Course Design for Culturally Diverse Learners

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Abstract

In the information age, knowledge and technology develop at a great pace and this changes all existing paradigms including those education. The notion of an open society based on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) points to the fact that the information society has been transformed into a network society. Globalization of education becomes more widespread in conjunction with increasing number of distance education and e-Learning practices in the recent years. It's clear that culturally diverse learners have different interest, expectation and needs regarding the distance learning environments. Courses need to be designed taking account of cultural diversity in order to optimize "self-learning". It can be argued that instructional designs that take global and local cultural diversity into account, lead more efficiently to learning outcomes and help to solve the problems. Through these lenses, finding solutions via different cultural perspectives and developing instructional programs and preparing open course materials accordingly is a must. This presentation concentrates on a case from Anadolu University for studying the culturally sensitive instructional design principles for distance education, in the light of theories from leading researchers in the field. The research findings about the feedback from students in Azerbaijan about the learning and communication media used in associate and bachelor degree programs point to valuable inferences.

1. Introduction

Researchers have studied the concept of "culture" with different aspects, producing numerous definitions until today. Through a literature review, it's seen that a considerable number of researchers have adopted Tylor's definition. Tylor defines culture or civilization, in its wide etnographic sense, as a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of a society" [9]. Matsumoto and Juang explain culture as "a response or solution to the problem of adapting to our contexts in order to meet basic biological and social needs" [8]. Kroeber & Kluckhohn define culture as "consisting of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consisting of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action" [2]. Hofstede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others" [6]. Culture as a concept is diverse, changing, and concrete as well as abstract, this is why the implications for its potential impact on communication at a distance become increasingly complex [5].

2. Theories on Cultural Differences in e-Learning

Gunawardena has produced a designing model for considering cultural differences in online courses. This model is structured to address organisation of global web-based courses and enhance the flexibility via the interface that delivers it. Model represents a dynamic educational system, which exists within a global context. Each of the elements--- institution, instructor, individual, and group— brings to the course "non-negotiable factors" that exist within their cultures and negotiable factors that are presented as choices and options within the framework of the course. In a culturally relevant design the most important factors are dialogue and communication. Thus course design must accommodate dialogue for negotiation of the course structure to take place [5].

Gunawardena, Wilson and Nolla list some factors that should be taken into account while designing for culturally diverse learners [5]. These are (1) Language Choice, (2) Format Choices, (3) Communication Channels, (4) Activity Choices, (5) Method Choices and (6) Knowledge Construction. Chen found that three cultural factors, namely "thinking patterns, expression styles, and cultural context", are the prominent cultural factors that influence how people behave in the electronic media, and these are the manifestation of their cultural values [3]. In addition to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Chen's three cultural factors, Gunawardena et al. stated that other important

constituent parts of culture are "cognitive processes"; perception, language, nonverbal communication.

Badrul Khan has also developed a check list that can be used for culturally sensitive online course design [7]. Some of the categories placed in the check list can be listed as; cultural diversity, geographical diversity, learner diversity, bias, digital divide, etiquette, legal issues, social and political issues, learning style differences, content design, instructional strategies, previous experiences, interface design, navigation, evaluation and feedback options, technological issues, orientation, non-verbal communication strategies and language.

3. About the e-Learning portal of Anadolu University

Anadolu University has been the pioneer of the Open Education System in Turkey, with the Open Education Faculty founded in 1982, and has taken the opportunity to offer dual mode education. Anadolu University Open Education System offers 11 bachelors degree, 30 associate degree programs and has about one and a half million students living not only in Turkey but also in Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia and 7 Western European countries. Anadolu University is one of the mega universities of the world on account of the number of students [1].

Open Education e-Learning Portal (http://eogrenme.anadolu.edu.tr/), is a modular learning management system (LMS) that is customised for users. Each programme has own website and is run efficiently by role based hierarchy. All e-Learning services are presented on course basis. Learners can benefit from these services in personal learning environments that can be accessed after logging in to the system with username and passwords. Interactive e-Book, pdf e-Book, e-Seminar (webinar), summary presentation videos, e-Exams (trial tests), e-Exercises are components of the portal and are support materials to the printed course books that are prepared according to the instructional design format of Anadolu University. In addition, videoconference lectures, audio books, face-to-face academic counselling lectures, TV lectures are offered to the use of students [1].

4. Methodology

This research is designed as a case-study. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in collecting data. While preparing the items of the questionnaire, literature review has been made and the design checklist prepared by Badrul Khan was used with his permission. The questionnaire items were reorganised according to focus grup interview with 4 graduates and review of semi-structured open-ended questions. The questionnaire consists of open and closed ended and ordinal questions and 24 items in total with a 3 level-Likert scale. The scale was applied with 81 students in Azerbaijan, Baku, who are registered to different programmes in 2014-2015 academic year.

