

Running Head: Research Proposal

Research Proposal:

Exploring the Cultural Impact on Communication and Learning within Asynchronous,
Higher-Learning Online Forums

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Abstract

Based on the premise that cultural background does influence how we act and think, this research proposal seeks to examine how culturality affects communication and learning within online, text-based, asynchronous communication forums. This research proposal proposes to examine the student's online communication experience, and observe the role culture plays in the way participants process and interpret information. The proposed studies seek to determine if and how communication achieved through text-based, online forums inform learning. The author contends that, since higher learning institutions rely on computer mediated communication (CMC) as their primary means to achieve global, collaborative learning, research on communication and learning within CMC forums is a worthwhile endeavor for Academia. Based on existing research, the author notes conceptual gaps and unanswered questions concerning the actual role culture plays on the impact of learning within CMC forums. This denotes the need for further research in this domain, and reinforces the need for the proposed study. The author maintains that findings from this proposed research could serve as a guide to modifying CMC forums to reflect culturality, and in turn improve the learner experience.

Keywords: culturality, computer mediated communication, asynchronous online communication, intercultural/multicultural/sociocultural communication

Exploring the Cultural Impact on Communication and Learning within Asynchronous, Higher-Learning Online Forums

Higher-learning institutions readily use computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a means of teaching and learning. Having studied online for the past ten years, I have taken special interest in examining asynchronous, online communication forums. Also, as a student within the Masters of Educational Technology (MET) program, I have investigated online forums to better understand how this communication format can best support the learner experience. It is a natural progression to now turn to examining how culture impacts communication and learning within these same online environments. This study can also help me better understand and gain insight into my own intercultural communication patterns, and thus hone my cultural intelligence, as I prepare to facilitate online courses.

Many higher learning institutions now rely more and more on CMC as their primary means to achieve collaborative learning with students around the world. From an educational perspective, this research proposal seeks to convince Academia that it is a worthwhile endeavor to study the impact culture may have on communication and learning within asynchronous, higher-learning, online forums.

Statement of Problem: Thesis Question

Through previous research and personal experience, I came to understand that online environments are not ‘culture-free zones’, since learners bring their own culturally-shaped worldviews with them. (Morse, 2003) According to Plum (2007), our cultural background does influence how we act and think, and thus this in turn can influence how we interpret each other’s online contributions. Based on these premises,

my thesis question is twofold: firstly, does culture have an impact on communication within asynchronous, higher-learning online forums; and secondly, if so, how does this affect learning? Consequently, the impetus for the research is based on the following: firstly, investigate through a cultural lens student perceptions about their communication experience within asynchronous forums; secondly, observe the role culture plays in the way participants process and interpret information within text-based online forums; and thirdly, analyze findings from these studies to determine if and how communication achieved through text-based, online forums informs learning.

Literature Review

Organization of Literature Review

The assumptions and theories that underlie this research are based on my ten-year experience as an online learner, combined with previous research on text-based, online communication forums within the MET program. As such, I acknowledge the subjectivity and possible bias of this research, and consequently try to compensate by drawing from a wide body of literature, essentially originating from primary sources.

To begin, since I intend to carry out my research under a cultural lens, it will be important for me to define 'culture'. Also, in order to best develop my thesis argument and present my claims objectively, it is fundamental for me to examine the tenets of transformational learning, and a holistic approach to communicating. I then explore literature on the dynamics of online communities of inquiry, specifically examining the challenges related to text-based, asynchronous communication forums. This literature review also looks at studies that have been carried out to determine if and how culturality

affects communication and learning. The literature review also incorporates a conclusion that draws the literature together, provides insights and a focus for the proposed research.

Summary, Analysis, and Critique of Selected Literature

Defining Culture

As I intend to study how culturality may affect communication and in turn learning, it is important for me to define how I will interpret the term 'culture'. Like Macfadyen (2011), I am critical of viewing culture as a construct of nation states. Gee (2000) observed that culture needs to be considered as evolving, "[...] an ongoing process of sense-making at any particular point in time, within a particular context and from a particular viewpoint [...]". (p.188-189) Giddens (1991) views cultures as social systems that are grouped together under social practices, core values, identities and located in contexts that are sociohistorical in nature. Montiel-Overall (2009) believes, "[...] the way in which individuals construct knowledge varies across cultures [...]". (Montiel-Overall, 2009, p.180, as cited in Olaniran, 2012)

Combining Macfadyen's (2011), Gee's (2000), and Giddens' (1991) definitions of culture with Street's (1993) (as cited in Hewling, 2005), who considers that: "Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition." (p.23), I have arrived at a holistic definition of culture. Thus, for the purpose of this research, I can define culture as a human trait that is inherent to us all, and that culture is made up of complex social systems, which evolve with time and space.

