A Feeling or a Practice? Achieving Interculturality In an eLearning Course

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Abstract

This paper discusses findings from a research study of a Sino-UK online course about the impact of intercultural understanding of e-learning in an online course, involving UK and Chinese higher education practitioners that was jointly designed by a UK and Chinese team. This topic is important because of current policy trends where technology has become one of the key drivers of globalization. Drawing on research data from computer mediated communication in the course, the papers considers processes and factors related to course design that may foster or impede intercultural understanding. The main conclusions of the paper is that course design has an important impact on the successful outcomes of intercultural e-learning, particularly a course design that creates an online learning community where learners can build social relationships and trust to share knowledge, values and goals that facilitate collaborative learning about cultures. Emerging findings are that styles of computer mediated communication can enhance or adversely affect intercultural e-learning and a strong link between social presence and learner support is needed. Finally, the paper identifies the need for more research for the development of good practice.

Keywords

Learner difference, e-learning, interculturality, learner difference, learning community, globalization.

Introduction

Designing an e-learning course is always challenging, but even more so when the aim of the course is to be intercultural and the participants and the course team are intercultural. This paper discusses findings from a research study of a Sino-UK online course about the impact of interculturality in an online course, involving UK and Chinese higher education practitioners.   The online course took place between October-December 2006 as part of the Sino-UK eChina project funded by HEFCE.   The online course was jointly designed by a UK-Chinese team and supported by an intercultural teaching team. The participant feedback indicates that the online course was very successful. However, both the participants and tutors encountered challenges and difficulties related to online communication and negotiating meaning in this intercultural setting.   This suggests that there are many factors that can enhance or adversely affect intercultural e-learning, and it is important to gain an understanding of these. Although interculturality had an impact on all aspects of the online course – pedagogy, curriculum, technology and organisation - in this paper, we reflect on one main factor – the design of the online course as a key factor in determining what happened within the course to foster or impede intercultural understanding.

Intercultural e-learning where both teaching teams and learners are intercultural and geographically distributed is an increasingly common aspect of internationalisation and globalisation of higher education. Technology as a key driver of globalisation is having a strategic impact on higher education (Knight,

2004).   In the UK, for example, Middlehurst & Woodfield (2007) in a recent research report for UK universities highlight this as part of wider globalisation trends and comment that it is creating further complexity and challenges for higher education. One of the trends they identify is the growth of modes of flexible learning in international settings, including distance learning using technology. In China, e-learning is one of the drivers for pedagogic reform, including the development of more student-centred and self-study modes of learning (Kang & Song, 2007). However, the global development of online learning often ignores both the issue of cultural difference and the opportunity that this offers to create rich and rewarding online learning. Some writers are seeing this as one of the current 'problems' of e-learning that represents a new form of 'educational imperialism' (Ziguaras, 2001). Others are viewing this as a challenge that can be overcome by learning design.   Collis (1999), for example, identifies the need to operationalize the potential of cultural difference into the design of e-learning and offers some design guidelines for flexibility that respond to multiple cultures. However, these guidelines relate to on-campus blended learning contexts in one university. There is a tendency to characterise online learners through generalised cultural stereotypes as the basis for the way in which they will learn online – this has been identified and extensively critiqued by Goodfellow & Hewling (2005) who argue that this is simplistic. Other studies (Kim & Bonk, 2002) highlight cultural differences relating to online communication in particular as a key challenge for the design of online course .

In the eChina UK project during 2005-6, we had the opportunity to collaborate with Chinese universities to jointly design an e-learning course that drew on e-learning pedagogies and practices from both countries. The e-learning course was supported by an intercultural teaching team and its aim was to allow Higher Education teachers in the UK and China to explore differences and similarities in their understandings of e-learning and to gain new insights to develop their practice. This idea of sharing as professional practice across cultures through the medium of technology is part of what we mean by intercultural e-learning. The online course took place asynchronously using Moodle Virtual Learning Environment for a 10 week period in late 2006.   For this paper, we are drawing on data from the course archive, online discussion forums, evaluation questionnaires and completed e-portfolios. We also draw on our own experience of collaborating with the Chinese teaching team and of teaching on the online course. Our analysis of this data is at a very early stage, and consequently we can only present brief insights in this paper.

