1st Session Summary

Multicultural co-existence and eLearning - Wielding a double-edged sword for a happy marriage?

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Session 1 led off with two case presentations from the two extreme ends of Asia; Turkey (Professor Ali Ekrem Ozkul, Anadolu University), and Japan (Professor Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi, Tokyo Institute of Technology). Anadolu helps teach market economics in Kazakhstan, a country of Turkic lineage formerly stricken with the Soviet regime, but eager to take off as one of the prospective exporters of natural resources from Central Asia. Tokyo Tech helps Thailand and other NIEs in Southeast Asia with advanced science and technology education not readily available in the region.

Both initiatives proposed a similar hybrid solution, tactfully integrating satellite delivery, Internet service, advance print/video material (Anadolu), intensive f2f lectures (Tokyo Tech), local tutoring, and extended (twelve to fifteen weeks) learner participation involving the whole group. Both cases report careful efforts exerted in adapting to the local educational contexts, in close collaboration with the partner institutions. Their success seems to be due to the high level of commitment of every party involved, as well as the high motivation of the students.

Background

Our four panelists share the notion that the permeation of ICT invites a reorganization of social landscape, linking local to global, enabling multi-channel knowledge flow, politicizing the links between technology and business, and changing business models. The rapid growth of eLearning in the higher education arena represents one example of such reorganization.

Every innovation has its own share of both beneficial and detrimental impacts on society, and ICT is no exception. For example, in spite of the rosy buildup of the notion of a knowledge economy, efforts to narrow the ‘digital divide’ between developed and developing countries may pose a serious threat to indigenous cultures that are themselves evolving. Without enough time for creative digestion, local cultures may be exposed to industrial forces, born and raised in aggressive market economies, which are meant to help them catch up with the global ICT revolution.
Knowing all too well that economic development is a necessity in impoverished regions, we face a catch-22 bind wondering whether the quick development of social overhead capital and human resources can happen without sacrificing local heritage. Influence of electronic literacy on traditional cognition and communication style should also be taken into consideration.

Introduction of ‘fast food’ culture, coined as ‘McDonaldization’, offers another case in point. To accommodate local diet, they develop culture-specific products like the ‘fisshubaaga (fish burger).’ However, such ‘localization’ is only a piece of the larger picture; that is, the systematic implementation of a highly industrialized agribusiness and distribution network, conducive to the standardized mass production of ‘fast food’. Elements of the new lifestyle, including new job opportunities, may be welcomed by the locals, but may also come with a hidden cost, namely, the traditional diet culture, commercial customs and agricultural wisdom, at risk of being displaced by the new, highly sophisticated production system. Only recently the downside of the system, including excessive use of agrichemicals, shady meat quality, and hazardous nutritive value, has raised serious concerns about dietary security, favoring a ‘slow food’ approach, with product labeling that allows one to trace the origin of what one buys and eats.

So, this is not just a technology issue. What is being addressed is of a political, economic, and ethical nature. Moreover, it is a sustainability issue, given that the repository of indigenous wisdom, whether in written record or cultural practice, has been rapidly disappearing, a trend that may be irrevocable by the time its significance is discovered. That is why we need to employ a structural perspective, critically studying the present situation in terms of power distance and cultural imbalance.

Towards this end, Dr. Gonzalez put eLearning in perspective by delving into the process of creative learning, and Dr. Ebuchi proposed a philosophy of the Internet based on a detailed cultural analysis of globalization.

Style in technological advancement, as in language and communication, reflects the specific culture/value system that grows it. The Internet, for example, is incredibly convenient for all of us, and it is especially blissful for verbal types. Seen from a different angle, it is also unique in the sense that no other medium so thoroughly blurs the distinction between commerce and information. Few sites are purely educational, and though almost all Fortune 500 companies are said to have introduced some kind of eLearning for employee training, most do so for profit rather than as an educational service. Moreover, eLearning has been growing as a platform of business opportunity, in the context where entrepreneurship and practicality are highly valued.
Context

A Cameroon example illustrated by Dr. Ebuchi is quite instructive. Rural NGOs try to mediate between online multimedia material and illiterate locals with a view to improve livestock production. Such a pro bono endeavor championing the needs of a local community seems necessary when it comes to countering a flood of industrial forces. Intervention of this kind would be hard to achieve at a distance online; rather, it should be facilitated by on-site supporters, familiar with both the local conditions and the relevant hi-tech resources.

The Cameroon example also correlates with Dr. Gonzalez’s reference to embedded embodied cognition. Descriptions of the creative learning process in a Brazilian context illustrate the importance of a learning group committing to whole-body immersion for a marked duration of time. The multicultural background of the group called for careful facilitation efforts by staff teachers, which, in turn, helped a self-organizing process to emerge to the extent that the students ‘developed creative abilities, such as the disposition to face uncertainty and problematic situations with an open mind looking for solutions.’

A lesson to learn from the case would be that since eLearning material is only one of a number of resources available to the fully present learning community, the key to success lies in the collaborative management of those resources, allowing for the flexible accommodation of individual needs. The Cameroon example similarly stresses the relevance of on-site supporters. This line of thought implies that eLearning should be contextualized into local practice. On-site educational interaction and user feedback directed towards the content provider may also play a role in redressing the cultural imbalances of cyberspace.

