

Book Review – Learning Cultures in Online Education

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Book Review

Learning Cultures in Online Education

Editors: Robin Goodfellow and Marie-Noëlle Lamy (2009). [*Learning Cultures in Online Education*](#). New York: Continuum Studies in Education. 248 pages. ISBN: 978-18470-60624-4

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I felt lucky to come across *Learning Cultures in Online Education*, edited by Robin Goodfellow and Marie-Noëlle Lamy from the Open University, UK. This insightful book, which successfully blends empirical studies and theoretical underpinnings, responds to my professional interest in the place of foreign language education within the scholarship on online learning. The editors, both of whom are engaged in the dynamic fields of distance language learning and e-literacy, suggest viewing online language learning as a practice that vividly exemplifies learning cultures as they emerge in distance education across disciplines. The title of the book alludes to this connection, which according to the authors is promising because in their opinion the process of learning about cultures, where the development of linguistic competency, arguably, plays a central role, is related intrinsically to the emergence of “learning cultures.”

In the informative introduction, Goodfellow and Lamy celebrate a polysemous concept of culture, which resists the boundaries of a single definition. In addition, the editors outline four major areas of inquiry associated with cultural contact. They are (1) transnational and cross-border education; (2) the take-up of computer-mediated interaction by previously marginalized groups; (3) the growth of new forms of knowledge production, which overlap the issues of identity and media; and (4) the spread of social networking phenomena and their use in education.

Offering a useful frame for the chapters, the editors suggest viewing cultural issues as inseparable from educational, linguistic, and technological ones. Cultural perspectives incorporate such areas as curriculum, interaction, collaboration, pedagogy, language, and assessment, as well as issues of cultural identity, which are frequently raised in research literature but are not often addressed satisfactorily. They note such factors as the growth of multiculturalism and the widening participation policies in national systems of higher education, which face the constraints of low IT literacy and lack of familiarity with online systems and pedagogies, the rapid expansion of transnational e-learning, and the spread of new media communication practices (i.e., Internet community, socializing, and informal learning practices), which are becoming increasingly influential for the learning process and indicate the necessity to further problematize “learning

cultures.” This necessity becomes more evident in subsequent chapters, where researchers bring international contexts to bear upon such areas of inquiry as “cultural learning styles,” (i.e., the preferences of individuals), “cultures of learning,” (i.e., the norms and values associated with learning in specific institutions), and finally “learning cultures,” (i.e., the area of emergent innovative collective approaches to learning in conditions that are wholly characterized by remote communication).

In the first chapter, Charles Ess, the founder of the Cultural Attitudes to Technology and Communication conference (CATAC), who has written widely on topics of culture, education, and technology, argues that cultural identity is a hybrid, which has many more dimensions than nationality or mother tongue. He views online scenarios as themselves culturally coded spaces, which invite the formation of “third cultures” based on the combination of elements from different cultural traditions in which individuals socialize to form their own identity. Recognizing diverse aspects of culture and the lack of theories “to do justice to the multiple dimensions of ‘culture’” (10), Ess challenges the very possibility of conceptualizing “learning cultures.”

In the second chapter, “Identity, Gender and Language in Synchronous Cybercultures: A Cross-Cultural Study,” Charlotte N. Gunawardena, Ahmed Idrissi Alami, Gayathri Jayatilleke, and Fadwa Bouchrine further investigate the topic of online cultural hybridity by drawing on the empirical research they conducted in Morocco and Sri Lanka. Their findings demonstrate the possibility of hybrid cultural identities emerging from local systems of activity, such as an Internet chat. These authors pay special attention to the discussion of the ways that participants’ identities, for example their gender and religion, are enacted and/or concealed as part of the process of negotiating norms of communication online.

In chapter three, “Entering the World of Online Foreign Language Education: Challenging and Developing Teacher Identity,” Robert O’Dowd discusses the influence of the implementation of online learning on the identities of faculty members. While recognizing that the Internet and virtual learning platforms have become an integral part of education in Western society and have helped to shape the expectations and hopes that teachers and students now bring to formal education, O’Dowd points out that transitional processes from face-to-face to online teaching/learning and new institutional e-learning policies may take different shapes. Analyzing a case study of foreign language and linguistics classrooms on a Spanish campus, he suggests that the impact of online learning and teaching is intrinsically related to the general culture of learning and teaching that exists in each school. O’Dowd suggests that it is important not to underestimate the impact of a university’s socio-institutional context, which includes the minds and behavior of the teachers, on online learning practice.

Whereas the focus of chapter three is on instructors, Christine Develotte considers the same transition but emphasizes the identities of students in chapter four, “From Face-to-Face to Distance Learning: The Online Learner’s Emerging Identity.” Her case study examines an online course, Teaching French as a Foreign Language, offered at a French university. Considering the experience of online textual activity as socially demanding, she analyses the “discursive space” and learning cultures that emerge in the online learning environment, represented by the learners,

and tracks their emotional and cognitive adaptation to the role of online learner. Drawing a comparison between on-site and online instruction, Develotte concludes that the learning culture that is constructed in the process of online instruction is more convivial and less competitive, and it leads to more connections among students and between students and instructors than the more familiar but less dynamic, in her opinion, on-site condition.

