Global Learning Networks (GLNs) and Their Intercultural Implications: The Role of the Education Providers

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Abstract
Increasing interactivity among people and nations, made possible by rapid developments in ICTs, have led global learning networks to become indispensable parts of our lives. These multicultural common platforms can create very effective and democratic learning environments in diverse societies having different cultural values, beliefs and perceptions. Some people can access to educational opportunities through global learning networks, which they could not otherwise in their home countries. On the other hand, these networks may be instruments of disseminating the values and discourses of a dominant culture. Moreover, teaching approaches insensitive to diverse cultures may harm local values, causing cultural degeneration.

This paper discusses that the differences among individuals and societies in indigenous cultural values, learning process, communication behaviors and the use of technology should be taken into consideration in global learning networks. Along with the individual responsibilities of constituent organizations functioning on the learning network, there should be well-built coordination and cooperation among all concerned parties such as education providers, national regulatory bodies for global learning networks to be ethically and culturally sensitive and beneficial for both learners and societies.

<Keywords> Technology, globalization, intercultural differences, global learning networks


Technology, Globalization and Emergence of Global Learning Networks
The capacity to transmit large quantities of information quickly and cost-effectively in digital format is transforming work, organizational decision-making and education. The use of linked networks of computers — Internet- is increasing at an astonishing rate and is enabling
millions of organizations and people around the world to communicate instantly and cost-effectively with one another (Farnham, 1999:7). Developments in communication technologies, together with the post-Cold War-peace, facilitate and provide a context for processes of globalization (Dudley, 1998:22-5).

There is a strong tendency to use the term globalization as a synonym for Westernization or Americanization. Dudley (1998:22-5) asserts, “Although globalization ostensibly has cultural, political, and economical dimensions, all of the developments that contribute to globalization processes are structured by a rationality that is principally Western and principally economic.” Ben-Rafael and Sternberg (2001:9) argue globalization, among other manifestations, means that the West is becoming an ever-stronger lodestone for underprivileged populations in the rest of the world. As such, globalization is becoming a major factor in “Western societies” development into heterogeneous populations and the multiculturalization of settings.

Limiting the globalization concept to just “Americanization” or “Westernization” hinders the grasp of the problems and opportunities associated with it. Hence, some assume wider perspectives in terms of the meaning and scope of globalization. For instance, Scott (1998:122) attaches a wider meaning to the globalization concept that emphasizes the impact of global environmental changes, the threat of political and social conflicts that cannot be stopped by immigration or asylum policies or policed by superpowers, and the growth of hybrid world cultures created by global-brand culture and indigenous traditions. Similarly, Sadlak (1998:106) writes, “Globalization does not have to be seen as a downward-pointed mega-design threatening cultural diversity or insatiable globalised commercialism. It is true that it can reduce local and national sovereignty particularly in economic and financial areas. However, it can work to the advantage of social and economic development in many developing countries and disadvantaged groups in our society. It might help us understand and accept that the world continues to undergo immense transformations, and is beset by problems that can and must be deal with on a worldwide basis.”

Confluence of advancements in ICTs, cheaper communication, proliferation of computers and globalization has led the emergence of learning networks on a global scale. Harasim (1994:14-22) discusses that global learning networks (GLNs) promote the development of learning society by providing any time and any place opportunity for interaction on any subject around the world; active participation in knowledge building and information sharing; and lifelong learning. Learners today can access virtual classrooms, online work groups, learning cycles, peer networks, and online libraries mostly on the World Wide Web platform. In addition, they engage in group learning projects with peers from other regions and countries; share ideas and resources; access information on current events or historical archives; and interact with experts, interviewing scientists. Educational network applications are proliferating in universities, colleges, and distance education and training institutions as
well. Adults can take credit courses, or participate in professional development, training, informational forums, or executive seminars that are offered entirely or partially online.

GLNs are formed by various people who have different levels of income, status, education, social hierarchy, etc. This implies the existence of an exceedingly diversified society and, thus, intensive intercultural interactions. Cummings and Sayers (1997:10-3) argue that learning networks stimulate students' research skills and promote other cultural perspectives. By opening their minds to experiences from other cultures, they have become more aware of their own culture because of the contrast they experienced with another. Furthermore, learning networks provide access to information and possibilities for democratic participation. If textbooks are no longer the only source of information and if students can draw from the resources of virtually any library around the world, ensuring that students learn only what is culturally or politically appropriate may become more difficult. Harasim (1994:24-5) comments that learning networks do not eliminate domination by more vocal participants, but dominance by a few does not exclude the ability of others to have their say.