Culture is a critical influence in e-learning. It impacts on the way in which individuals and groups communicate and respond to their environment. As Collis (1999) points out, e-learning ' is an example of a learning intervention involving computer technology and as such its impact will be influenced by culture-related aspects'.   There are therefore multiple facets to the impact of culture in e-learning – not only in the online communication but in the teaching model, the way the technology itself is experienced and the expectations that participants have of learning and teaching.   We focus on a key pedagogical aspect in this paper – the design of the online course, in particular giving two examples of unexpected outcomes of computer mediated communication arising from online activities that we believe were significant in promoting intercultural e-learning.

An online course design for intercultural e-learning

The online course aimed to be 'intercultural' by enabling HE practitioners from the UK and China to explore differences and similarities in their understanding of e-learning pedagogy and practice, promoting intercultural exchange and as a result of this to develop new shared knowledge about e-learning.   The design of the course was negotiated and implemented by an intercultural (UK/China) teaching team. Our aim was to achieve an intercultural e-learning design that was hybrid – namely that it drew on pedagogic ideas and practices from both the UK and China. This is discussed more fully by McConnell, Banks & Lally (2007) elsewhere. Our learning design approach can be summarized as drawing on social-constructivist processes from the UK and instructional design principles relating to content and learning outcomes from China. The course design was based on the development of an online learning community that negotiates, communicates and collaborates to complete course activities to build a shared community of practice.   This process enables participants to connect new ideas and concepts to things they already know and relate this new knowledge to their own professional contexts. The tutors function as facilitators, inspirators and validators and the technology serves as a communicative and collaborative infrastructure. We believed that the intercultural context of the online course and its participants would stimulate meaningful interactions between participants that would lead to a sharing and exchange about e-learning theory and practice in different cultural contexts.   These ideas of situated practice (eg Brown et al, 1999) and group learning through a community of practice (eg Lave & Wenger, 1991) are Western ideas that

were new to the Chinese but that was the reason they wanted to try them out in practice.   The online course had 3 phases – (1) building a learning community, (2) exploring conceptions of e-learning leading to a group product, (3) reviewing and sharing group products.   These 3 phases were preceded by an induction phase that helped participants to familiarize themselves with Moodle, to practice online communication and to meet each other.   We paid particular attention to intercultural learning support: the e-tutoring team had 4 Chinese tutors and 2 UK tutors, some of the course content was translated into Chinese, we provided background information about each country, there was a language support forum, and the Chinese e-tutors provided additional language support through e-mail.

The course was advertised through higher education mailing lists and, interestingly, was quickly over-subscribed.   There were 44 participants on the course (22 from the UK and 22 from China) and 6 e-tutors (3 from the UK and 3 from China).   All worked in higher education in a variety of teaching and support roles.   21 participants subsequently submitted e-portfolios for assessment, and 16 participants returned evaluation questionnaires.   This data shows that there were many successful learning outcomes for participants.   The course archive bears this out - there was considerable evidence of significant intercultural exchange among participants.. However, this was not consistent nor continuous – there were times when it happened and times when it didn't.   Certain phases and activities were more successful than others, and there were periods when lack of participation and on-line 'silence' undermined the achievement of activities and the motivation of participants. Some of the participants felt that, though they individually benefited from the online course, it did not fully achieve its aims of intercultural exchange. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this is partly to do with the tensions of different expectations of tutors and participants because of their cultural backgrounds and partly to do with embedding intercultural competence and exchange as a central feature of online activities.

The importance of socialization for discussing cultural differences

The socialization and relationship building phases of the online course were very successful. All participants seemed to buy in to the idea of an online learning community and readily exchanged personal information and insights. It gave a dynamic atmosphere to the course. This continued into a particular task related to the idea of professional exchange, where participants completed a template about their professional knowledge of e-learning which continued through the process of paired exchange. However, some of the richest exchanges occurred apparently spontaneously, unrelated to tasks.   This example occurs in the social café space, and the thread was started by one of the e-tutors inviting others to have a cup of tea

> Would anyone like a cup of tea? (thread title)
> [UK tutor A] The café is open. I hope you can find a table and someone will be along to
> take your virtual order. The first tea is free as part of our welcome service too. The food
> includes both Chinese and UK food and snacks. Gambei.
>
> [Chinese participant A] That's a great idea. My choice is a table that is covered blue lattice
> and close the window. I want a cup of tea only. Although the food may taste good I can't
> order any food now. Because of the lateness of the hour in Beijing I worry about eating too
> much food will become fat.

After a sequence of 8 message exchanges about choices of refreshment, the discussion became more serious with this observation from a UK participant about differences between UK and Chinese contributors with this self-deprecatory posting:

> [UK participant A] ………I am noticing how often others (AND ME) are going to critical
> questions or comments (my first posting was a complaint!!)…..and that this seems to be
> different between the British and the Chinese contributors (maybe not an actual different
> experience but a different level and frequency of making a critical comment). Or perhaps I
> am imagining that.

