion is unable to convey the nuances of human interaction and, therefore, the students felt that it was difficult for them to figure out the intentions of the other students during group work due to their different working styles and cultures.

The students felt that the synchronous communications helped them to “get to know each other much better thanks to the live interaction.” Nevertheless, this type of communication also presented challenges, especially in scheduling a synchronous conference as the students were spread around the globe in different time zones.

The students mentioned that time zone differences had an impact on their timely participation in the asynchronous discussion forums, as this factor was not usually considered in the course design of most of the courses. In the program, some instructors would post questions requesting the students’ answers in a timely manner, and would request that the students not repeat points already made in previous posts. One student noted that “[s]ometimes it would be very difficult to find a question to answer once I woke up in the morning finding that every single question had been answered.”

A good balance of both synchronous and asynchronous discussions was regarded as beneficial for international online courses. Many of the students appreciated the instructors’ uses of a combination of both types of communication modes in order to balance the communication weaknesses of each type. For example, one student commented that “[in that course], the instructors not only used discussion forums, but also used Breezelive for asking student questions – good balance to have international students in different regions (in a narrow window of time) engaged in the courses.”

Collaboration

The students noted different culture patterns in online collaboration and communication but indicated that these differences did not affect their learning in a negative way. For example, one Indian student commented on the independent nature of the U.S. students and the group orientation of the Chinese students, “I would not say the cultural differences affect [the collaboration] in a negative way. Cultural differences are certainly there. Culturally, we like to work more in teams, but the students in the U.S. tend to be more independent. We hesitate a bit in saying
‘No’ to anything even though we know it is of a discomfort to us, but most foreign [the U.S.] students do not [hesitate in saying ‘no’]. We are more sensitive and care for others.”

Another Chinese student mentioned the competitive nature of the U.S. students in comparison to the Chinese students’ politeness which focused on creating harmonious relationships. She commented that the “cultural difference is visible. The U.S. folks are more active, normally hold very strong opinions and can hardly be persuaded. For example, if we have both U.S. and Chinese teammates doing one assignment, the U.S. folks will normally take the lead, set-up the framework and, then, finalize the whole assignment. The Chinese students will be more polite, and may have less of a contribution because of their personalities.”

The students appreciated the diversity brought by the cross-cultural differences. As one Indian student mentioned, “I personally feel that the cross-cultural team helps in bringing a good perspective to the teamwork. The diversity definitely helps, especially in bringing in the experiences that people have in different countries and geographic regions.”

Cases

As a major instructional strategy, many students pointed out the need for more diversified cases in the courses. For example, one student commented that “[the courses need] more global thinking, because they focus on U.S. examples…Sometimes, you think that this case is difficult to apply to my country. They have to think about what is happening in other countries.”

Many students commended one particular course that balanced the use of local and global cases. When asked whether they could give an example of a global course, a student noted, “I would like to suggest Law, as the course structure is very nice and introduces the international students the U.S. legal systems, while comparing [the U.S. legal systems] to different kinds of legal systems worldwide.” The students also noted that such a balance was not only beneficial to the international students, but, also, provided opportunities for the U.S. students to better understand the cultures of other countries.

Several of the Chinese students mentioned that they would like to see more close relationships between the case analyses and practical issues faced by their companies. They stated that they felt that the cases used in the course work were too distant from the reality of the Chinese work environment.

Academic Conduct

Several international students have expressed frustration at being severely punished for their inappropriate citations of others’ work according to the academic rules of the U.S. universities. They felt that the instructors lacked an understanding of the culture differences in regard to educational practices. For example, one student commented on his experiences:

I had not put the reference from where I had taken this information. When the professor pointed [it] out, I immediately expressed my apology for my ignorance and committed to follow it in future … But I was reprimanded for academic dishonesty, which cost me to lose marks, and finally ended up in a lower grade. I personally feel [that] this would have been treated in a different way in India – probably a warning for [a] future reprimand.

Language Issues

The students reported that language barriers appeared to be the biggest concern for the Chinese students. Although, each student passed the standard graduate admission examinations (i.e., TOEFL, GMAT), the majority of the students still had severe limitations in regard to the English language that hindered them from having the desired level of understanding of the course content, and effective communication of their opinions in the online discussions. For example, one student commented that
For Business Law, we may have had a feeling about it after reading the chapters, but could not express our arguments or perspectives. The law itself was tough to understand. Being able to express it with an in-depth view [was] even more difficult for us.