**Global Learning Networks and Their Intercultural Consequences**

The intercultural differences among people are based on basic cultural differences (e.g. concepts of time, need for personal space, tolerance for ambiguity), learning differences, verbal and nonverbal communication differences, visual communication differences, individual differences, and technology related differences (Rice, et al., 2001:193-8). O'Hair et al (1996, cited in Heiskagen, et. al. 2001:233) argues that communication is difficult to separate from culture because they are language bound. Moreover, culture influences how language is used to interpret the world. Even within a single country where people speak the same language, some cultural boundary problems may occur. Sub-cultural, co-cultural and ethnic differences can lead to major differences in how people use and interpret language and non-verbal behavior.

Some people fear that dominant languages invade their languages through the Internet. Zheng (2001:135-9) observed several forums on the Internet to examine the effect of the English language on the dilution of the Chinese language (dilution refers to the cases where a title consisting one or more English worlds, or the whole title in English is used in place of the Chinese language), and commented:

"So the government will be in a dilemma: promoting the use of English and watching the dilution of the native language. At this stage, the information exchange between China and Western countries is one way. The WWW brings new emerging words and ideas to Chinese people in seconds. People have to use them before the government issues an official translation. So in the near future, more and more people will use more and more diluted Chinese language. If the language is diluted, the culture will be next, then the people. The
Japanese language has been changed a lot in the last hundred years, so have the Japanese people. We have survived successfully during industrialization. What happens to the Chinese language during globalization?"

Hongladarom (2001:315-21) claims that the Internet will succeed in turning all cultures of the world into one monolithic culture, which he terms "cosmopolitan culture." Cosmopolitan culture is different from Western culture that is a product of more than two thousand years of continuously evolving civilization and has its own traditions, customs, belief systems, and religions. Cosmopolitan culture, on the other hand, is borne out of the need for people from different cultures to interact. Cosmopolitan culture originated first in the West because the need for finding a common ground among people on the network was first felt there; however, it does not mean that the two cultures are the same. Cosmopolitan culture is shaped by the mutual relationship between the Internet and local cultures: while the Internet is a window from where influences can be received, the content of the Internet is obviously determined by what is posted to the connected computers.

Using the Internet for communication and learning purposes does not have to mean that local cultures will lose to Western or other dominant cultures. For instance, Walls (1994:161) evaluates the balance in the intercultural relationship of any society with others and stresses the acquisition and retention of diverse alternatives for balancing dependence, independence, and interdependence among its members is one of the most important survival strategies for any society. He comments that Japan's cross-cultural relationships have usually been task-focused relationships whose purpose has been to enrich their primary domestic community relationships. The result of practicing both inner and outer modes of distinguishing-while-relating with others has often provided them with "stability" and "dynamism." The specific benefit to Japan of international exchange for domestic enrichment (writing, watercolor painting, digital watches) may be formulated as "import, adopt, domesticate, and improve." By this formulation, they have not become less Japanese, but have become more effectively Japanese.

GLNs have also potential to make intercultural communication easier. Most networks are mediated by text-based messaging and the computer, which offers important benefits for establishing meaningful and effective communication. In the network, status, power, and prestige are communicated neither contextually (e.g. the way meeting rooms and clothes communicate) nor dynamically (e.g. the way facial paralinguistic behavior communicate). Communication in the network is "blind" to hierarchy in social relationships (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire, 1991, cited in Harasim, 1994:26). Charisma, status, and other physical cues associated with appearance and presentation have less influence because they cannot be easily communicated electronically. Text-based messaging helps people those who may not have a "voice" in face-to-face situations due to discrimination based on cues associated with gender, ethnicity, race, age, socioeconomic status, or physical appearance (Harasim, 1994:26).
Learning Network Related Roles of Governing Bodies

While GLNs represent enormous opportunities to provide intercultural, democratic common platform for learners, they become harmful when learners are passive receivers of certain values and discourses exported by the sender. Goldsmith (1993) writes “There is no better way of destroying a society than by undermining its education system by destroying cultural patterns through the educative process.” Chiefly because of advancements of ICTs and permeable national borders, web based teaching programs have gained popularity beyond the national borders. There are thousands of different kinds of degree, certificate or credit courses offered by various organizations via the Web, and anyone can enroll in any program through the Internet as long as they pay for the fees. In the absence of worldwide quality assurance standards, accountability requirements, authenticity mechanisms, and coordination and collaboration among countries, many people may be exposed to one-sided cultural dissemination. Dhanarajan (2001:65) discusses the existence of a mismatch between the global educational market and the local curriculum. Through the few examples, he claims that the curriculum in the host country has not kept pace with the needs of global learners. Curricula design is mostly responsive to local needs, and distant learners suffer serious disadvantages. He comments that there is also the danger of creating new forms of imperialism, with one or two countries dominating large parts of the educational market with their view and interpretation of knowledge and information.