Defining Transformational Learning

This preliminary literature research provides the definitions and philosophies on which transformational and holistic approaches are grounded, providing the basis for

assumptions and theories that will help me analyze students' perceptions of online forums, student-to-student interactions and their learning process.

For research purposes I focused upon Mezirow's (2000) initial theory (as cited in Baumgartner, 2001) that the ultimate goal for learning is achieving personal growth and attaining self-actualization. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) determine that self-actualization can best be achieved through transformational learning. According to many theorists, (Baumgartner, 2001; Cranton, 2002; Cranton & Wright, 2008; Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, 2003; Wang & Sarbo, 2004) this form of learning supports the development of critical thinking skills, making meaning of learning, applying course and experiential content, integrating concepts, and questioning one's beliefs and assumptions. For the purpose of this research proposal I can define 'transformational' learning, as the way learners relate to and conceptually frame their experiences using a good balance between affective and rational ways of knowing. (Baumgartner, 2001)

An Holistic Approach to CMC

The term 'holistic' learning can be defined as transformative, reflexive, and experiential learning; linked to spirituality in the sense of 'wholeness' and interconnectedness to all things. (Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003) Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) remind us that an holistic environment fosters the exploration of the cognitive: meaning the sharing and discussion of ideas; the affective and relational - interpreted as connecting with peers and linking ideas to experience; as well as exploring their own cultural identities through various symbols.

Communities of Inquiry

In my experience, active online participation through communication forums is often limited to less than half of the student body. What has guided my research here is finding out why the other half remains passive, and if and how this affects their learning experience versus the other half who does participate. According to many theorists, collaborative interactions can lead to vibrant communities of inquiry where students feel they can engage in meaningful, reciprocal dialogue (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Merriam et al., 2007). Hewling (2005) relates that this form of dialogue can take place only if participants engage actively, at which time the community of inquiry can be referred to as a ‘third culture’. Hewling (2005) suggests ‘third’ cultures vary in their own turn according to who is part of a particular space at a specific time.

Communication within Text-Based Online Forums

The process of human communication is extremely complex, (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003) yet we often reduce it to its simplest form: speaking and writing. In reality we also communicate using a complex set of symbols, using words, actions, emotions, and body language that help us express ourselves, ascertain our identity, and establish trust relationships with ‘the other’. According to Macfadyen (2011) establishing our identity within the time and space of text-based asynchronous environments represents a challenge. Macfadyen (2006) discusses the idea that “[...] collective identity is tied to physical space: the land.”(p. 3), how can this environment be recreated within a disembodied space such as text-based online forums? It is difficult to establish ‘trust’ if we do not know who the ‘other’ is. It is also important to remember that the process of human communication is in itself multicultural, as most individuals have inherent

differences. These differences can affect both the way the written message is interpreted, as well as influence expectations. (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003) Speece (2012) feels that online education is oriented toward low context culture, thus there are few opportunities for social interaction, which affects communication. Within online text-based environments, there can be a sense of dissonance due to temporal delays in responses, and misunderstanding based on wording, which can both affect the degree of knowledge building and critical inquiry achieved. (Xin & Feenberg, 2006)

Successful communication should be based on shared meaning, (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003) and this is not always easy to achieve within asynchronous forums. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) suggest ‘multiple cultural’ approaches could offer learners alternatives that best suit various cultures and orientations. Hewling (2005) argues that participants need to be encouraged to ‘identify’ with multiple cultural frames of references in order to facilitate open exchanges. There is a potential for meaningful communicative interaction when there is a sharing of culture, language, values and experience for then there is a probability of mutual understanding. (Schramm, 1954, as cited by Hill, Watson, Rivers, & Joyce, 2007) The web site on communication studies provides many valuable communication theories in regards to better understanding intercultural communication. For the purpose of this research I am particularly interested in the transactional and interactive models. (www.communicationstudies.com, n.d.)