A UK participant responded in a trenchant manner.

> [UK participant B] ……..At the risk of provoking Chinese ridicule the argument is presented like this. A Chinese student will not admit that they don't understand because that would imply either that they are stupid (loss of self face) or that their teacher was incompetent (loss of other face). I do apologise if I have given any offence with this, but I think we have to risk offending each other if we are to promote deep understanding. I would be really interested in two things from any of our Chinese colleagues or Brits who understand these things. The first is, does that – possibly rather crude – explanation have any validity? And if not, what would be a better explanation. The second, is whether there is a comparable Chinese explanation of British behaviour?

This response perhaps had the effect of intensifying cultural differences and two Chinese tutors responded with acknowledgement of insights about the nature of Chinese contributions:

> [Chinese tutor A]……..I understand what you said very well and that's what I've noticed in the forums too – actually I've posted a message about it in the induction module. Chinese participants have not been so critical as British participants do, perhaps both for language and cultural reasons. What you've noticed is interesting and is one of those issues that we'll fine perhaps more in this course. I am expecting to explore real problems I met in my experience in online course development and tutoring. I've learned that people from two cultures have different understanding of so many concepts and each other's feelings, what are called literal meanings and implied meanings in linguistics. So what I've learned in general is to be sensitive to cultural issues, to respect each other's cultures, and to learn more about the other culture in order to be more understanding.

> [Chinese tutor B] ……I find UK participants are very active and many ideas are critical and constructive. For Chinese ones, at the beginning we pay more attention to social relationship. We seem much gentle and polite and have not critical ideas. I am sure later with the course going on and the influence by you, the Chinese participants will express their ideas openly and freely.

> [Chinese tutor B]…….the British friends would like to directly speak out or complain about the problem. For the Chinese friends, as I have the similar feeling we don't do it in that way, because if we do so, people will think I am very stupid and in fact it is a very easy problem. In that case I will feel that I lose the face. So I agree with your ideas. And it is very necessary that 'we have to risk offending each other if we are to promote deep understanding'. It is very interesting, for the British friends, you just speak out, do you have anmy other feeling about it? Have you thought of the result or effect if you speak out the problem?

Another UK participant responded to UK participant B in a very reflective way, perhaps indirectly cautioning the UK participant B about cultural stereotyping.

> [UK participant C]…..I agree with what you said, but I also think we need to be cautious of categorizing cultural differences in such a crude manner. Maybe it is the explanation of culture that needs to be critically evaluated more carefully, or better still, development of the explanation for cultural similarities rather than differences. Or even a method for explaining WHY do we have such differences or similarities might be very useful for social understanding and advancement. It might be convenient to categorise cultural traits within slots and label societies as such, but we can also risk the danger of creating overly structuralist conceptions of our reality that are rigid and can even result in culture-phobic outcomes. We can even create cultural differences through assumption and widespread belief. A well intentioned cause can lead to a sour end.

In this example, the socially mediated process of communication begun by an e-tutor inviting others 'to have a cup of tea' has led to a rich exchange about cultural differences in online communication, though it is clear that styles of communication are significant in either enhancing or adversely affecting

intercultural understanding. We contrast this with some of the problematic issues encountered about use of content. Content introducing theory and requiring critical reflection seemed to direct the focus of communication away from experiential insights and to 'formalise' communication that proved inhibiting to both UK and Chinese participants. Online academic readings seemed to lead to a sense of pedagogic 'dislocation' that created additional uncertainties for participants when they were required to publicly respond to them.   In this example, the topic of culture has become a motive for learner engagement through social processes that are less constrained than responding to content.   This suggests that in an intercultural context, online content is less important than online knowledge construction developed through mediated social process that emphasises the building of trust and relationships.

