

Intercultural understanding among Asian participants in a blended e-learning course

Geetha Udayangani Kulasekara
The Open University of Sri Lanka
dgkul@ou.ac.lk

Sherlyne A. Almonte-Acosta
St. Paul University, Q. C. Philippines
alshetra@yahoo.com

and

Uranchimeg Tudevtagva
Mongolian University of Science and Technology
uranchimeg@must.edu.mn

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intercultural learning experience of the participants who followed the 'eLearning development and implementation (eLDI) Asia 2011' blended online course, conducted by the university of Philippines open university in collaboration with the deutsche gesellschaft für internationale zusammenarbeit (giz) Germany.

The course consisted of a total 250 study hours (200 hours online and 50 hours of face to face) having six modules to cover almost all aspects of the e-learning course development. During the online phase learners were supported by an array of expert online tutors from Asia, under the guidance of two umbrella tutors. They facilitated learning using different kinds of interactions, viz. by the use of synchronous, asynchronous communication tools and also by the use of web 2 social networks. There were collaborative activities, individual activities and educational games to further support the learners in comprehending and constructing their knowledge.

Participants who are educational specialists and training experts were from six different countries in Asia, and had varied educational backgrounds, cultures, and languages. This paper aims at capturing the intercultural understanding that transpired in the entire e-learning process. How does intercultural understanding manifested in the online and face to face interactions between and among learners and tutors? How do participants adjust and consider the so called intercultural understanding in the varied aspects of interactions? What are the factors of intercultural understanding that were evident in the process? Through a dominant qualitative research method, the above given questions will be answered.

Introduction

Due to the unprecedented expansions in the information and communication technologies and the global mobility of people around the world, the capacity to associate with cultural diversity has become an increasingly important feature in education. A growing number of institutions are embracing e-learning as a response to the demand of lifelong learning, absorbing learners from varied geographic locations bringing together a global audience in a common learning platform. However, there has been a gap on the knowledge base of integrating intercultural understanding, knowledge, and competence among stakeholders in e-learning.

Learning in cross cultural e-learning environments, bring about additional challenges to learners as they are separated from time and space, distinct in their cultural, contextual, institutional background and also speaking a variety of languages. In adapting to such e-learning environments learners also need to develop a sense of multiculturalism, in addition to the skills related to effective communication, collaboration and social interaction that permits interaction with learners from different countries (Chen, Hsu & Caropreso, 2006). In this study, an attempt was made to capture the intercultural experiences that transpired among learners in the 'eLearning development and implementation (eLDI) Asia 2011' course, with the aim of providing an understanding of the intercultural dynamics in the e-learning teaching learning process.

Therefore, the research questions for the study are: 1. How does intercultural understanding manifested in the online and face-to-face interactions between and among learners and tutors? 2. How do participants adjust and consider the so called intercultural understanding in the varied aspects of interactions? 3. What are the factors of intercultural understanding that were evident in the process?

Theoretical correlate

Culture can be broadly defined as values, beliefs and behaviours shared by a particular group of individuals or a social group; and it is shaped by history, social, political, economic and geographic factors (Marshall, 2002). It is something that the older members of the group try to pass on to the younger members (Alder 1986), and therefore it is not inherited but learned. This indicates that we reconstruct and change our suppositions as we grow and learn, with the contact of external influences (Marshall, 2002). Hence, culture is a critical influence in all teaching and learning experiences (Chen, Hsu & Caropreso, 2006).

Culture is an integral part of life and people are naturally absorbed into it (enculturated) and sometimes therefore ethnocentric, thinking that 'our way is the best way' (Sen Gupta, 2003:43). In an intercultural encounter, these kinds of lack of cultural adjustments or predispositions may seriously challenge the success in social, workplace or academic efforts. Therefore a conscious effort must be made to overcome such predispositions.

Intercultural understanding enables people to identify the cultural diversity and step away from ethnocentrism and perceive the world differently. The need to recognize cultural differences,

intercultural awareness, competence and communication are the main factors that contribute to effective intercultural understanding (Meier, 2007). Providing opportunities for intercultural understanding, increasingly large number of world's academic institutions are now exploring the potential of multicultural education using e-learning technologies, while developing necessary knowledge and skills in various academic disciplines.

