Morse, K. (2003). Does one size fit all? Exploring asynchronous learning in a multicultural environment. JALN, 7(1), 37-55.

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As new technologies become less expensive, provide greater access to various forms of multimedia, and are integrated into all aspects of everyday life, online learning environments are becoming more prevalent. Online education, as experienced through course management systems, is being heralded as meeting the needs of students' lifestyles by managing time conflicts and access from remote locations, and helping people to juggle personal commitments (Harrison & Bergen, 2000). However, research indicates that improvements are needed to prevent high drop-out rates and to improve learning results (Byun, et al., 2000; Carr, 2000; Moshinskie, 2001). Online distance education courses need to be designed in such a way that learners with different backgrounds and preferred learning approaches will feel motivated and gain the best possible learning results from such courses. It is a challenge for instructional designers of online education courses to determine learners' preferred learning approaches and related social and cultural issues, and to design learning environments to meet these needs. Designers of such programs should consider cultural differences in their design as students of different cultural backgrounds may have different perspectives and interpretations of learning content (Driscoll, 2000; Gayeski, et al., 2002; Moshinskie, 2001).

The case used for this study was a graduate seminar delivered fully online using asynchronous computer-mediated conferencing communication (CMC) for class participants to discuss topics and issues raised from the reading materials assigned by the instructor. Based on a review of literature on asynchronous CMC, the author lists the benefits of this medium as flexibility, participation quantity and quality, communication openness/access, and post-participation review/access for references. He also lists various challenges such as technology frustration, coordination, timing/delay frustration, and skills deficits. The author points out that even though culture is a primary factor in "determining individual behavior patterns, and provides the paradigm by which experience is interpreted, assimilated, and adapted"(p. 40), a systematic consideration of the role culture plays in CMC is missing in the literature.

This paper discusses different definitions of culture, such as "shared patterns of behavior", "systems of shared meaning and understanding", "...those learned roles of behavior which bound accepted acceptable practice in a group environment", a result of fundamental societal assumption, and the concept of national culture, and argues that the indicator of cultural background should be ethnicity rather than nationality. The author goes on to introduce a continuum between low context and high context cultures, and uses a table to illustrate the difference between low context education perceptions/expectations and high context education perceptions/expectations.

Characteristics of low context learning are:

- Emphasis on learning outcomes (students as contributors to exploration and/or development).
- Emphasis on attitudinally based "deep" learning.
- Wide variety of learning tools and assessment instruments.
- Informal lecturer/student relationships.
- High student numbers/high contact time.

Those of high context learning are:

- Emphasis on teaching inputs (student as recipients and reproducers of materials).
- Content and knowledge based learning.
- Individual and examination-based assessment.
- Formal lecturer/student relationships.
- Small group sizes/low contact time.

The participants for this exploratory case study were 24 students with a variety of cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Participants who were assigned to the low context cultural group were from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and those who were assigned to the high context cultural group were from Pakistan, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Each group had 12 students making the ratio of representatives of low context and high context cultural groups 50/50. The author believes the exact even split of number of participants "improves the potential accuracy of response difference" (p. 45). All the participants in the low context cultural group used English as their primary language of communication while those in the high context cultural group used English as their secondary language of communication.

The author agrees with arguments in the existent literature that asynchronous computer-mediated communication can successfully serve as a learning medium for students with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. However, as learning patterns are developed as part of a participant's ethnic/cultural development, the factor of ethnic/cultural backgrounds noticeably influences learners' perceptions/expectations of asynchronous communication network. He suggests that ethnic/ cultural backgrounds of learners should be considered in the design and delivery of both computer-mediated communication and face-to-face instruction by improving the presentation and developing richer learning in a transcendent multicultural context.

In addition to those stated by the author, one important limitation of such a study might be that learners' perceptions/expectations may change after being exposed to another cultural environment for a certain period of time. And such a change could possibly affect the identification of a learner's ethic/cultural background.

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