Examination of Existing Studies

I have chosen to peruse several studies to examine the way participants have been categorized and findings analyzed. I also reflect upon the proposed models and theories to help guide the formulation of my survey questions. I have also looked for any

discrepancies in methodology or research gaps that may exist in order to best conduct my own studies and orient my research.

Kim and Bonk (2002) examine behavior of three nationally distinct, undergraduate groups within CMC. Their findings indicated differences in the way various national groups participate; some were more group-focused, driven and reflective vs. more contextually driven and social; while other groups were more action-oriented and pragmatic in attaining results and finding solutions. Morse (2003) essentially uses Hall's (as cited in Hewling, 2005) "low" and "high" context definitions to categorize participants in his study, as he observes three asynchronous, online discussions over a period of three weeks. Morse (2003) finds that students do appear to be influenced by their respective cultural backgrounds in the way they prioritize benefits and challenges experienced with their online studies. Morse (2003) also notes that high context students appeared to find online studies more difficult, because of technology differences and different communication norms relating to their cultural background.

Hewling (2005) uses: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term orientation to evaluate online, text-based communication messages, which I feel would provide a good guide for my own studies. Parris and Linder-Vanbershot (2010) provide a learning framework and guideline, as well as a CDLF questionnaire to look at cultural learning preferences, but not in relation to communication. Although Mason (2011) did an extensive study as to why students are motivated within collaborative forums, the study did not look at the degree of learning achieved.

Conclusions Following Literature Review

Much speculation, but little actual research has been achieved to evaluate if and how text-based interactions within higher-learning, online environments inform learning. Furthermore, based on the literature perused, I found conceptual gaps and unanswered questions concerning the actual role culture plays on the impact of communication and learning within asynchronous, online communication forums. This denotes the need for further research in this domain, and reinforces the need for the proposed study.

Since the way learners construct knowledge varies across cultures, and that social practices and cultural traditions can shape the way individuals think and learn, (Montiel-Overall, 2009, as cited in Olaniran, 2012) this further supports the need to research how culturality affects learning within online forums. Unlike Kim and Bonk (2002), I will not focus my study on nationally distinct groups. Instead, I will take into consideration that in a post-modern world, cultures and sub-cultures can be influenced by travel, immigration and global media. (Hill et al., 2007) As such, I will study individuals from three Canadian Universities, where I believe individuals have rich sociocultural backgrounds. Since sociocultural differences can create potential barriers to communication (Hill et al., 2007), I feel that studying groups from these universities will allow me to examine sociocultural variables and how they may affect communicative behavior, and ultimately the learning experience.

A central theme came up through my literary research: the importance of nurturing the whole person, including the spiritual and emotional dimensions. Thus I feel it is important to base my research on the idea that learning is for the whole person, taking into consideration “[...] the spiritual, biological, intellectual, and emotional

dimensions of ourselves.” (Zinn, 1997, p.30) I intend to use a holistic approach to formulate questions and also in the manner in which I carry out my research.

Linking ideas to experience is achieved through the sharing and discussion of ideas, and it is through this shared knowledge that learners can experience transformational learning. (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003) However, since transformational learning can occur only if there are meaningful exchanges (Anderson, 2004), and that for this to happen learners need to have a sense of: safety, possibility, trust, discovery of the self, and acknowledging of the whole person (Cranton & Wright, 2008), this points to the importance of evaluating how learners ‘feel’ about their online, text-based experience.

Further Questions and Future Research Possibilities

Based on findings from this research proposal, subsequent research could logically flow to running pilot projects that help create and foster more culturally sensitive and culturally adaptive CMC environments. (Hill et al., 2007) Future research could also focus on the impact of communication between educators and learners within online environments, with a special focus on developing cultural intelligence and competence. Research could further investigate if learners understand the purpose and practice of discussion forums, (Hewling, 2005) as well as consider how culture plays a role in the way learners perceive privacy and self-disclosure, and how this affects their participation and learning experience.