Through cross cultural educational experiences and review of literature, Bently, Tinney & Chia (2005) point out eight educational factors that affect the effectiveness of intercultural e-learning, *viz.* language, educational culture, technical infrastructure, local /global perspective, learning styles, reasoning pattern and cultural and social context. Out of all, language factor has been recognized as the central issue in e-learning especially with students who are non native English speakers (Meier, 2007) and have found that they need more time for processing in the language of instruction (Zhang & Kenny, 2010). As pointed out by Zhang & Kenny (2010), in order to meet the needs of the learners, it may be necessary for the course designers to be aware of the needs and requirements of the international learners (such as cultural, communicational, technological and instructional) to establish supportive environments for learning.

‘eLDI Asia’ e-Learning Course

The ‘eLDI Asia 2011’ course was an eight months international blended e-learning course consisted of 250 hours of training (50 hours of face-to-face workshop, 200 hours of online). The objective of the course was to enhance e-learning worldwide, specifically Southeast Asia, to promote further development and utilization of e-learning capacities and technologies which meet the specific demands in developing countries (Gervacio, 2011).

Twenty (20) participants followed the ‘eLDI Asia 2011’ course, and they were from six different Asian countries, *viz.* Philippines, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam and Jordan. They are mostly educational specialists and training experts and had varying computer skills and different knowledge and experiences on e-learning. Hence, each participant had own expectations towards this course. Communication language of the course was English and all participants were non native English speakers.

A big advantage of this course was that it had been a cross cultural blended e-learning course, which provided a new experience for all participants. There were two face to face workshops, both held in Philippines. One at the beginning was an orientation workshop, and the final one was to evaluate the participants’ final projects. The face to face workshops had been very motivating for all participants and it had been a key experience for the inter-cultural understanding between the participants.

Figure-1 gives an overview of the structure of the course and the communication tools used in the course.

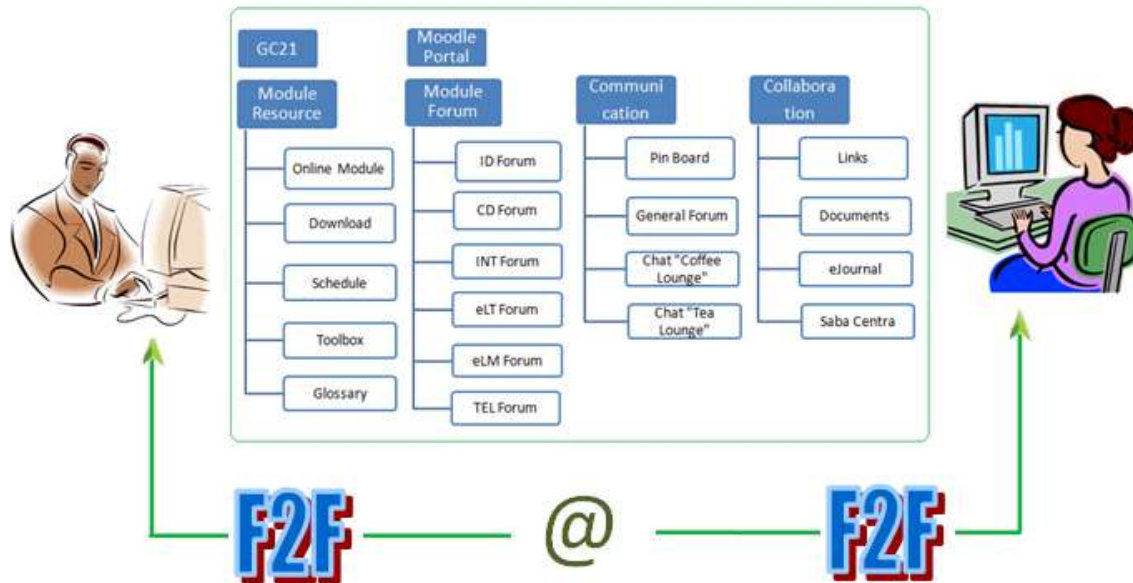


Figure 1 - Structure of the eLDI course and tools used for communication

Subsequent to the first face to face workshop, over 200 hours of learning, learners underwent the online phase of the course. The online phase consisted of six modules namely instructional design, content development, interactivity, e-learning technology, e-learning management and tutoring for e-learning communities, to cover the entire aspects of the e-learning course design and development. Module recourses were available as online resources (audio visual material) as well as downloadable/printable resources to support the learning process.

During the online phase learners were supported by an array of expert online tutors from Asia, under the guidance of two umbrella tutors. Each module was supported by a different pair of tutors. They facilitated learning using different kinds of interactions, *viz.* by the use of synchronous, asynchronous communication tools and also by the use of web 2 social networks. This helped learners to develop and improve their understanding on online and offline learning activities in all six modules. Tutors used different approaches to motivate the participants during the course of study.

