Towards a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Online Teaching: An Irish Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative interview study is to explore the extent to which faculty in one Irish higher education institution consider the cultural nature of what they include in the design and delivery of online courses. As the number of online courses increases nationally and internationally, there is a need to consider the diverse background of the students that faculty will meet and work with. However, from the literature examined it seems that the focus is primarily on identifying suitable pedagogical approaches and technology, rather than the cultural dynamics amongst participants in online programmes. In this study, it emerged that though faculty are aware of diverse learning needs of their students, culture was not considered either in the design or delivery phases of their courses. Recommendations for how to address this are included and intended to provide some assistance for those working as or with faculty teaching online.

Keywords: globalisation, culturally responsive pedagogy, online teaching

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1. Introduction

The number of online courses has increased considerably in recent years, particularly in the United States (US), and higher education institutes consider the provision of online learning opportunities as key to their long term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Within the Irish context, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published a policy document in 2012 focusing on increasing the provision of part-time and flexible education. Online delivery was integral to the successful implementation of this strategy (HEA, 2012) and a number of higher education institutes began the process of delivering blended and/or online education as a result of this government-funded initiative (HEA, 2015). However, while institutes often focus on identifying suitable technologies and pedagogical approaches, there is also scope for discussing the role of online teaching in the context of globalisation and its impact on education. Yang (2003) highlights the dangers associated with the globalisation of higher education, in particular the view of education as a product which should respond to the needs of the marketplace, and the "relentless imposition of Western values" (p.282). Bolanle & Agnello (2008) also point to the tensions that exist when "one-way assimilation and accommodation" (p. 75) of educational practices is assumed.

The need for faculty to consider the diverse, intercultural backgrounds of the students they will meet (Rutherford & Kerr, 2008) in online courses is also discussed. The absence of such considerations may result in what Gorski (2008, p. 524) refers to as a "well-intentioned, colonizing practice", with educators subconsciously promoting a model of education, based on their own culture and values.

For the purpose of this study, the following definition of culture was considered useful:

> The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways (Banks et al., 1989, p.8).

The focus here is on a Western Anglophone approach, one which favours “independence, low power-distance, acceptance of risk and low context” (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009, p. 6). Online discussions and collaborative problem-solving in English are key features of this model, which may often be at odds with local cultures and contexts. Faculty should therefore consider “the specifically cultural nature of [their] online pedagogies and their relation to the discourses of cultural difference” (ibid, p. 175).

2. Purpose of the Study

An examination of the literature relating to online teaching shows that few studies focus on the extent to which faculty consider the cultural nature of what and how they teach online. This small-scale study seeks to add to the literature on culturally responsive online teaching and is intended to inform academic developers and faculty, who are either preparing courses for online delivery, or currently teaching online.

The paper will focus on the experience of three faculty members from the researcher’s institution in relation to online courses and will be guided by the following research question:

To what extent do faculty consider the cultural nature of their own pedagogies when designing and delivering online courses?

3. Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism “focus[es] on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants”(Creswell, 2013, p. 9) . It posits that learners construct knowledge through interaction with peers and, as they negotiate meaning through learning activities, they actively construct their understanding of the world around them. This aligns with the researcher’s epistemological view that knowledge is socially constructed (Creswell, 2003).

A socio-constructivist approach is often used in the design of online courses. For online educators and course designers, developing an awareness of the diverse realities that might be constructed by the individual learners is conducive to a more inclusive approach to their teaching. It was therefore considered an appropriate lens through which to conduct this research.

4. Literature Review

In the interest of providing a context for this research study, it is useful to look at the literature in three specific areas:

1. Globalisation and education
2. Cultural hegemony in online education
3. The role of culturally responsive pedagogy in online education

4.1 Globalisation and education

Steger (2013) suggests that there is no consensus amongst scholars in relation to the provision of a definition on globalisation. However, the context provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in a report on globalisation in higher education presents a useful framework for this study: “globalisation [is] a phenomenon of increasing worldwide interconnectedness that combines economic, cultural and social changes” (OECD, 2009, p. 13).