Research Methodology

How Literature Review Has Shaped Research Proposal

Based on my literature review, research will be carried out with a focus on the whole person, including the spiritual and emotional dimensions of communication and learning. Research will address the relationship between text-based, online communication environments and culturally-based learning patterns, namely signs and tools used by individuals, as they process and interpret messages and make meaning of their learning. (Morse, 2003) Once findings have determined the relationship between these elements, it will then be important to study if and how culturality within these communication forums affects learning.

Description of Research Methodology

Site and Sample Selection

Once permission has been granted to conduct study within three Canadian universities, third year students partaking in fully online, Social Studies classes will be asked to participate in surveys via e-mail. Random sampling will be used, as participating students will have willingly agreed to participate in these surveys. Both surveys will be cross-sectional, with the intention of first evaluating how students feel about their communication experience within online forums; and secondly, investigate how present online forums influence their learning experience. Questions will focus on a single concept and include only items that relate to the initial question and objectives of the study.

Invitations to participate in the survey will be sent out to all students within a randomly chosen Social Studies class (should there be more than one) within each of the

three selected universities. Since willing participants will originate from a bank of learners that extends to three distinct third year, Social Studies university classes. This will provide a good sampling among a wide bank of online learners, and as such, contribute to validate results and generalize findings. In order to respect ethical research standards, the identity of the participating students, as well as the three universities and the specific study program will be kept anonymous. At this stage of my research proposal, I can do my best to tailor informed consent based on the present scope and focus of my research.

Research Design

This research proposal presents the studies in three stages, with the first two stages being quantitative, and the third stage qualitative. The first stage of the study will comprise a survey that evaluates how students perceive their online learning experience. Based on the analysis of collected materials and findings, the second set of questions will focus on finding out what kind of environment, type of communication, and activities best support a participant's learning experience within the online communication forum. Beyond multiple choice answers, participants will be offered the opportunity to provide written feedback in both surveys, so critical thinking can be adequately evaluated.

Depending on results of the first two surveys, further research will likely be conducted through triangulation in the following term. As such, the third stage of the study will be qualitative in nature and comprise interviews, analyzing of online messages between peers, and include case studies, with the objective of finding out more precisely how culture influences communication patterns and in turn influences the learning experience.

Data Collection Methods

Participants who have agreed to take part in the surveys will be sent a link via e-mail, where they will have two weeks to log in and complete the survey anonymously. The anonymity of the data received will help insure that the data is analyzed and compiled in an ethical manner. I also need to factor in the possibility that participants won't participate in the second survey, although it is not absolutely essential for the same students to take part in both surveys for this study to be successful.

Preliminary Plan for Data Analysis Strategies

After compiling the first survey, I will look for patterns and evaluate the ideas that may have emerged as I collect data. I will also evaluate if the data collecting techniques I am using are capturing the kind of data I am looking for, and this should also facilitate the creation of the second survey. I will need to be aware of the possibility of bias when I filter the data I need or feel I don't need. It would be wise to create a mind map to help me uncover what is important and how one element leads to another.

The second survey would be created based on the findings I compiled from the first survey. The questions would be carefully formulated to incorporate compiled data, synthesized with sound research material, and again focused on my hypothesis. Because I have researched how to foster organic and holistic online, communication forums in the past, I will need to be aware of possible bias, as I analyze and synthesize survey materials.

Timeline

This project could be initiated in June 2013, and the first surveys carried out during the 2013 autumn term. The qualitative aspect of the research could be carried out

during the January 2014 term and the research finalized by June 2014. (A proposed timeline is attached in Annex A)

Ethical Considerations

I need to consider many ethical issues, beyond my own biases, as I carry out this research proposal. I also have to consider the influence I may have had through readings, as well as my own worldview on online communication forums. Based on my educational philosophy, which is founded on humanistic principles, I have adopted research ethics that are based on a holistic approach. (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009; Flinders, 1992) Based on this approach, I intend to carry out my research by considering the individual as a ‘whole’ entity, and will also conduct my study with the notion that it is sometimes necessary to make sense of reality by being satisfied with imperfect understanding, rather than wanting to control the whole. (See Annex B for full ethical considerations)

Significance of Proposed Research

In order to support this research proposal and convince both participants and universities to participate, I would emphasize the idea that meaningful learner-to-learner interactions are vital to elearning (Anderson, 2004); and as such, online communication forums should foster communities of inquiry where participants are able to construct meaning through sustained dialogue. (Garrison, et al., 2000) Consequently, it is important to critically examine the ways in which cultural assumptions and communication patterns influence learning. I would also remind Academia that findings based on research could positively influence the way online communication forums are designed and the way instructors facilitate for example. Such a study would fill the existing gap in this domain and serve to benefit students, practitioners and Academia alike.