Synchronous communications were mainly through chat sessions and there were three chat sessions per module: first two with the module tutors to discuss the content related matters and the third one with the main umbrella tutors to reflect on what is learned in each module. In addition to the chat sessions there were two 'Saba Centre' synchronous computer conferencing discussions with the main coordinator of the course from Germany.

Asynchronous communication was mainly through online discussions/module forums, supported by the online tutors. Those were mainly to provide support on social construction of knowledge. Learners had to post at least two posts in each module forums and had to initiate discussions as well as to reply to others postings. In addition, there were collaborative group activities such as maintaining e-journals and educational games to further support the knowledge building process

Learners were continuously assessed by assigning 'concept task' and a 'practical exercise'. Concept task was guided by a model answer given by a virtual participant called 'Mika soma'. The practical exercise was directly on the development of the individual e-learning projects. Learners were given deadlines to submit these activities and feedback were provided by module tutors to improve their work.

Learners were called for the second face to face workshop on the basis of the successful participation and completion of modules activities as pre informed to the learners at the beginning of the course. Learners had to complete the individual course projects, and final output was evaluated by the peers and the two umbrella tutors at the final face to face workshop.

Methods

A descriptive case study method was employed in this study. Perspectives of participants in learning the 'eLDI Asia 2011' blended e-learning course were understood and analyzed. Three of the participants were interviewed during the last day of the second face to face while the others were asked to write their reflection as guided with some questions via e-mail. Authors were also participants of this study, and their reflections were also included in the analysis. The incidents from the participants were analyzed using the coding schemes that guide the development of themes. The constant comparative analysis was used. The work of Ricouer (1985), Brunner (1990), and Yin (1994) helped us to understand the method of analysis and construction of meaning from the stories, reflections, and utterances of participants.

Results and Discussion

Below are the themes, developed from the interviews, reflections and experience of the authors. Ownership of the ideas was kept anonymous. Analysis should be the highlight of the vignettes.

Theme 1: Difference as a springboard to meaningful interaction

Majority of participants came from different parts of Asia. Inevitably, each carries a certain level of ethnocentrism and stereotyping among them. However, upon knowing the backgrounds and ability of their classmates, perspective was changed which has facilitated to better interaction.

"...prior to participating in the eLDI, I have this thought that people from my country are good in technology...at first I thought that having a good command of an English language is a necessary condition to be good in the language of technology. Amazingly, they are great! My exposure to the ability of my classmates from different countries is really a humbling experience....they are very good in technology...downside maybe is their ability to speak the English language...but they can somehow make themselves understood...what I considered as difficult is a piece of cake to them!" (Participant 1)

"...In our e-Journal collaborative work, I was left with two classmates who have difficulty in speaking English...I patiently e-mailed and scheduled chat with them to come up with a plan on what to write. We divided the parts of the article ...both of them came up with bulleted concepts within the assigned segment of the article . I was really surprised and asked myself...what is this? Then I realized that, they have difficulty on expressing themselves in writing as well. So I made

use of their given concept/idea and expound it in writing. I know that they have the knowledge but expressing it in English serve as a hindrance.” (Participant 5)

Apparently, people represent their country as they join an international gathering or convention. More often than not participants carry within them their own view of their country and others. Some may have a bloated notion of their country and their people as far better than others. Vignette shows that participants were not exemption nevertheless, upon knowing the abilities of their co participants, such ethnocentrism have toned down into cultural relativism. She recognizes that each participant has strength and is willing to share.

Based on the vignette, it can be inferred that the participants have undergone a great deal of interaction with her co participants. It was mentioned that “*can somehow make themselves understood*” and “*they have knowledge but....*” This means that they penetrated the web of social relationship in the e-learning process. Such interaction was facilitated by an intelligent and meaningful ways. This is even supported by the design of the teaching learning process. They may have developed the ways to reach out to their classmates for the purpose of better learning. Perhaps an adjustment was done upon realization of inefficiency and for a healthy class dynamics. As Fitzgerald (2000) explains, culture competence relates to the ability to participate in the everyday web of social relationship, even in a limited or reduced level (in McAllister, et. al., 2006). This means that one has to harness an ability to socialize within the varied culture. A realization built on the strength of others and one’s weakness could serve a point of meaningful interaction as evident in this e-learning class. Understanding one’s own could enable individual to connect, interact and thus makes ones on culture intercultural. As Fitzgerald (2000) further states, culture general competence is context bound, practice-based, awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills concept. In this way professional does not assume (or stimulate) another cultural identity, but performs in a way that indicates that professional recognizes and values cultural differences and the potential implications of culture (McAllister, et. al., 2006). Given the above context, recognition of the difference facilitated for a meaningful interaction in an e-learning class.