Use of a mindmap tool to transcend communication and language issues

Some of the richest dialogic sequences in the online course arose in response to the use of visual resources. For example, the tutors collectively developed a learning community 'map' using a Mind Map tool. The use of this as a visual learning tool seemed to transcend the difficulty of reading about conceptual ideas in textual form and stimulated many responses. This is clearly an important requirement for intercultural learning design.
This sequence began with Chinese tutor A starting a new discussion thread with the topic **A picture to help us decide on the project theme.** The aim of this was to bring together the ideas that the online group had previously discussed to make a decision about their group topic:

> [Chinese tutor A]: Hi, here I'm attaching a picture synthesizing the interesting points participants have discussed in our course forums. Would you like to look at it? I'm sure it can help us decided on a project topic for our group. What's your idea of the topic for us?
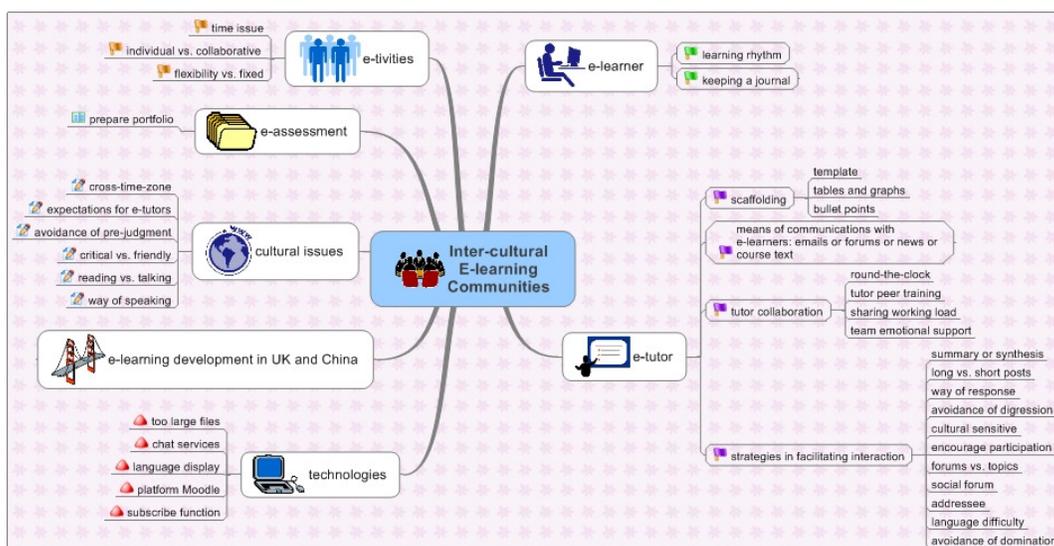
This had an impact on the group and there were 5 positive responses with comments on the diagram:

> [UK participant A]: Wow – that's some diagram! You've captured ideas from other groups too, haven't you? Very helpful. The bit that looks a bit empty to me is the e-learner branch of the diagram. I am interested in how to help learners learn in this new way – e-learner training/e-learner development, I suppose is what you'd call it.

A number of Chinese and UK participants responded to this, contributing insights and questions from their own practice. In this message a Chinese participant very politely directs the discussion onto more practical issues related to skills:

[Chinese participant A]: Hello，I'm awfully sorry for being absent from our forum for a long time. Very glad you have done so much for our elearning course. Just now I have shared all of your good ideas and suggestions and wonderful diagram. About the diagram I agreed with [C] very much, and I also think it looked a bit empty on the e-learner branch of the diagram. Here what we are interested in is how help learners learn with the help of the new way, such as - e-learner training/e-learner development.
As far as I understand the elearning courses mainly serves the adult students who can not afford much time to study on a campus and there is no need to study on a campus. What they want is to get knowledge directly and easily online. Anyhow nowadays most of the elearning courses are abstract, dull and uninteresting. The reason that I come here is to explore an effective way that how can we made our elearning courses interesting and absorbed. Can we have good ways to tell students how to make good use of the online resources to study. Can we invent a good methodology and practical program to help them achieve their purposes.
Also I am very interested in how can we explore some good elearning skills to help ourselves and our students both nationally and internationally.
Here maybe I am very rude and impolite can we take a course for example to discuss how to organize the elearning and what concerned resources about the course should we offer to the students online and in order to study the course well how should we teachers conduct the course online.

A UK participant acknowledges her point but responds by giving a rationale for the importance of e-learning theory:

[UK participant B]: Hi, I found your post quite interesting. In fact you are right that some courses are really abstract and that we should be looking at practical ways for developing effective learning in the virtual world. In my opinion your NOT being rude at all. As another participant and colleague in this VLE i was glad to find that constructive opposition of ideas. However, I'd also like to add though that abstract thinking might be a way at looking at and evaluating our experience in elearning, especially that we all seem to have some form of professional experience in adult education. From that we can extract models, re-model these models and then re-evaluate their effectiveness in practical life.
On the other hand, I think we also need to think very deeply about elearning and maybe even challenge our own and even others existing ideas concerning elearning and education in general. This requires a great deal of abstract thinking. What do you think?

