Equipping Educators Engaging in Cross-cultural & Cross-media Digital Communication with an Essential Toolset

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Abstract: Many educators have become accustomed, consciously or unconsciously, to teaching with one unchanging style in the conviction that it is the responsibility of the students to adapt to them and to their cultural framework. This has never made for the best approach to education and in the highly globalized world of modern tertiary education it fails basic standards of competency and professionalism for a number of key reasons. In helping educators working online become better teachers we need to be encouraging in them an awareness of the need to be constantly be adding to their toolbox and an understanding of how they can do this. We must help them acquire and learn to a comprehensive range of tools. These tools are, in the first instance, neither items of technology nor elements of mastery over technology, necessary though these things are. Rather, the tools are conceptual and cognitive in nature and are concerned with aspects of perception, analysis and communication and their application to teaching in a culturally plural and technologically hybridized environment. These tools help educators understand students from different cultural background or settings and respond to them in ways that maximize the effectiveness of the teaching-learning exchange.

Overview:

This paper springs from a project intended to help educators working in culturally diverse environments and employing modern digital and on-line educational media to better understand the principles of good communication and effective teaching and learning in the world in which they work.

It begins by raising awareness of the key issues of the need for increased sensitivity and flexibility and the necessity of genuinely two-way adaptation by both educator and student. The project that this paper relates to is a professional development module that has been developed specifically to equip tertiary educators to better help overseas students but is constructed around general principles of value to students of all nationalities and cultural backgrounds, including the many Australian students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Particular attention is given here to on-line and other forms of digitized teaching media and learning environments.

Building awareness of cultural differences

As the old adage has it: "to a man with a hammer in his hand everything is a nail." Many educators have become accustomed, consciously or unconsciously, to teaching with one unchanging style in the conviction that it is the responsibility of the students to adapt to them and to their cultural framework. This has never made for the best approach to education and in the highly globalized world of modern tertiary education it fails basic standards of competency and professionalism for a number of key reasons.

Firstly, in western English-speaking nations such as Australia, Great Britain and the United States of America local students from cultural backgrounds very different to that of the majority their lecturers represent a significant proportion of the student body.

Secondly, western universities are increasingly dependent upon fee-paying overseas students to meet the staff wage bill and these students have every right to expect high professional standards in the teaching-learning experience that many families have sacrificed so much to afford.

Thirdly professionalism and intellectual integrity call for modern educators to make the most of the globalized environment that they find themselves working in today.

Fourthly and finally, online and digitized teaching and learning offers much but also demands much and it is imperative that technical sophistication is matched by professional sophistication.

The four elements of this section examine cross-cultural communication, teaching and learning, and highlights the need for flexibility, sensitivity and variety.

Theoretical considerations

Ting-Toomey (1999) argues that ignorance of a different culture's norms and rules can produce unintentional clashes between us and the people of that culture. "Culture", Ting-Toomey asserts, is an elatic, dynamic concept that takes on different shades of meaning – depending on one's perspective. The word "communication" is also fluid and subject to different interpretations. While both culture and communication reciprocally influence one another, it is essential to distinguish the characteristics of the two concepts for the purpose of understanding the complex relationship between them.

The first question that we need to ask is: what is culture? At first this question appears too simple to be worth spending time on. "Culture", however, is an enigma, and defining what we mean by the word is no simple matter. It contains both concrete and abstract components. It is also a multifaceted phenomenon. Culture is like an iceberg (Ting-Toomey, 1999), the deeper layers eg. Traditions, beliefs and values, are generally hidden

from our view; we only see and hear the uppermost layers of cultural artifacts eg. Fashion, trends etc. and of verbal and non-verbal symbols. For example in Chinese culture/s, the essence of being a "worthwhile" person revolves around the individual respecting his or her parents at all times and being sensitive to the needs of the family. Family comes first. If we live within the same cultural group, we speak the same language or dialect, share similar nonverbal rhythms and we can decode each other's nonverbal mood with considerable accuracy. The need to be seen as sharing something similar propels us to identify with salient membership groups and involves general processes of group-based inclusion. With people from different membership groups, however, we constantly have to perform guessing games and often experience awkwardness during interactions. This contributes to a persistent sense of anxiety and uncertainty. For many students coming from a different cultural background it means that simply being present in an Australian classroom, virtual or not, generates a significant level of stress regardless of the course content.