Possible Implications of Study

According to Speece (2012), online education presently caters to individualistic and low-context cultures based on the English speaking world, and this factor can limit the way learners from high-context cultures can interact socially. If findings from this research determine that Speece (2012) is correct, results from the studies could go beyond providing an understanding of asynchronous communication forums, and with further research formulate a guideline for factoring in culturality within online course design and delivery. With the rapid expansion of global education through CMC, this proposed research can perhaps redefine the idea of education under the banner of ‘one world, one culture’. Further research could be conducted on the premise that the process of human communication is in itself multicultural, and that since culture is as complex as each human being, CMC may need to incorporate spatial, social, spiritual, and experiential dimensions (Siegmund, 2004; Brockman, 2001; Ross, 2000) in order to address the ‘whole’ person. (Zinn, 1997)

Annex A

Timeline

- **May 2013:** Put together a cover letter and present research proposal, as well as a preliminary survey questionnaire for approval by UBC. This should give me sufficient turn-around time to make modifications if necessary.
- **June 2013:** Present the project and the two proposed surveys to three universities in Canada, asking permission to solicit willing participation of one class of third year, online, English literature students during the autumn 2013 semester. I will also present a basic outline of a qualitative research to be carried out during the winter 2014 term within the same group of students. Depending on response, communicate with more universities to fulfill the goal of having three different universities participating.
- **July 2013:** It will be important to test run the first questionnaire among peers and professors, and make adjustments accordingly.
- **August 2013:** This will be a good time to confirm participation from three universities for conducting the qualitative research in the autumn term, and the quantitative research in the winter term.
- **September 2013:** Introduce research project and surveys to students through their university emails, and solicit willing participation. Convene on a date and conduct the first study, create a two-week window for participants to fill-in online anonymous survey.

- **October 2013:** Once participants have all completed surveys, analyze and compile data. Based on synthesis begin formulating the questions for the second survey.
- **Late October 2013:** Solicit peer and professor feedback on pilot test run and adjust questions accordingly.
- **November 2013:** Send out invitations to participate in second survey via email. Conduct the second study in the same manner the first survey was carried out following the same two-week window frame, and then proceed to compile and analyze data.
- **Late November 2013 until January 2013:** Analyze and synthesize the results and provide a synthesis.
- **January 2014:** Provide an article based on quantitative study that includes results, analysis, and synthesis of findings leading to a hypothesis, providing a guide for a quantitative research to be carried out during the winter term.
- **February 2014:** Ask permission to begin online observations of text-based messages.
- **February – March 2014:** Based on compilation, analysis and synthesis of observations, design interview questions and solicit participants willing to respond to interview questions. Depending on results, a case study may also be carried out.
- **April – June 2014:** Provide an article based on qualitative study that includes results, analysis, and synthesis of findings leading to a hypothesis, providing a guide for further research.

Annex B

Ethical Considerations

The ultimate goal of this research is to support my hypothesis and not simply to gather information. As a researcher, I will need to negotiate genuine dialogue, as I try to solicit collaboration with all the persons that will be implicated in the research process. (Flinders, 92) Since I am founding my research on humanistic and holistic principles, I will make sure agreements between myself, Academia and the participants are mutually beneficial. During the entire research process I need to make sure I am honest and fair, and that I remain impartial, and not to moralize others or impose my worldview. Since this research is about examining culturality within online communication forums, it will be especially important for me to be culturally sensitive to differences in the way I address and communicate with individuals who take part in this research. I will also need to hone my cultural intelligence skills, as I consider wording and tone used within the survey questions. I have to be particularly conscious of the implications my conversations and interviews with individuals could have when carrying out qualitative research. Interviews and case studies carry serious responsibility when made public, and conducting this type of study must be done with respect and considering the whole person. I also need to enter this research with an open agenda, allowing for modifications along the way according to needs.

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