The realization of co participants’ ability, background as well as one’s own capability, facilitated for adjustment that leads to a meaningful international e-learning interaction.

Theme 2: Understanding before Judgment

Aside from ethnocentrism, stereotyping is often times part of one’s notion about certain country and its people. A comment was given:

“...I don’t know...whenever I encounter certain nationality, I have a preconceived notion of who they are (e.g. being rude, assertive, demanding etc.)...However, through this course, I was able to relate along with my stereotype and then I realize, I need to loosed up and be open-minded. In all our online chat, I notice that all are polite in dealing with each other. I did not notice any incident of harshness in fact we carry to out online interaction the jolly and accommodating attitude that we established during the first face to face.” (Participant 1)

“...to me I have negative thoughts about certain nationality and it somehow annoying...It gets personal sometimes...In this class I was able to work with one...the varied activities in every module facilitated for interaction with that classmate...to my surprise I was wrong and our

interaction went well....also I was always reminded on a lecture on intercultural understanding, cultural differences, and cultural sensitivity. Perhaps these ideas provided help me to get along....” (Participant 3)

Culture and even preconceived notion or biases about culture may have an impact in an international e-learning process. However, it is necessary to withhold judgment by having an objective understanding of the context and even the individual involve. As evident the participant in the e-learning managed the interaction with her co participants despite biases. According to vignette, by virtue of open mindedness, successful dealings with classmate are possible. The realization dawns on the participant as she interacts through chat and internalize the lectures in the modules. One made mentioned that application of the lecture on pertinent concepts enables her to work smoothly with her classmates. Apparently, the different activities in the module help in fostering intercultural dynamics.

“...There were also times where learners have to adjust their way of writing (online) and speaking (face to face), according to the culture of each member of the group. Whenever there were things that are not clear, the group was always open for clarification --- no one reacts violently. This is a proof that everyone gives a chance to understand where the other person is coming from. Respect for each learner’s culture and principle is also evident within the group.” (Participant 5)

“I am not good in English like some of my co participants. I really exerted effort to understand what is being discussed....when I see reactions that are quite questionable to me...I do not interpret it negatively. I ask for clarification. Oftentimes difficult! People are laughing yet I cannot follow what is the point of laughter. I do not take it against them....I find ways to understand....it’s not only the words but even the context...ahhh but it was a good experience....even in the online discussion...I really tried hard. During chat time, I can’t do anything but to patiently read the transcript that appears in my screen...I react sometimes...but late I think because others are talking other topic. I am glad if someone from the group recognizes my inputs....it happens. I feel good coz I know others out there pay attention and trying to understand me. (Participant 2).

Awareness and understanding are pivotal in the process of intercultural understanding. As the participants become aware of their biases, they strived to overcome such and develop their own coping strategies. As they become aware of their own weaknesses, they try to address it and do something. In the event that there are points of clarification, it is observed that participants exert effort of understanding the perspective of others or where are they coming from. Appreciation on the reaction by the co participants is also evident. Moreover, participants withheld judgment and act with prudence. In this way conflict is being avoided instead respect is exuded.

Holding a certain cultural balance can be personally and professionally confronting. It presents challenges on one’s self and values. Participant vacillate their understanding from their own context to the other or vice versa, thereby going beyond linguistic competence. Thus, intercultural understanding becomes possible beyond spoken and written words as participants learn to position themselves using perspectives of who they are and others. In other words, it is the dynamics of understanding their context and others as well. As Bryam & Alli (2002:15) stated, “intercultural dimension enables learner to understand how intercultural interaction takes place – how social identities are part of all social interaction – how their perception of other

people and other people's perception of them influence the success of communication, - how they can find out for themselves more about people whom they are communicating" (Belisle, 2008:2).

An effort of understanding first before making judgment was evident in the participants. They withhold judgment, biases and pre conceived notion about their co participants in order to have a successful interaction. Incidents were manifested initially during the first face to face workshop. As they get to know each other, they do not haphazardly judge their co participants instead understanding was employed. Eventually, they get to know each other and the meaningful interaction that they had with the initial face to face workshop serve as the foundation in the online modules. Thus participating in varied activities such as chats and collaborative projects became manageable. Metaphorically speaking, the seed that they sow in the first face to face grows beautifully in the online classes. What they have established in the first face to face served as a very good foundation for them to go on with the online class.