Hofstede (1991) view culture as:
- *"learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes."*
- *"the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another."*

Hofstede (1991) also argues that everyone belongs simultaneously to several different kinds of groups and is variously influences by different layers of mental programming within themselves:
"a national level according to one's country (or countries for people who migrated during their lifetime);
a regional and/or ethnic and / or religious group(s);
a gender level, according to whether a person was born as a girl or as a boy;
a generation level, which separates grandparents from parents from children;
A social class level, associated with educational opportunities and with a person's occupation or profession; for those who are employed, an organizational or corporate level according to the way employees have been socialized by their work."

Hofstede (1991) identifies five independent dimensions of national culture, each rooted in a basic problem with which all societies have to cope, but on which their answers vary. He describes the dimensions are as follows (emphasis in bold added for clarity):
*"**Power distance**, which is related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality.*
***Uncertainty avoidance**, which is related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future.*
***Individualism versus collectivism**, which is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups.*
***Masculinity versus femininity**, which is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women.*
***Long-term versus short-term orientation**, which is related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present.*

Long-term orientation with respect to the concept of deferred gratification has been referred to when describing the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1905), so too a cultural commitment to hard work and education for long-term benefit represents an important characteristic of Asian cultures.

Like Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2003) drew their study sample from a business and concluded with six oppositional dimensions of culture:

Universalism	*versus*	*Particularism*
Individualism	*versus*	*Communitarians*
Specificity	*versus*	*Diffusion*
Achievement	*versus*	*Ascription*
Inner direction	*versus*	*Outer direction*
Sequential time	*versus*	*Synchronous time*

While the above cultural factors have been found as important in understanding people's attitudes and competency in general business practice (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2003), what is much less well understood is the ways in which cultural background shapes their attitudes and competency with respect to adopting and using technologies for online teaching.

Principles for Twenty-first Century educators

Twenty-first Century educators in general, and certainly those working cross-culturally and across a variety of digital media need to bear in mind the following principles:

1. *One size does not suit all.*
Different learners and student groups benefit from different approaches.

2. *My world is not (quite) your world.*
We think that we all live in the same world, understand the same things and respond similarly to similar messages but the reality is not quite so simple.

3. *Respect and the individual.*
All sound teaching and communication requires respect for the individual. This has always been true but it requires special attention when significant cultural differences exist between teacher and learner.

4. *The different stages of learning.*
Where we hope our students will be one day is probably not where they are now.

5. *The principles of sound communication .*
Educators must practice self-awareness about a.) what is said, b.) what is meant, c.) what is heard, d.) what is seen and, most importantly, e.) what is understood.
6. *Listening for feedback and trouble-shooting problems in communication.*

Educators must learn to be good listeners and to be attentive to verbal and non-verbal feed back from their students, and they must be prepared to adjust their approach to the circumstances they find themselves in.

7. The head and the heart.
What the heart feels and what the head understands are often very different. Great educators are effective in reaching both heart and head.

Cross-media communication, and teaching and learning in the digital age
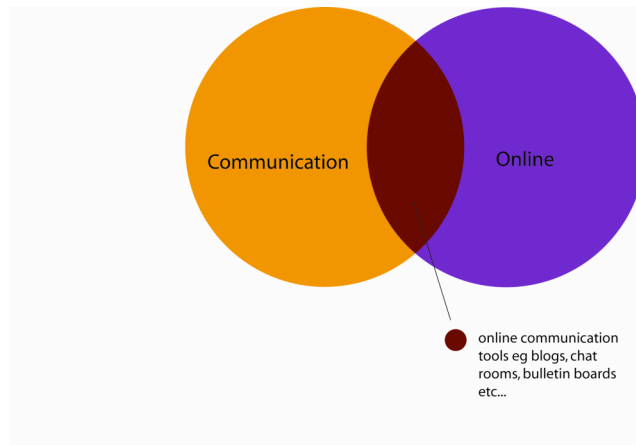
Some popular communication media being used today are blogs, wikis, bulletin board and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) communication such as that facilitated by Skype.

