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RESEARCHING THE DESIGN OF A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE LIBRARY SCIENCE COURSE

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This paper critically explores the importance of culture, its relevance to, and the importance of its inclusion in course design particularly within the Caribbean context. The paper further argues for the design of a culturally sensitive library science course that provides a bridge to undergraduate studies for paraprofessional library staff within the English speaking Eastern Caribbean. Given the Caribbean's geographic dispersion, its shared historical experience of colonialism, slavery and the cultural hegemony of developed countries, a focus on the preservation of culture is required and an online course is appropriate.

Keywords: Caribbean culture; Culture; Cultural difference; Culture and course design;

Intercultural learning; Instructional design; Instructional technology; Culture online

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) is a nine island sub-group of islands within the Caribbean with a combined population of over 600,000. Within the OECS, tertiary education is not yet fully developed: only about 3-7% of the population access higher education and students in increasing numbers travel abroad to study (Crooks-Johnson, 2014). In response to this context, in 2007 the University of the West Indies (UWI) established its Open Campus through which it currently offers 800 accredited programs using various modalities including online and distance learning. UWI offers courses for pre-university education, certificate, diploma, and undergraduate programs, postgraduate degree programs, extension courses, technical and vocational, and other

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continuing studies courses (p. 12). In spite of these advances, and although UWI offers Bachelors and Masters degrees in Library Science (LIS) as on-campus programs, neither UWI nor any tertiary institution of learning within the OECS offers certificate or diploma courses accessible by OECS member states, that prepare paraprofessional library staff to transition into the first degree.

The majority of paraprofessional staff in libraries in the OECS have no formal training.

Completing a degree through distance learning transformed my life. I acquired improved interpersonal skills, specialized managerial skills, and received increased remuneration. I saw the value of distance education for those from small developing nations such as ours, especially for women who form the core of library workforce, and want to advance in the workplace, but not at the cost of leaving home and family. Thus the online learning context has become my focus as I pursue the PhD. Library staff practice in a technology-rich networked environment where knowledge and skills are required online. An online program designed to meet the academic needs of library paraprofessionals within the sub-region would be uniquely positioned not only to offer LIS training that provides a bridge to the first degree, but it would also help to overcome the geographical distance, thus connecting students scattered throughout these islands. My research proposes that a culturally sensitive library science course can be developed, designed and delivered online to paraprofessional library staff.

WHY FOCUS ON CULTURE IN THE DESIGN PROCESS?

An examination of the definition of culture underscores its importance to education and why it should be considered in course design and development, particularly design and development for the local context. Hofstede's definition of culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" (Hofstede 1986, p. 301)

indicates the subtle shaping of the individual by society's culture. Henderson (2007) has provided a detailed definition that reveals the constituents of culture and captures its vulnerability and instability, the idea that culture is not static. It is:

The way of life of a people. It is the manifestation of the patterns of thinking and behavior that results through a group's continuing adaptation to its changing social, historical, geographic, political, economic, technological, and ideological environment. Culture incorporates race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, values, traditions, language, lifestyles, and nationality as well as workplace and academic cultures (p. 131).

Gregory (2006) has noted that culture includes race, ethnicity and class, and plays a crucial role in the socialization process since it is prescribed by society's ideas and values. Our culture is a deeply rooted part of our identity, what we value, and the way we think. Culture is not a singular, monolithic construct. Rather it is a diverse set of practices among nations, societies, communities, organizations, institutions, and individuals (Seufert, 2002). Cultural diversity is now recognized as a valuable asset to be preserved and used to solve current and future problems. Henderson (2007) notes that internationalization/globalization of culture can lead to exclusion, marginalization and cultural homogeneity with Western knowledge and culture being conveyed as "natural, necessary, and, in effect, beyond criticism" (p. 132). However, consideration of culturally embedded norms is a deeply ontological and epistemological matter that impacts the choice, design, and use of technology in the learning environment. Our assumptions about how we know, how we come to know, how we communicate what we know, how we choose teaching and learning strategies are informed by the cultural norms, values and discourses that underpin them. These cultural discourses are imbedded at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, regional and national levels and are transmitted as we teach, and through the various other interactions in the learning

environment. Henderson (2007) has noted, "How instructional design of e-learning and e-teaching takes cognizance of multiculturalism and internationalization is exemplified by focusing on the ways it includes and excludes issues of culture" (p. 131). A focus on culture in the design phase of writing a new course is considered a counter response to globalization (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010).

PARTICULAR CONSIDERATIONS FOR CARIBBEAN CULTURES

Given the similarity in such cultural antecedents as economy, history, and political systems, there are some commonalities in cultural values among the islands of the English speaking Caribbean. However, although each island state within the English speaking OECS has a common colonial and slave past, yet, it was experienced differently. The islands were colonized by different powers at different points in time (George & Lewis, 2011). So their histories are the same, yet different. Even in a country as small as Antigua and Barbuda, the population is a blend of individuals from different cultures. Eric Williams, former prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, typifies the dualism of unity and cultural diversity:

There should be no Mother India for those whose ancestors came from India. . . . there can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin... there can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties,...there can be no Mother China even if one agreed as to which is the mother; and there can be no Mother Syria and no Mother Lebanon. A nation like an individual, can have only one mother. The only mother we recognize is Mother Trinidad-Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children (as cited in London, 1991, p. 16).