Theme 3: Developing an atmosphere of camaraderie

Participants have cited incidents of adjustments and negotiation in the process of e-learning. The following vignettes manifest the efforts and willingness of the participants to have a successful interaction:

"...in every aspect of e-learning (i.e. face to face and or online phase/sessions) I am conscious of my dealing with my classmates...I've always thought of peace and harmony, I always think that we have varied culture. What may be acceptable to my end may not be to them. In online session, chat for example, I always use emoticons so as not to be misunderstood." (Participant 4)

"...In an instance wherein I may be contradicting other opinion, I make it a point that bitterness does not stay...it happens in one face to face session...after expressing my contradicting views, I gave peace gesture to my co participants...I know that all of us are respectable in our fields and in our country...and who knows this might not be the end but the beginning of future collaboration..." (Participant3)

Peace and harmony are paramount in the intercultural interaction of participants. As much as possible they maintain friendly atmosphere. As observed, they sustain fun in the learning process both in face to face and online learning. For others the initial interaction was planned.

"At first I tried to observe how the other participants are behaving. I tried to listen to whatever they want to share. I also made a small research about their culture. Then as I was starting to interact with them, I discovered that there was nothing much different so my interaction with them became natural." (Participant 5)

"I am not good in communicating in English, I tried hard to understand and to be understood...my ability in technology enable me to belong. My classmates come to me for help and I do give my best...my best explanation...most of the time I do it for them than explaining...I understand that they need my help so I give...." (Participant 2)

"Interestingly it seems that we are on face a face to face basis when we throw jokes to each other...the punch line was given like how we did it face to face...like when we say, the yellow color, the mayor...etc...I always picture to my mind how my classmates laugh...then I find

myself laughing in front of my computer....there is a sense of connection....I think our face to face session makes us look forward to online meetings. (Participant 4)''

The effort of the participant to mingle with the group is evident. The goal indeed is to maintain good relationship. During the face to face workshop, the effort of making one's culture known to others was observed. Various performances were shown and exchange of gifts and souvenirs items that are representation of one's country was done. During class hours, participants seat next to each other and change seating arrangement each day to facilitate for getting to know each other. As part of colloquial exchange during the break, teachings of terms not only of the host country but terms from the countries of participants were done. This served as an aid for laughter, camaraderie and thus propels for intercultural understanding.

There are gestures that were manifested that convey meaning in the interaction. These include direct act of helping without necessarily speaking, various body language, and sometimes getting a translator to ease communication barrier (e.g. fellow Mongolian who can speak better). They are part of the effort to adjust with the group given the deficiency in speaking English language. It is understood that using a different language other than one's posited cognitive overload, hence, effort to communicate and to adjust in varied ways is admirable.

Adjustment in the face to face session in terms of speaking, showing respect, fostering camaraderie was also evident in the online sessions. As mentioned, they are careful on the words that they are using, for those who are not good in the English language, they strive hard to understand the transcript that appear in their screen during online, the use of emoticons so an not to be understood was done and significantly, they foster jolly atmosphere even on the online class. They utter jokes online that were based on their experience in the face to face. There is a continuity of the face to face session to the online sessions. The good impression left by the first meeting help in sustaining the online sessions.

Conclusion

Intercultural understanding is made possible through the supportive and welcoming learning environment in eLDI Asia, 2011. The perspectives of the participants show that intercultural understanding refers to the dynamics of the openness and willingness to adjust to the other beliefs, culture, backgrounds, ideas, concept of self, values, attitudes, and behavior. Such dynamics is susceptible to forms of negotiation within and among the participants in the class. Along with this dynamism is the emotive and imaginative memories brought by the first face to face session. The very experience in the first face to face sessions propels and contributes into sustaining online sessions. The dynamism of intercultural understanding is captured in the themes above, namely; Difference as the springboard of meaningful interaction, Understanding before judgment, and developing an atmosphere of camaraderie.

This paper has largely focused on the perspectives of the participants in the course. The incidents presented here may be of value in reflective practice of educators involved in international e-learning. A further study on the nature of integration of intercultural perspective into the pedagogical approach to e-learning may be pursued. The process, policies, and practices that affect the teaching and learning in the international e-learning context is also worth an endeavor.

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