Each of these media has certain strengths and weakness and each does a different job well. None is completely sufficient in itself and consequently they are best used collectively in a complementary fashion. Their utility, however, is not something that can be determined in absolute terms. Rather it is socially and cultural determined. When considering how useful each of these media are in different contexts we need to consider their relevance to cross-cultural communication the types of languages used in these media, their specific characteristics as tools and the best ways to use them. In particular, we need special consideration to their orientation towards Individualism or Collectivism (IC) as cultural preferences.

Triandis (1988) asserts that the Individualism – Collectivism (IC) axis has long been generally considered "the single most important dimension of cultural difference in social behavior". It is certainly readily evident in the cross-cultural literature that this is widely seen to be one of the key axial distinctions between cultures. The concepts involved here are, at least initially, relatively simple and straight-forward.
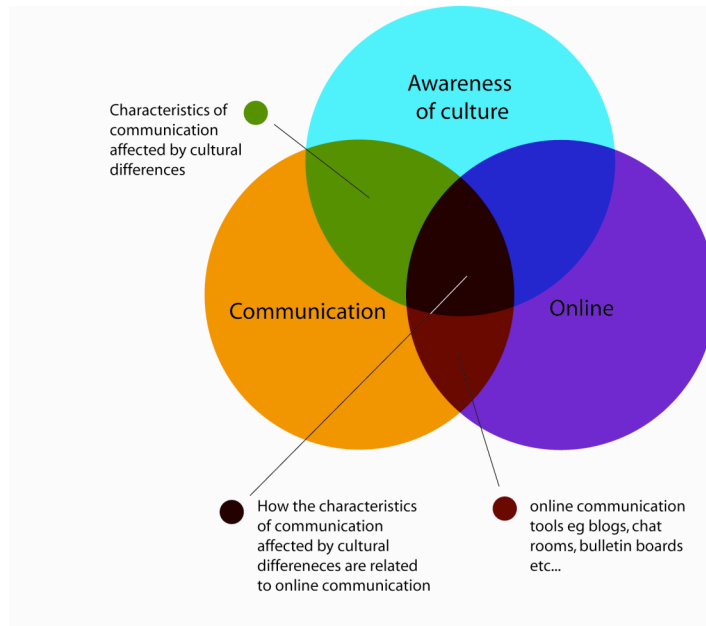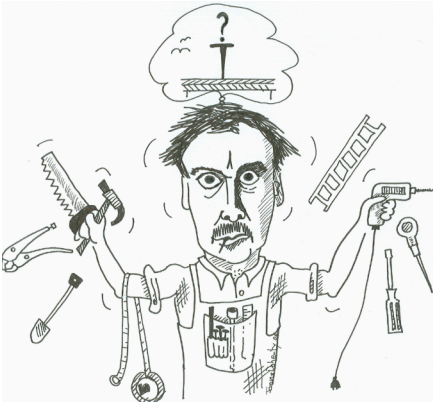
Conclusions: Rounding-out the educator's tool kit

Homo Sapiens – human beings – are sometimes described as being talking animals - animals with language. They are also sometimes described as being tool-making animals. In the post-industrial Information Age in which we live the two converge more than ever before. This is certainly true for educators whose techniques of communication are their essential tools of trade. This is especially true for educators working with digital media.

A hammer does not a toolbox make. A professional is recognized by their tools. For whilst skilled hands can do amazing things with even rudimentary implements no true artisan will satisfied with anything less than the right tool for the right job, and they will continue to experiment and explore, adding new tools to their toolbox as circumstances demand and opportunity permits. So too it must be with modern educators working in culturally and technologically diverse environments.

In helping educators become better teachers we need to be encouraging in them an awareness of the need to be constantly be adding to their toolbox and an understanding of how they can do this.

We must help them acquire and learn to a comprehensive range of tools. These tools are, in the first instance, neither items of technology nor elements of mastery over technology, necessary though these things are. Rather, the tools are conceptual and cognitive in nature and are concerned with aspects of perception, analysis and communication and their application to teaching in a culturally plural and technologically hybridized environment.   These tools help educators understand students from different cultural background or settings and respond to them in ways that maximize the effectiveness of the teaching-learning exchange.

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