5. Findings and Discussion

81 learners studying at Business, Economics, International Relations, Hospitality Management, Tourism and Hotel Management, Public Relations and Publicity, Banking and Insurance Programmes have participated to the research. 90% of the participants stated that they actively use the e-Learning Portal. In reply to the question about the frequency of use (daily, weekly, monthly) they have reported that weekly use is the most (34%) and daily use follows this by 32%. The participants were asked to rank the course learning materials in accordance with the frequency of their use. The books are the most preferred materials by students. This finding is followed by: lecturing videos, e-Book, exercises and videoconferencing, Interactive e-Book, e-Seminar (webinars). It can be argued that this finding affirms Collis [4] who stated that books and other printed materials are more convenient as primary study materials in terms of portability, usability and cultural fit when compared with computer materials. It can be discussed that students abstain from interaction and they prefer self-study. Another notable finding of the research results is that 39% of the participants have difficulty about attending to the e-Seminars (webinars) because of the time difference; however 40% of the participants do not emphasize such a difficulty. Similarly, while 38% of participants have difficulty to achieve course materials because of technical limitations (like the Internet connection speed or browser, software compatibility, data transfer speeds); 40% do not point to such technical difficulties. In addition, 34% do not have any "prior" e-Learning experience. Besides, the education language (Turkish) does not cause any specific difficulty to understand the course content (70%). The learners have also reported that there isn't much problem to understand the jargon, idioms, analogies or expressions used in the course materials and actitivities however some terms can not be understood well enough. The learners do not have problems about comprehending the visuals such as navigational icons, images, graphics, signs or symbols used in the course materials and actitivities.

About cultural sensitivity, half of the respondents state that courses present more than one point of view on controversial issues and the course activities have a structure responsive to different backgrounds and learning styles of learners. 60% of the participants state that they need a guide about using the materials such as videos, e-Book, interactive e-Book, exercises in the portal. This result is followed by; guide requirement about consultancy service 49%, participating to activities, discussions, e-Seminars etc. 48%. The participants have also been asked to indicate their use/preference about the communication media. In this respect, the learners satified with communication via videoconferencing is 74%, communication via e-Seminar is 64%, communication via e-Mail is 61%, communication via academic consultancy is 56%, communication via social network is 45%, phone calls to the bureau in Baku is 33%. Besides all the positive feedback from 81 learners on the course design, it's interesting to see that 69% of the participants think that presenting the course materials in multilanguage format could be useful.

6. Conclusion

In accordance with the research results, it's clear that students use e-Learning portal frequently and e-Learning design thus needs to be structured well enough to be prepared for considering interest, need, expectation and cultural diversity of learners that have capital importance for them. According to the findings, the learners have stated that they prefer individual learning methods and materials, stating less interest for interaction. However the responses also indicate interest to videoconferencing and webinars among other materials; the hesitation for interaction may be dwelled on in a future study with learners in Azerbaijan.

Another concern is the time difference depending upon geographical diversity, the courses can be planned according to availability of both lecturers in Turkey and learners in Azerbaijan. The lectures may be given in evenings especially considering that some students work. There are also face-to-face academic counselling sessions in Baku in order to prevent/minimize attendance diffuclties.

As it's stated in the research findings, the education language Turkish is not stated as a problem by the participants, it can be argued that this arises from the fact that Azerbaijani and Turkish are very close languages. However there is still a tendency among respondents to prefer multilingual formats in course design. This need may be further questioned. It can be stated that the terminology is a common problematic issue for Azerbaijani learners. Thus it can be predicted that a terminology dictionary can be reorganised enhancing its content and can be included in the related courses. Additionally, if a service is offered especially for culturally diverse learners, attention must be paid to expression styles used in courses and activities. Learner guides can be revised and developed about using the materials in the portal. Students in Azerbaijani research group stated that they preferred courses and activities supported with face-to-face communication, like videoconferencing, e-Seminars mostly. This result might be based on the fact that students have characteristics of Hofstede's high-context culture dimension [5]. Accordingly, it can be argued that especially e-Seminar applications and academic consulting via videoconferencing can take larger place in designs; it is important that supporting services should be designed to support face-to-face communication.

Thanks to globalization and also to increasing attention of higher education institutions to quality and accreditation issues in open and distance learning (ODL). They motivate academicians and practitioners for greater interest to culturally diverse learning environments and culturally sensitive instructional design.

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