Beerkens (2003) looks at the various conceptualisations of globalisation within higher education research and concludes that “globalisation is not a one-dimensional development” (p.135). He cites four perspectives: geographical, authority, cultural and institutional. Two of these have particular resonance in the context of this study. His geographical perspective encompasses an interconnectedness facilitated by international linkages, which are becoming increasingly common with online learning opportunities. The cultural conceptualisation of globalisation is often coupled with a discussion around homogenisation and the export of content or policy. Beerkens also highlights the tension that exists between the fear of a “McDonaldisation of higher education” (p.144) and a desire to retain native traditions.

The homogenisation of cultures and the dominance of the Western cultural model features strongly elsewhere in the literature on the impact of globalisation in education (e.g. Hides 2005; Spring 2008; Yang 2003). Additionally, the economic emphasis of globalisation is becoming integrated into the language of education, with a focus on "meeting the needs of the global economy" (Spring, 2008, p. 331) and a shift towards the management of learning for economic purposes (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009). Educational discourse now includes references to "human capital, economic development and multiculturalism" (Spring, 2008, p. 332) to improve economic growth, and there is an increasing focus on standardising education to respond to the needs of the economy (Yang 2003), with international standards used to benchmark nation states, such as that provided by the OECD (Rogers, 2014).

4.2 Cultural hegemony in online education

As the globalisation of education continues, online education opportunities are also increasing. In the United States in 2012, 7.1 million learners were taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014). For the purpose of this study, online courses are considered to be those that have at least 80% of the course content delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2014). However, the practice of online learning often favours a Western (primarily Anglophone) model of education (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009) and while cultural theorists argue that the Western model of education has become globalised because it was the best, others would contend that it is a result of European cultural imperialism (Spring, 2008).

Cultural hegemony then is the influence of cultural values and perspectives on another group of people, whether this is intentional or not. Gorski (2008) provides an example of the well-intentioned practices of intercultural educators, who were unknowingly guilty of "educational colonization" (p.517) in their presentation of other cultures. Remembering Taco night, a cultural festival he attended as a fourth grader, Gorski describes his introduction to the Mexican/ Mexican-American culture. While persuaded that the intercultural event was meant to be educational, it contributed to essentializing a particular group of people and presenting them as the "clearly identifiable other" (p.516).

Even within cultures, the influence and the often perceived superiority of the Western model of teaching and learning online is apparent. An example of this is evident in a study by Hamdan (2014). His research focused on 64 female students from Saudi Arabia who were completing a course online. He notes their "traditional educational culture" where rote learning and memorization are key features of the education system and "critical thinking is not emphasized" (p.312) and asks "to what extent is e-learning adaptable to non-Western students' needs and cultures?" (p.329). A dichotomy exists between the authors' preference for a Socratic and social constructivist model of acquiring knowledge (through the use of discussion forums, etc.) and the existing model of transmission from the teacher to learner.

The influence of the Confucian-heritage culture of Chinese learners studying online US courses was examined by Zhang (2013), and Hofstede's power distance dimension (2001) was used to explain some of the difficulties students encountered during their online course. According to Hofstede, power distance refers to how "people in a hierarchical society respond to other individuals who hold positions that are superior or inferior to their own" (cited in Zhang 2013, p.242). While the US is a low power distance culture, China is considered a high power distance culture. For the Asian students who were the focus of this study, the importance of an awareness of their cultural background was highlighted as a significant factor in understanding the challenges they faced.

In a critical reflection on her online learning experiences as a Chinese learner in the US, Tan (2009) also recommended that online tutors include cultural sensitivity at the design and delivery phase. The challenges she encountered in relation to language, culture and technology were exacerbated by the lack of culturally responsive teaching. She highlights the importance of cultural understanding and argues that this is lacking in online learning situations. This would have the added benefit of encouraging a sense of community and providing an opportunity to develop a social presence, a key element for success in online learning (Wright, 2015).

4.3 Culturally responsive pedagogy

According to Gay (2010) “the fundamental aim of culturally responsive pedagogy is to *empower* ethnically diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy” (p.127, italics in original text). While Gay focuses on ethnicity specifically, it is applicable to students in all contexts. The concept has its origins in the argument put forward by Gramsci (1971, cited in Pitsoe & Dichaba, (2013) that students learn better when consideration is given to their background, culture and values.

Additionally, access to online education is “culture-bound” (Edmundson, 2012) and online learning is a “cultural artifact” (ibid), influenced by the cultural norms of the course designer. The cultural expectations of the learners should be taken into account by these designers. Edmundson states:

> […] if educators (instructors, instructional designers, and institutions) are unaware that these expectations even exist, they cannot address or accommodate them, and subsequently, they will fail in their efforts to provide global online learning (2012, p. xvii).