The textuality of online learning environments is also a point of departure for Leah Macfadyen's chapter five, "Being and Learning in the Online Classroom: Linguistic Practices and Ritual Text Acts." She discusses learning cultures as communities, "in which the 'rules of engagement' have to be constructed." According to Macfadyen, significant learning needs physical embodiment, which can be achieved via online "textual rituals," during which self-identity is necessarily constructed through the interactions between participants. Macfadyen analyses in depth a course in global citizenship, where some participants reconstruct themselves as global citizens.

Anne Hewling further explores "textualized interactions" in chapter six, "Technology as a 'Cultural Player' in Online Learning Environments," but from a different angle. She focuses on the analysis of virtual learning environments and criticizes the functional efficiency of the systems in practice. Hewling is particularly interested in the exploration of the role of technology in the negotiation of culture. In her view, technology can function autonomously; as well, it can replace the authority of the institution. As Hewling suggests, technology appears to behave as a cultural factor, and its unpredictable functioning in combination with the unfamiliar pedagogy can create cultural challenges even for students whose cultural background is the same as that of the host institution.

In chapter seven, "Trouble and Autoethnography in Assessment Genre: A Case for Postnational Design in Online Internationalized Pedagogy," Catherine Doherty focuses on the 'troubling' assessment procedures in a context of postnational pedagogy, which online internationalized learning exemplifies. Drawing on a case study of an MBA core unit offered by an Australian university, this author argues that in postnational learning cultures all students should be positioned as international, regardless of their national identity or place of residence. Therefore, in order to prevent the dominant influence of local practices and learning cultures that operate within the host institution, it is necessary to examine traditional "assessment genres." Ironically, as Doherty observes, to avoid privileging any local frame of assessment "by default," it is an imperative to closely analyze local assessment approaches, especially in their interactions with transnational environments and identities. She views this "autoethnographic move" as one of the characteristics of post-national pedagogy and suggests that internationalized online learning offers unique opportunities for its further exploration.

Jay Lemke and Caspar van Helden in chapter eight, "New Learning Cultures: Identities, Media and Networks," provide a further critique of traditional schooling and point out how students learn through popular culture media and personal social networking, including online communities. These authors suggest that further research on how people learn outside the school and the curriculum will be instrumental for improving online learning practice and education in

general. They call for special attention to be given to such factors as the roles of passion and emotion in learning as well as to learners' motivation.

After acknowledging that significant research has been done on the responsiveness of instructional design to the cultural peculiarities of learners from different national, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, the editors state their intention to move the existing debate on online cultures in a "somewhat different direction" through the exploration of six major themes. They are (1) the nature of identity online; (2) the continuing importance of embodiment; (3) the negotiation of cultures and the limitations of essentialist approaches to cultural difference; (4) the centrality of language(s) and textuality; (5) the under-acknowledged importance of the affective dimension, including resistance and creativity; and (6) the increasingly unpredictable behavior of technologies. There is no doubt that these themes allow contributors to draw readers' attention to the rapidly changing face of "culture" in online education and to the active role that institutions, faculty, designers, and learners play in this process. The editors successfully bring these themes together to outline two key areas of interest, which, in their opinion, are productive directions for future research. They are (1) studies of the processes by which institutions and corporations develop hegemonies over pedagogies of global online education, and (2) an investigation of the cultural dimensions of communication in online learning communities and the processes of negotiation of identities by their participants.

In their discussion of institutional cultural hegemony over pedagogy, the editors ask a plausible question about the possibilities of developing alternative models to the dominant Western/Anglo model of online learning. They suggest that an understanding of the cultural nature of Western/Anglo online pedagogy and its relation to the discourses of cultural differences is a promising area of future research, which would allow the promotion of non-Anglo-hegemonic models of online learning. A critical awareness of culture is integral to the development of non-hegemonic models of online learning, which are shaped largely by "hybridized identities." Such identities result from the process of negotiating cultural identity, which, arguably, occurs mainly via (in) linguistic interaction.

Research on second language learning and intercultural studies therefore can serve as a basis for research on online learning cultures. The editors draw a parallel between the most recent developments in the research on language learning and the potential areas of study in multicultural online learning research. As in applied linguistics, the inquiry moves away from the *evidence* of language learning towards the socio-cultural *conditions* for language learning; in the research on learning cultures, the conditions in which multicultural online language learning takes place should be analyzed as well. Lamy and Goodfellow also note that issues of power are at the center of research on socio-cultural language learning theory, where most often the focus is on immigrants' language development and heritage language research. Power issues are also of primary importance in intercultural exchange research, where power has been constructed in psychological terms as a facilitator or as an inhibitor of comfort in online groups.

In the spirit of promoting multiculturalism as an intrinsic feature of learning cultures in online environments, the book ends by suggesting the consideration of open education resources

(OERs), created by diverse groups of scholars, as a promising focus for research on online learning cultures.

In summary, this book will be of interest to a growing audience of researchers and practitioners who are interested in both the creation of and the immersion in learning cultures, particularly as they develop in online environments and as they challenge our approaches to education.

