

Session 3: Practical Issues in Networking

Group B: Cultural Factors

Summary

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Group B of the third session dealt with issues pertaining to cross-cultural exchange in e-learning. Each invited speaker presented his/her theoretical approach, views, practical findings in e-learning based on their research projects and practical experiences from teaching courses in distance education, developing web-based learning material to enhance intercultural understanding, and cross-cultural collaborative projects by videoconferencing in language learning.

Presentations

The session started with a presentation by Hamdi Erkunt from Turkey. He made an interesting analogy comparing e-learning business with a kitchen. In his presentation which he titled "The E-learning Kitchen", he asserted that content is the most important aspect of e-learning, and that imported or adapted content is not good enough because it could be culturally biased. The content for learning must be customized and provided in good quality to cater to the learners' culture.

With technologies made available for teaching and learning all the ingredients can be prepared and cooked effectively and efficiently. The actors in the e-learning kitchen are learners, instructional designers and educational technologists. Their roles combined together along with the work of a production team customize the learning material and turn it into quality content to fit to the learners' needs and cultures. He described the objective, role and function of the respective actors in the e-learning kitchen.

Erkunt then went on to pose a question on what e-learning is. From his experience, he noted that e-learning is often misconceived as a pre-packaged course that an individual takes by himself in front of a computer. This is a concept widely shared by decision makers in education and many others dealing with e-learning. He maintained, however, that this is but one form of e-learning; there are other forms of e-learning that use an instructor and the interaction between the instructor and learners as well as among learners themselves can still be a part of e-learning.

Hamdi Erkunt concluded his presentation by stressing that although it is hard to develop something that assures quality in learning and measures how well learners learn what they are supposed to, there is a way to do this by creating the conditions necessary, and also by taking the learners into ac-

count as early as possible to design and produce quality learning content for the learners needs that is also culturally appropriate to satisfy the learners.

The second speaker, Jane Bachnik, stressed the importance of considering cross-cultural aspects in international distance education such as customs and communication styles based on her research project. She pointed out that there are multiple levels in culture as in a light house. When you find yourself in a different culture no one tells you the foundation of that culture, which is taken for granted that everyone knows. The lack of understanding the basics of the culture causes extreme difficulty in communication and interaction with the people of that culture. She gave an example that even in exchanging a business card there are a lot of intricacies involved. Taking up the case of Japan where indirect communication is encouraged, she explained that high value is placed upon what is unsaid in communicating with one another, and you have to understand the unsaid. But finding yourself in any culture like this makes you socially a child who needs someone to take care of you, which she terms “a cultural child” .

Bachnik described in detail the online learning software she has been developing, focusing on a home stay situation in Japan used as a vehicle to understand the cross-cultural issues by comparing different cultural perspectives, and also how the content has been developed. This online cross-cultural learning content is not fact-based learning, but for the process of learning to learn with a student-centered approach and made accessible to anyone who wants to learn. It could also be used in language learning because language and culture are so intimately related.

Developing content such as this requires the e-learning components as described in the first presentation. In relation to the e-learning kitchen model presented by Hamdi Erkunt, however, Bachnik pointed out that in Japan those important components /actors are absent in developing this kind of learning content. In the case of Japan there is no “kitchen” , she asserted. Therefore, either one person performs invarious capabilities bearing several roles such as an instructional designer, an educational technologist, etc. Or one has to depend on outsourcing. Bachnik added that there are a lot of problems in having the content outsourced in that no one has the kind of expertise required in the e-learning kitchen. The director of the outsourcing company, a generalist, takes charge in the process of content development. The process is linear, like a production line, rather than circular, allowing back-and-forth input. Bachnik indicated that this is a real and serious issue in developing learning content in Japan.

Masako Sasaki, the third speaker, introduced her cross-cultural distance learning project using videoconferencing technology, and reported the effectiveness of networking technologies such as ISDN and SCS in enhancing language learning and intercultural understanding. In introducing her project, she explained the objectives of the cross-cultural joint classes, including what the participating

Japanese students were expected to learn, and how the connections were established.

The project focusing upon EFL provided the students with different learning settings through the use of videoconferencing technology. One is learning with another group of Japanese students, the second is learning with students in non-English speaking countries, and the third is learning with local students in English speaking countries. These joint classes were designed to help the students acquire formal and informal communication skills by real-time oral interaction in which they explored to gain insight into the deep and surface culture of the partner classes.

Through the findings of her project Sasaki reported that the use of videoconferencing technology with a humanistic approach is effective and useful in enhancing English language proficiency, intercultural understanding, critical thinking, collaborative learning and media literacy or ability to use technology on the part of the students in participating countries.

Discussion

In all three presentations of Group B, cultural factors and communication were discussed as vital. With regard to the learning kitchen theory, which appears to be a linear model, it was indicated that establishing close communication between the actors fulfilling the roles of designer, educational technologist and production team is the key for successful content development in quality. The kind of web-based tutorial introduced, could be applicable and useful as a navigating tool to deal with cultural ambiguities in other cultures such as in the Pacific island cultures.

Also, it was pointed out how, in language learning, subtle cultural ingredients can affect the way in which intercultural communication takes place such as responsiveness in students; this may pose a problem when speaking a second language through videoconferencing. In implementing a project aiming at language learning it was suggested that it would be important to have some structure in place. Furthermore, English is a world-wide medium of communication spoken with all sorts of accents or intonation, and native speakers of English should learn to be tolerant in listening to the English spoken by non-native speakers. Finally in promoting cross-cultural distance education there is an issue relating to the culture of learning itself, which varies from one country to another, that needs to be taken into consideration.