Another Chinese participant then posts her own framework summary of the ideas discussed, using the MindMap tool:

> [Chinese participant B]: Now this is the framework I have drafted days ago,perhaps we can absorb all the virtues of two frameworks and make it more perfect.
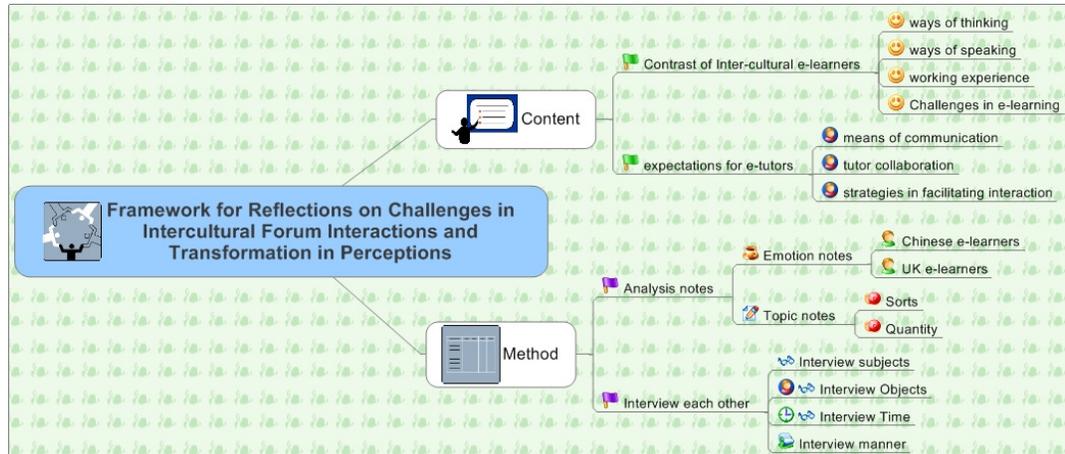
After further negotiation, this then became the topic of the group assignment that was ultimately produced. The use of the concept mapping tool helped the process of group decision-making because it helped to visualise the conceptual understandings of both the tutor and participants, summarising effectively variations in conceptual understandings. This had a beneficial impact on what the group were able to achieve.

Conclusions

The course design and computer mediated examples presented here suggest that it is possible for participants from different cultures to achieve significant learning outcomes through the process of computer mediated communication and collaboration about very specific issues and understandings related to their individual professional practice of e-learning. This means that cultural difference of learners in itself becomes an affordance that can and should be used in the learning design. The data shows that there are styles of computer mediated communication that can either enhance or adversely affect intercultural understanding, although further analysis of the data is needed to understand these. It shows that participating in intercultural e-learning, whether as a teacher or a learner, is also a source of tension because of the varied expectations of learners and teachers. Learner differences relating to educational background, institutional role and personal interests are also part of the cultural frame of reference for negotiating differences. As Hewling (2006) identifies, the focus in intercultural communication is on 'interaction among participants identifying simultaneously with multiple cultural frames of reference'.

Our main conclusion is that online course design has an important impact on the outcomes of intercultural e-learning because it is a key factor that drives the way intercultural e-learning is understood, impacts on the practice of computer-mediated communication and collaboration and the way participants can experience an online course as 'intercultural'. We believe that a course design that builds an on a learning community model - to foster social relationships and building of trust and lead to the sharing of ideas, collaboration and production and the appreciation of difference - is a key requirement for intercultural e-learning. McLoughlin (2001) calls for a holistic perspective in the design of culturally inclusive e-learning that builds on pedagogy, task and assessment. This was our approach, but with hindsight we would change a number of aspects of the course – we would reduce the workload, we would change the tasks and reduce the amount of academic content and we would put even more emphasis on building social relationships, creating a stronger link between social presence and learner support. The

importance of this has been discussed by Kehrwald (2007). We also highlight the importance of visual learning in this context and the use of visual tools such as Mindmap.

To conclude, as a consequence of this experience and emerging insights from the research data, we believe that cultural difference itself can stimulate meaningful interactions between learners that lead to rich knowledge-building – but embedding cultural factors into the design of an online course is challenging to achieve in practice. As McNaught and Vogel acknowledge (2004), it means 'stretching the comfort zone', as all involved in e-learning – designers, tutors and learners will need to work in different and more collaborative ways to achieve interculturality. There is a global need for good practice in intercultural e-learning.

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