The students noted that they had to triple their time spent reading when the information was in English rather than in Chinese. To help ease the language barriers, the students suggested that the professors give the course schedule and materials before the start of the course or lessons, so that they can better prepare for the course. The students also appreciated those professors who made efforts in providing audio and video aids, which not only helped the students to understand the course content, but also allowed them to review the content repeatedly in order to overcome the language barriers.

Discussion

Key Cultural Issues

As reflected in the interviews, the Eastern students exhibited modest, face-saving personalities in the group work and preferences for group work, whereas the U.S. students appeared to be independent, assertive and confident with a competitive attitude that dominated the group interaction process. According to Hofstede’s study, these findings reflect the collectivism and femininity attributes of Eastern cultures and the individualism and masculinity attributes of Western cultures.

An interesting theme, however, that emerged from the study is that almost all of the students agreed that the cultural differences, which originated from ethnicity, existed, but did not negatively affect their communication or collaboration in learning. The participants seemed ready to accept the differences and looked for the positive aspects that cultural differences bring. There are two possible reasons for these positive perceptions. First, developing countries such as China and India have become increasingly open to new ideas that originated globally. In addition, these countries have also experienced a globalization of their economies and, therefore, cultural diversity has become pervasive in every aspect of their cultures.

Second, the students mainly came from three large global companies that have engaged in or are ready to engage in international business. The students’ previous experiences in working with international customers contributed to the heightened level of cultural sensitivity.

The study revealed the cultural differences in regard to instruction styles. The students noted that the U.S. instruction style leaned toward a learner-centered, process-oriented style with a focus on interaction and participation, whereas the Eastern style tended to be lecture-centered with an emphasis on exams. The students also noted that the sequence of instruction was less structured and more inductive in the U.S. (i.e., teaching from examples to general principles), while Eastern education was highly structured and more deductive in its instruction approach (i.e., teaching from general principles to examples). These patterns of cultural differences were consistent with previous discussions regarding the cultural differences between Eastern and Western educational systems (Robinson, 1999; Zhang, 2007).

Although the students were positive in regard to their transition to a more interactive learning style, some of the students felt uncomfortable with the case-based learning method due to the lack of structured instruction content and the absence of strictly guided instruction. These findings were consistent with Hofstede’s (1984) results, which showed that individuals in Eastern Asian countries tended to have high uncertainty avoidance and were uneasy with unstructured ideas and situations.

Although the students appreciated the more equalized role of the online instructors in the online courses, their strong preferences for highly structured textbooks and a stronger presence by the online instructor in the discussion forums indicated the authoritative image that they hold of instructors. In China, a textbook represents the finest form of knowledge developed by authorized experts and are the absolute sources for finding the correct answers. According to Hofstede (1986), the heavy reliance on instructors and textbooks are indicators of the high power distance dimension of Asian cultures.
This study shows that language is still a dominant barrier for students who have English as a Second Language (ESL), especially for Chinese students who have rarely been exposed to an English learning environment. This study points out the need for international students to improve their English reading, listening and writing skills beyond the basic TOFEL and GRE requirements before coming to the U.S. in order to be able to complete a smooth transition from their native environment to an intensive English language environment. On the other hand, special assistance or considerations need to be given in online courses attended by international students whose first language is not English, so as to ensure equal student participation.

The issues concerning plagiarism resulted from the students’ lack of knowledge of local academic cultures in Western universities. Hayes and Intorna (2005) stated a need for the instructors to develop a broader cultural understanding of how international students were taught and assessed, before imposing rigid categories of judgment upon them that may further alienate them in an already foreign environment. Instructors also need to manage academic misconduct issues by making clear their expectations for the students’ academic conduct, explaining how these expectations might differ from those utilized in the students’ own countries and providing resources for the students to utilize in order meet these expectations. A culturally sensitive instructor should also give the students opportunities to correct their behaviors when they make their first mistakes rather than harshly punish their course grades as was found to be the case in this study.

Case-based learning plays an important role in online MBA teaching. Online instructors often utilize cases from their traditional counterpart courses in their online courses. Most traditional cases are developed in accordance with the U.S. business context. Therefore, it is not a surprise to find that the international students feel a lack of a connection to the cases used in the program analyzed within this study.

