

# Globalisation and the Cultural Impact on Distance Education

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## 1. Introduction

The role of a distance educator in today's quest for the delivery of knowledge to a global community must begin with the question - "What do I need to consider about my own culture before I embark on the delivery of education to a culture that predicably will be different to my own?"

With the delivery of distance (or flexible) learning in today's society the changing roles of both the teacher and the learner need to be seriously considered. This is particularly relevant with the use of new technologies to deliver courses in locations with entirely different cultural and academic traditions. International education of this kind currently faces challenges in facilitating cross-cultural learning. Some of the challenges we face could be due to persistent problems of limited communications technologies, lack of teacher training, inadequate competence at university administration and general cultural differences such as acceptable level of student support. Global changes call for the development of new pedagogues with new communication technologies in ways which are sensitive to issues of cultural diversity.

Education by distance faces many challenges as we are all aware, these are all well documented [1]. We all know that the feelings of isolation, time management, compatibility of technology are some of the issues that need to be carefully thought about. When one contemplates the extra hurdles of dealing with a country that has a different language and a different culture then the considerations of delivering education needs to be viewed with a more in depth perspective. Are we as educators able to consider these differences whilst sitting inside our own culture?

Aalborg University felt that it was time to step outside of their very successful national program [2] and test what barriers and success it encountered with their program on an international level.

This paper, in a summative fashion, reflects on the cultural impact of 'tried and true' successful distance education teaching modalities used at Aalborg University in their distance education program, in an Australian setting.

## 2. Method

The modalities that are used by an Australian Masters of Information Technology - Health Informatics program that are compared with a cultural view are:

- Computer mediated communication (CMC)

- Residential gatherings
- The provision of coursework materials
- Verbal communication

Within each modality a number of key intents are identified and the main outcomes are assessed from the distance student's point of view.

### 3. Results

The result of the assessment is shown in the table below.

<b>CULTURAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT</b>		
<b>Modality</b>	<b>Intent (Denmark)</b>	<b>Outcome (Australia)</b>
CMC	Conference system as a backbone for communication between students and teachers	Technically the product chosen worked well, it was easy to install and quite user friendly
	Successful group discussion and supervisor communication to minimise the feeling of isolation and to enable collaboration between students and supervisors	Due to the lack of a common language, an in depth communication about professional issues was almost impossible. Spontaneous communication difficult This caused the feeling of isolation.
Residential gatherings	Face to face contact – student to student and student to supervisor	Language proved to be quite a barrier for real participation on behalf of the students, however the supervisors were most helpful
	Delivery of lectures as an introduction to subjects	The lecturers were uncomfortable with the delivery of their lecture material in English.
	Research project discussion with the forming of groups of students for project work	The students were not sufficiently prepared for professional discussions in another language. The feeling of distance and, the difference between the countries healthcare made the challenge of working together on a research project unmanageable.
Coursework	The necessary provision of reference material and text books for the course	A number of books were in Danish, therefore a comparable English text needed to be found. Often reference material that is easy to obtain in one country is difficult to find in another  Some textbooks when translated to English had a loss of meaning and flow.  Examples of Healthcare need to move outside a National example and have more of a global application.
Verbal communication	Synchronous communication Reduce isolation Personal contact Interaction and guidance when needed.	Heightened isolation - time zones are awkward. Different calendars - eg: summer/winter when one hemisphere is on summer vacation the other is in winter and working!!

### 4. Discussion

A program in health informatics can be very successful within one nation, and achieve good results within neighboring countries. But when the program is diffused to

more distant countries unforeseen problems may occur. The situation is very similar to the transfer of IT systems, where one very well functioning system can prove to be of limited or no value to organizations in even near by countries.

In the Babel project [3] cultural preferences in development and implementation of health informatics systems have been investigated and a model for handling cultural diversity has been developed [4]. Given the definition of culture as used in the Babel project and defined as *the acquired preference in problem solving*, then problem solving could be understood in a very broad sense, which includes learning situations. As culture is defined as something which is acquired, it could magnify the implications in a learning situation and hence be very complex to deal with in educational programs. However just to be aware of the implications would be an important factor in the implementation of distance learning programs.

The traditional difference between the teacher and the student should be re examined in the light of cross cultural exchange, modalities should be examined to make sure that they are applicable, manageable or learnable in a different cultural environment.

## 5. Conclusion

Tested and successful modalities within a national environment that have very positive outcomes for distance education revealed the potential to have a less of a positive effect when delivered to an international student.

Cultural exchange is difficult for both the teacher and the student. The teachers/supervisors need to carefully consider as many issues as possible. A visit to the participating country could make this task easier for both the student and the teacher, or could, on the other hand, exacerbate the problems encountered.

Supervisors need to be responsible for facilitation between the cultures, and the administration and the management within the organisation need to support the faculty in acquiring the competence in international and cross cultural teaching.

Students need to understand the possibilities of cultural impact and consider what ramifications this could lead to before they make a commitment to the program. They should also understand that undertaking international distance education programs where there is likely to be a cultural difference, requires a high level of dedication. The student should have the opportunity to make an informed decision when participating in cross cultural distance education.

Many questions need to be asked - Is it possible for distance educations and students to address these issues when their own culture could bias the decision? Do cultural differences make a real impact on learning outcomes? How could cultural differences enhance the learning experience? It is useful to consider the above questions and many others when addressing the delivery of distance education across differing cultural platforms.

## References

- [1] <http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~mcisaac/disted/final98/finalam.html>
- [2] Christian Nøhr, Ann Bygholm, Ole Hejlesen: "Strategic Planning of the Master Programme in Health Informatics at Aalborg University: Targeting and updating the Programme to Meet Explicit Customer Needs", International Journal of Medical Informatics, vol. 50, no. 1-3, 207-213, 1998.
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