Hall (2013) provides advice for designing culturally appropriate e-learning solutions for Arabic learners. Using a design-based research approach, the purpose of her research was to identify learner preferences in a specific cultural context. Her findings indicated that several case studies involving adult online learners did not take into account cultural preferences, which had an negative impact on teaching and learning.

In a phenomenological study of seven graduates of English as a Second Language (ESL) Tan, Nabb, Aagard, & Kim (2010) highlighted the fact that very few of the instructors and peers paid attention to the cultural diversity of the group. The research focused on how cultural differences and student perceptions affect online learning. They found that participants felt that online learning did not promote cultural understanding in the same way as the traditional classroom and they recommended incorporating activities to promote diversity and cultural understanding in online programmes.

Richardson and Alsup (2015) examined how the online identities of seven teachers were created. The participants were primarily concerned about transferring their pedagogical values and approaches to the online teaching environment, and developing a social presence. Interestingly, there was no mention of considering their cultural values in advance of working with a potentially culturally diverse cohort of learners.

Given the importance of considering cultural diversity in the design and delivery of online education, this research projects sets out to identify whether cultural sensitivity is something faculty members are mindful of in their practice.

5. Methodology

The purpose of this interview-based, qualitative study was to explore individual points of view and attempt to gain an understanding of subjective experiences (Richardson & Alsup, 2015, p. 146). An exploratory study, it seeks to understand the extent (if any) to which faculty members consider the role of culture in the development or delivery of online modules they are involved in.

5.1 Participants and setting

The study focuses on the experiences of three faculty members within an Irish higher education institute with approximately 6000 students (full-time and part-time). The institute provides a range of educational programmes in the disciplines of engineering, science and business.

Purposive sampling (Cohen et al. 2007) was used to identify suitable participants, who satisfied the following sampling criteria:

- he/she had previously completed an online module as a student
- he/she was involved in (currently or in the past) the development or delivery of an online module.
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The table below provides background information on the three participants who agreed to take part in the study.

	Discipline	Number of years teaching	Teaching environment (classroom or online)	Type of online courses completed
RP 1	**Business**	10	Classroom and online	Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
RP 2	**Science**	9	Classroom	Masters
RP 3	**Humanities**	20	Classroom	CPD

5.2 Method

Semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, provided the platform for data collection. Participants were invited to describe their experience as an online learner initially and subsequently as an online teacher/course developer. An interview guide (Quinn Patton, 1990) provided structure for the interviews, with open-ended questions such as:

1. What was your experience as an online learner?
2. Could you identify any cultural references in the online module/course you completed as a student?
3. What considerations did you take into account when teaching / developing the module /course?
4. Have you considered the cultural nature of your own pedagogy in the teaching / development of the module/course?

The principle of informed consent (Cohen et al., 2007) was applied to the research and participants were provided with an information sheet outlining their involvement in the study. They were subsequently invited to sign a consent form and with their permission, the interviews were recorded. At a number of junctures, participants were invited to confirm their willingness to continue with the research questions. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, using transcription software, and an MP3 file was created and stored for each participant.

5.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis is used frequently within qualitative research for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Initially, the transcripts were read without coding. A second reading included analysis of the data and identification of emergent themes, following an inductive process (Dawson, 2009). Codes were created and refined after each reading and these codes provided the basis for identifying common themes. Constant comparison of the data (Anderson, 2010) contributed to the validity of the data analysis process.

5.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by both the researcher's institute, where data collection occurred, and the institute supervising the research. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, according to BERA (2011) guidelines. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts and participant names were replaced by codes, RP1…RP3 (Research Participant).

6. Findings

The three faculty members had over 37 years teaching experience between them. This was primarily in a traditional classroom context, though one of the participants had more experience teaching online than face-to-face. In all, online teaching experiences relating to five Irish higher and further education institutes were referenced, providing an interesting snapshot of the current situation regarding online education in Ireland. The major themes which emerged from the data are discussed below.