Antigua and Barbuda, and perhaps the entire Caribbean region, are at the cusp of a dualism in relation to culture. We experience a sense of being overwhelmed by certain aspects of Western

culture (for example the arts, religion, language, and educational theories and concepts), which impinge on our culture, yet are both welcomed and resisted. George and Lewis (2011) perceived the intersection of the global and the local as a place of tension, trepidation, and possibilities for small vulnerable states, former colonial societies striving for meaningful independence while at the same time dealing with the challenge of globalization. They contend that:

The response of Caribbean states must include deliberate processes intended to unearth, document, preserve and disseminate local knowledge especially via the school curriculum. By ‘local knowledge’ here we mean both indigenous expressions of creativity that have been passed down across generations.... as well as more conventionally generated knowledge (p. 721).

They further pointed out that education in the Caribbean is seen as imported in a similar way that our legal system, government structures, and religions are imported, and that we have a history of looking beyond us for content and standards. As a result, local concerns are rarely addressed. Where the culture of larger countries/societies undermine and erode the everyday processes within smaller countries, education is seen as one of the ways through which cultural globalization can be countered. George and Lewis (2011) posited that the Caribbean has an unfinished education agenda where we have not yet articulated ways of bridging the gap between the local and the global. They suggested that if local communities are to avoid globalization as a new form of colonization, then a third space must be created where the local and the global meet.

MODELS FOR CULTURAL INCLUSION

Models have been developed to locate cultures that might be used to ensure local/national presence in this third space. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) seeking to locate the cultural

dimensions of learning that are most likely to impact instruction, explored cultural differences through the lens of the cultural dimensions of learning framework (CDLF). The CDLF constitutes eight cultural dimensions related to “social relationships, epistemological beliefs, and temporal perceptions” illustrating how they might vary in the learning environment (p. 1).

However, the model developed by Hofstede seems the most influential. Masoumi and Lindström (2012) noted that anthropologists such as Hofstede have identified dimensions of cultural variation to explain how individuals in different cultures “communicate, behave, perceive time, or view themselves in relation to others and to the environment” (p. 396). Hofstede (1986) identified five cultural dimensions that have been used by researchers and course designers to define cultures. The power-distance dimension acknowledges that while there are inequalities in all societies, some societies are more unequal than others, and characterizes the degree to which the inequalities in power within a society are accepted as normal by the less powerful. Uncertainty-avoidance denotes the degree to which individuals within a particular culture are able to cope with situations that are not clearly defined, are unstructured, or unpredictable and which they seek to avoid through objectivist absolutism and the establishment of strict codes of behaviour. Masculinity versus Femininity addresses the degree to which traditional gender roles are observed within a society. Men are considered more aggressive, assertive, leadership-oriented and focused on achieving material success, while women are perceived as being nurturing, having modest ambitions, and seeking to balance equity. Long- versus Short Term Orientation or ‘Confucian Dynamism’ describes the degree to which individuals within a society focuses on maintaining their traditional values. For example, how quickly do they want results in spite of negative future impact? Collectivism versus Individualism characterises the strength of the ties between individuals. Individualist societies are loosely integrated cultures in which individuals are expected

to look after their own interest. In contrast, collectivist cultures are tightly integrated, and individuals are positioned within them through birth or later circumstances into “in-groups” such as the extended family, spouse and children. The group protects its members in return for their permanent loyalty.

Hofstede’s model has been critiqued. Hofstede’s samples were drawn from a single multinational organization, in which most of the participants were middle-class males. The study focused on national cultures ignoring subcultures within the various societies. The study is dated. There is a danger of stereotyping, and a normative influence in the dimensions (Cronjé, 2011).

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR CULTURAL INCLUSION

Instructors and instructional designers should recognize the social situatedness of learning and consider the embeddedness of their subjectivities in teaching and instructional design. How can distance educators integrate diverse learners into the online community? How can they be sensitive to diversity? Lauzon (2000) suggested that designers need to be aware of their biases and prejudices, and adopt a critical stance that challenges their personal points of view. What do we know? How did we come to know? Who decides which knowledge is legitimate? This is particularly important when designers are designing for a culture other than their own (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010). Technologies are not value neutral. They are infused with the cultural assumptions of their originators. Design is impacted not only by the content but also by what instructors and designers believe about both the content and the technologies they use.

For instruction to be culturally relevant instructors/instructional designers need to familiarize themselves with students’ cultural knowledge and experience which is drawn from their social interactions in their societies/communities (George, 2013). Culture should be represented

respectfully and intercultural design considerations should not be "cosmetic, tokenistic, and/or stereotypical" (Henderson, 2007, p. 132). Any focus on online course design should include the worldviews of those involved in the learning context, and the specific requirements of the academic culture. Materials should explore systemic issues related to power, control, and disadvantage. Multi-racial and ethnic knowledge should be privileged, legitimized, and included in meaningful ways. Gender issues relevant to both male and females should be included.

IMPLICATIONS

This paper responds to the need to critically explore the importance of culture and its relevance to and inclusion in course design. No institution of learning in the OECS offers paraprofessional library science courses online. Given the Caribbean's shared historical experiences of colonialism, slavery, and cultural hegemony from developed countries, a focus on the preservation of culture is required. If an online library science course for Caribbean paraprofessionals is to be offered, it is important that Caribbean-specific cultural issues be in the forefront in both the design and the instruction.

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Nelson

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