Returning to the Anadolu and Tokyo Tech cases, we find both authors also emphasize the value of f2f opportunities. In addition to including discussions with the local tutor as a course requirement, Dr. Ozkul of Anadolu further points to the significance of on-site interaction by proposing that ‘if it is possible, the instructor must visit the campus where the students are located and spend a week with the students.’ Dr. Yamaguchi of Tokyo Tech similarly observes that ‘it is certain that close communication among local lecturers, teaching assistants and students improved the students’ study habits,’ and acknowledges the importance of international teamwork in project management.

It might be useful to distinguish the primary and secondary contexts. The former refers to an immediate, direct context in which people live and learn, whereas the latter refers to any of a number of external contexts, most relevant of which to
our current discussion is the one formed along the global mainstream forces steering
the ICT revolution and market economy, as seen from the periphery. Academic
research and the higher education arena have also witnessed a great impact from the
U.S. and European countries. Web contents and their accessibility, likewise, usually
take for granted their own social background. However, in light of the expanding gap
between the haves and have-nots, and the anti-globalism demonstrations, not to
mention colonial histories and the present opposition to Americanism in some Islamic
communities, that secondary context not only appears to differ from the primary, it
may even contradict and denigrate local practices of living and learning.

Those two contexts may also parallel ‘Lebenswelt’ (lived world) and
‘Wissenschaft’ (academic study) in Husserlian terms. If we view learning as taking
place within the primary context, or ‘Lebenswelt’, we need an explicit process by
which locals may conscientize their social conditions, contextualize materials usually
originating from the secondary context, then construct their own resource network,
with all these steps scaffolded and facilitated by experienced supporters. Feedback to
the secondary context, or ‘Wissenschaft’, may help keep it down-to-earth, and may
even provide a breaking opportunity for new directions of research. Making explicit
such processes merits special attention given the convergence of cultural forces
made possible by ICT.

**Transformation**

Multiculturalism admits a broad range of perspectives from educators, vendors,
manufacturers, developers, and social activists. Monoculturalism is not just fertile
ground for ethical acrimony, but it is now also an inappropriate business attitude,
which runs contrary to profitability and competency management, especially in global
companies.

Multicultural coexistence implies a movement towards mutual empowerment
and creative conflict management. As Dr. Ebuchi points out, it is ‘equitable and
cooperative co-existence of different cultural groups’ that concerns us, not an overt,
multicultural sharing of the planet, nor a simplistic assimilationism. It is our mindset
that needs modifying, hence the ‘hidden curriculum’ of our educational practice that
needs critical reflection. In that sense, the ‘conscientize - contextualize - construct’
process, mentioned earlier, should be crucial not only for Peripherals, but for Centrals
too, for the purpose of becoming empowered and creative in diversity coordination. It
is a social development issue any community has to address. Expanding awareness
for latent, elusive violence, which often sustains itself through social/personal habits,
can encourage every constituent to become more vocal and to be heard in both
personal and community spheres. These two spheres overlap because personality is
in itself multifaceted. Our ‘possible selves’, even dubbed as a ‘multiple personality order,’ are the foundation of our empathy and insight as well as the basis for growing beyond our original culture.

In this age of unprecedented human mobilization worldwide, with national borders rendered more porous, multicultural co-existence is an increasingly urgent issue even in domestic Japan. Grappling with unexpected conflict and resistance, each community has to gradually transform itself toward a more co-existent culture. It is also hoped that a growing awareness within the majority group of diversity, regarding such issues as gender, age, ability, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc., might accompany the transformative process, just as Japanese awareness of long-settled Koreans and Chinese was raised through coming face to face with ‘newcomers’ in the 80s.

Now, how about in cyberspace? Does community experience generalize into cyberspace, or vice versa? Are there resources available in cyberspace for community transformation? What’s the interface between eDemocracy and real-life democracy? These questions have to be considered before we can contemplate a prospective marriage between multicultural co-existence and eLearning.

As discussed thus far, there are a number of issues left for future examination, among which are:

- how to design the optimal combination of ICT, with special consideration for the role of eLearning embedded in the f2f learning community, depending on subject matter, learner characteristics, institutional needs, available infrastructure (both technical and managerial), available resources (both financial and educational), etc.;
- how to foster collaboration in project management, content development, interface design, pedagogy, etc.;
- how to facilitate the learning process of cultural diversity and mutual transformation, both online and offline;
- how to support the empowerment process and foster skills in creative diversity coordination among participants, both online and offline;
- how to link co-existence efforts in real-life situations and those in various media/cyberspace processes; and
- how to steer the direction of multiculturalism, based on the understanding of power distance, ethical problems, and sustainability issues.

When we stop and look around at our historical, structural context, our track record does not seem so dependable. We know too much about our miserable history. If history repeats itself, learning from history would seem to be something beyond
human capacity. Still, resignation does not help. It is our responsibility, living in the present, to pledge to future generations a better quality of life. Otherwise, they will charge us for nonfeasance or conscious neglect. Change can be painful, but it is a pain we must bear for the sake of our children.

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