6.1 Online learning is a precursor to online teaching

All of the participants agreed that before teaching online, it was important for faculty to complete a module online as a student, otherwise "you can't empathize with the student" (RP1). "It's so isolating and you need to understand what the person is going through on the other side of the computer" (RP1). Their confidence in developing online modules was increased by their experience of seeing how it was done elsewhere. "It was doing that course that helped me develop this course here. I wouldn't have been able to do one without the other". (RP2)

Even in situations where a module was already developed, the experience of the online learner fed into a retrospective review of the module: "I certainly revised it with […] what I learned from the online teaching module" (RP3).

6.2 Homogeneity vs heterogeneity of online learners

In two of the three participants' experiences as online learners, the groups were culturally similar (all Irish) and, according to one, did not provide much in the way of a multicultural references. However, the participant's view of interculturality was limited in this case to nationality:

"The mild amount of interculturality there was was between the Dublin and non-Dublin participants…" (RP3). However, this participant did note how assumptions that were made excluded learners: "people who weren't part of the staff body didn't have that option" (RP3).

The third participant was part of a culturally diverse group of learners and recognized the potential for a rich exchange. Though the programme was delivered by a university in Scotland, there were students from Ireland, Malta, Barbados, China and the United Kingdom and optional online group discussions provided an insight into professional practice within these countries.

6.3 Culturally responsive pedagogy

When participants were questioned about their experiences as online learners, they cited activities that required them to reflect, discuss topics with peers and engage in self-directed learning, using a "constructivist pedagogy" (RP1). One participant (RP3) also noted that the activities were very structured to facilitate successful completion, even if students were not previously exposed to these kinds of educational exercises.

Following on from their experience as a learner, each participant was invited to comment on the influence of their own cultural pedagogy in relation to the design or delivery of their online courses. Interestingly, one participant suggested that "part of [students'] learning is to do it through English and do it in the same way as other students" (RP1). This participant asked the question: "is the fact that they have gone through an education system where they do it a certain way, is that almost like […] a graduate from an Irish/English/American university, they've gone through a way of learning that is quite useful?"

Gay (2010) spoke of using a culturally responsive pedagogy to empower students from diverse backgrounds. Here, the participant (RP1) suggests that students who study in a particular university may expect to 'buy into' that model of education, and questions whether we should change it. Additionally, if the organisation is promoting an international approach, then "are we being disingenuous to the students?" […] "Should we meet them halfway?"

Interestingly, another participant recognized the need to "challenge [themselves] about [their] own thought process" (RP2) in relation to how one would teach a culturally diverse group in an online setting, while the third participant (RP3) intimated that they were "not thinking about interculturality at all", when developing their online course. It was destined for an Irish audience in the short term and "to a particular discipline, even though it's been written in a generic way" (RP3). However, in the longer term the key to successfully rolling it out to a wider, potentially global audience was to design the assessments to "allow for a diversity of responses" (RP3).

When asked about whether the institution's international focus and consideration of cultural diversity filters down to the level of the courses or faculty, one participant was quite clear in the response given: "I think not. Not from my perspective" (RP2). However, there is

recognition that the student population is becoming more diverse in Ireland and while the considerations may not be in relation to "nationality or ethnic background" (RP3), there is an awareness that the landscape is changing and more support is needed.

6.4 Beliefs, values and teaching approaches

Participants were heavily influenced by their own value systems in terms of the pedagogical approach that they adopted. One faculty member identified a "constructivist pedagogy" in the teaching approach chosen, indicating that there was "an ethos about how good teaching should be done and it is around group discussion". Students were required to adapt to this method, with the justification, "this is part of becoming a student" (RP1).

Additionally, the fact that a particular university was held in high esteem contributed to the adoption of its pedagogical models by another faculty member, since "they [the university] are the cream of the Masters […] so I would look up to them" (RP2).

A third faculty member showed how values can change over one's teaching career. This participant identified involvement in teaching a new course coupled with the participation in learning and teaching courses as catalysts for change in the teaching approach adopted and spoke "not so much tailoring it to cultural differences [but] making it relevant to the person" (RP3).

7. Discussion and Limitations

Participants were invited to explain the rationale for developing the courses they were involved in designing or facilitating and they pointed to a demand in the market, emphasizing the benefits of having an online course, such as access, opportunities to upskill or to re-enter the jobs market. This is in line with Yang (2003), who suggests that online education is predominantly market driven and Spring (2008), who argues that education is increasingly provided to meet the needs of the global economy.