There are enormous economic, political and competitive pressures at work in the internationalization of education and it is important to ensure that these do not lead to cultural and educational imperialism (Hanna and Latchem, 2002:125). Policymakers may fear losing control over education through GLNs. In terms of international education, to some degree, the opposite of their idea may be true. In traditional in-class education settings, local governments have almost no authority or control over educational institutions abroad with regard to the content of the courses their citizens take. Even though there may be an accreditation mechanism in effect, it is mostly related to the curriculum, and it cannot assure local governments of the content of the courses. On the contrary, today governments, as long as they have the supervision mechanisms, may have more power to interfere with the content of the online courses provided by institutions outside the national borders to ensure that GLNs are not disseminators of one-sided dominant cultures. However, it should be noted that online courses are just parts of GLNs; synchronous and asynchronous conferences, e-mail, chat rooms, and discussion boards are other means of communication in which ideas are easily exchanged in GLNs.

Governments should be principally responsible for providing coordination among related parties (i.e. education and culture related government agencies, foreign and local education providers) with regard to taking necessary measures to get the full benefits of multicultural learning networks while avoiding their negative influences. Furthermore, governments
should eliminate the barriers to the free circulation of ideas, information and knowledge across the learning networks (e.g. investment in network infrastructure).

**Learning Network Related Roles of Education Providers**

Sadlak (1998:107) discusses that society can expect that universities will try to reflect on how globalization affects our society and its institutions because universities are one of those places conducive to the development and gestation of theories, ideas, and innovations. Primarily through critical examination, they are enhancing our individual and collective ability for selection and application of ideas in all spheres of social, cultural, technical and economic activity.

GLNs can reach learners directly (e.g. virtual universities, global multinational universities) or through partnerships with one or more national education providers (e.g. strategic alliances). National education providers can play an important role in providing effective collaboration and coordination among the education institutions on the GLNs to guarantee learners benefit intercultural learning networks to a possible extent. National education providers should ensure that foreign education providers realize intercultural differences, cultural sensitivity, and the need for a good match between foreign offerings and local needs. Moreover, quality and authenticity of the learning material should be emphasized.

- There are both cultural and individual differences that create obstacles to learning efficiency. A culture's general values, learning expectations, and verbal, nonverbal, and visual communication rules plus technology attitudes and access, all influence the ways in

![Figure 1. Personal Learning Biases](image)

*Adapted from Rice, et al., (2001:192)*
which members of the culture interpret instructions (Reeves, 1997:27-30). Figure 1 exhibits “personal learning biases” as an intersection of cultural and individual differences among people. Rice, et al. (2001: 192) assert that all instruction must pass through this bias filter as it is processed by the brain. Instruction can create obstacles when it violates basic cultural and individual expectations. They suggest using culturally diverse teams and following good design practices to effectively deal with cultural and individual differences (Rice, et al., 2001: 198-9).

· Cultural sensitivity, however, is not merely awareness of cultural differences. It is a perspective, an attitude that acknowledges and appreciates cultural diversity and accepts the fact that norms, roles, rules, values, attitudes, and expectations vary across cultures (Casse, 1981).

· Providing examples and cases have been among pedagogically sound methods for better teaching. Yet, instructional materials must be customized or localized in order to facilitate learning. Keniston (2001:284) argues localization involves more than simple translation. Scrolling patterns, character set, dates, and icons must be adapted to the new language and the culture in which it is spoken.

Conclusion

Even though people around the world learn from each other by establishing intercultural relationship for a long time, rapid and unprecedented advancements in ICTs and globalization have accelerated and enhanced this learning process, and have led the emergence of GLNs, based mostly on the Internet and WWW. GLNs offer culturally rich and highly diversified learning environments to facilitate better learning and know more about realities of the world. Yet, GLNs have the potential of becoming disseminators of one-sided cultural, social, economic discourses that are disrespectful to intercultural differences among societies if there are no appropriate mechanisms to oversee them. Governments and national education providers have the principal responsibility to assure that cultural values and differences are taken into account by foreign education providers during the learning and interaction processes among participants. Through different mechanisms, national education providers should ensure that foreign education providers realize intercultural differences, cultural sensitivity, and the need for a good match between foreign offerings and local needs. Moreover, quality and authenticity of the learning material should be emphasized.

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