Case development is a complicated process. It might be difficult for online instructors to develop new cases to meet the needs of the international students. However, the instructors can devise innovative ways to increase the international components within their case studies. For example, the instructors can use the sources available on the Internet to design original cases for students to analyze. Students can also be asked to develop cases based on their personal cultural experiences and then share with their peers.

This study raises issues concerning an instructor’s cultural competency. As reflected in the interviews, instructors are varied in their sensitivity to cultural issues. A few of the instructors integrated cross-cultural content into their courses. However, many instructors appeared not to have considered cultural dimensions when designing their online courses.

**Diversity as a Preference to Cross-cultural Design**

The students’ preferences for diversity in the assessment strategies, uses of technologies and selection of case materials are aligned with Henderson’s (1996) ideas of integrating multiple ways of teaching and learning that “require a global perspective and sensitivity to cultural differences and the numerous ways in which culture influences learning” (McLoughlin, & Oliver, 2000, p. 58). As demonstrated in this study, a lack of diversity in instructional design may put international students at a disadvantage and affect their equal participation in online learning. Students prefer to maintain a sense of continuity by preserving the components of their own culture of learning, but also want to engage in a new cultural way of learning and thinking as part of their goal of learning in an international course. Diversity is the best solution to respecting culturally different ways of learning and ensuring equity among the students participating in a learning community.

McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) argued that a tension may exist between the need to ensure access to learning for a diverse student population and localize instruction design in order to accommodate the learners’ particular cultures, cognitive styles and preferences. For example, in this study, the Chinese students requested that the instruction cases be tailored to practical issues in China. Such localization may be accomplished in a course that is specifically designed for Chinese students, but would be difficult to implement in a group with multiple nationalities, without compromising the interests of the students from other nations. A strategy that asks the students to share personal cases from their cultural contexts may be a better way to ensure equal participation in a transnational course. Therefore, in order to balance diversity and localization, instructional designers need to consider both the micro and macro levels of cultural learning and find ways to integrate multiple ways of learning in order to foster intercultural subjectivity (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000).
Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the emerging issues in cross-cultural online learning environments. In regard to online collaboration, it is encouraging to know that cultural differences which originate from different national cultures do not negatively affect the students’ online experiences, but, instead, are seen as a potential factor contributing to more culturally rich learning experiences. Other issues identified in this study, such as language, communication tool use, plagiarism, time zone differences and a lack of diversified cases, may affect a student’s learning performance if the instructors do not take into consideration the needs of the international students. This study indicates that a culturally inclusive learning environment needs to consider diversity in course design in order to ensure full participation of the international students.

Implications for Practice

First, the cultural sensitivity of online instructors needs to be addressed in an online MBA program if the program takes the initiative to expand its international boundaries (i.e., intends to build its international student pool). Appropriate cross-cultural training support should be provided at the program level in order to develop the online instructors’ cultural competencies.

Second, the findings of this study indicate that online educators need to consider providing scaffolding to the international students in order to support their international learning adventure and reduce cultural language barriers. An initial student orientation to the U.S. culture and academic rules of conduct would be helpful in enhancing the cultural understanding of the international students.

A well-balanced use of diversified activities can alleviate the language barriers as well as allow the students opportunities to improve their English proficiency in a variety of ways. The use of audio and visual aids can be of significant help to international students.

Third, the findings of this study indicate that fostering the principles of flexibility and variability in online courses is essential for a transnational course to effectively address the diversified needs of its international audience. Online instructors can conduct a quick learner analysis in order to get an understanding of the students’ expectations and cultural backgrounds so that they may adjust the diversity of the course to address the international audience accordingly.

In summary, as a program-level case study based on a small sample size of participants from several specific ethnic origins, the generalizations of the results in this study should be exercised with caution. However, we believe that the analysis of the emerging cultural issues contributes to the limited extant knowledge of the cross-cultural design of online courses. In addition, the recommendations raised in this study provide valuable information and insights that can be used to assist distance educators and policy makers of similar online MBA programs in designing, practicing, and making policies for students’ successful global online learning experiences.

This study opens numerous new avenues for future research. First, the present study can be further extended by including international students from multiple disciplines. Second, each of the emerging cultural factors identified in the study is worthy of a more in-depth investigation. The impact of academic integrity issues on international students’ learning experiences is also an important topic of research. The design and development of cases that are culturally inclusive for global learning courses represent a significant area, which contributes to practices of cross-cultural learning.

References