From the literature examined, the need for a culturally responsive teaching approach was highlighted as important to help international students succeed in online courses. Interestingly, while the faculty who participated in this study had considerable exposure to online education, particularly as learners, they were never made explicitly aware of the need to consider cultural diversity. Consequently, they did not include this in their own teaching practice. However, one of the participants (RP1) admitted he teaches user-centred design for technology and felt that this was “the exact same thing basically”.

There was also evidence of the well-intentioned educator, identified by Gorski (2008), who subconsciously promotes their own (Western Anglophone) model of education (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009). Their approaches were supported by sound pedagogical principles, but did not take into account the potential for cultural hegemonic practice.

However, each of these faculty members was cognizant of the changing student population and the need to adapt teaching to provide a more inclusive educational experience. Extending this to include cultural diversity did not seem to be a significant leap and all participants were open to the idea of exploring this further.

While the small-scale nature of this study limits its generalizability to the wider population, it contributes nonetheless to the discussion on the importance of considering culture in online curriculum design and delivery.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This small-scale qualitative study set out to examine the extent to which faculty consider the cultural nature of their own pedagogies when designing and delivering online courses. It points to the lack of a provision for this currently, as evidenced in both in the literature researched and the empirical study carried out.

Participants were invited to examine their experiences of online learning and teaching, specifically in relation to culture. It emerged from analysis of the interviews that this was not a key consideration for any of the faculty members. However, Edmundson (2012) argued that if

educators were not aware of an issue, they could not address it. This indicates that there is a responsibility on those providing online teaching education to include culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies.

To this end, it may be helpful to consider instructional design models that include a cultural dimension, as outlined by Rutherford & Kerr (2008), to provide a more inclusive educational experience. One such model shows how an online course might improve its cultural inclusiveness:

Degree of inclusivity	Examples of delivery
Low degree of cultural inclusivity –  High degree of cultural inclusivity +	Type 1 – Low level of inclusivity in teaching and learning (assimilation) Online resources which recognise student differences without recognising differences in strategies approaches and learning differences. Offers no social interaction of dialogue. Learning is information transmission or "shovelware". Assessment is summative and focuses on products, not processes. Low level of constructive alignment. Type 2 – Medium level of inclusivity in teaching and learning (accommodation) Recognises that learners have different strategies and offers choice in learning tasks and adaptation of methods to accommodate students who are different. Does not include culturally-inclusive assessment practices and focuses excessively on teaching approaches rather than learning. Moderate level of constructive alignment. Type 3 – High level of cultural inclusivity (High level of constructive alignment) Recognises that while there are differences among students, their learning needs are best served by a focus on designing constructivist learning activities that recognise that: • students may adopt different learning approaches and have different levels of prior knowledge • the cultural differences and perspectives that student bring to learning are assets, not liability • setting high expectations and challenges for all students thus creating a motivating climate • assessment should be authentic, and include diagnostic assessment and outcome assessment.

Mcloughlin's Inclusive Pedagogical Model

McLoughlin (2007, p. 233) cited in Rutherford & Kerr (2008, p. 76)

The model identifies the degrees of cultural inclusivity that may be present in an online course in teaching, learning and assessment strategies and the challenge is to include a culturally responsive approach throughout each of these areas.

The following considerations should be taken into account by course designers and educators of online courses:

· Recognition of the diversity of cultures and the “culturally mediated cognition” (Education Alliance, 2008, p. 12) of the student cohort. The ways of “knowing, understanding and representing information”(ibid) in a given culture provides valuable insight for the design of teaching, learning and assessment activities.

- Inclusion of student-centred learning activities where students can choose culturally relevant resources (Smith & Ayers, 2006). Students can then connect "cultural references to academic skills and concepts" (Aronson, 2016, p. 167).
- Opportunities for collaborative and cooperative activities. These facilitate interaction and dialogue amongst participants, providing an chance to include multiple perspectives and allowing participants to construct both meaning and knowledge.
- Authentic assessment will allow students to engage in culturally relevant activities. Additionally, if students are given the option of selecting an activity which speaks to their cultural identity, the knowledge gained will have added cultural value.

A dialogue around the importance of cultural sensitivity in online education is needed as higher education institutes in Ireland (and elsewhere) recruit more and more students for their online programmes. This paper contributes to this discussion and highlights the need to attribute as much importance to cultural awareness as to technology and pedagogy.

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