

Intercultural Implications of Global Learning Networks (GLNs)*

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Increasing interactivity among people and nations, made possible by rapid developments in ICTs, has led global learning networks to become indispensable parts of our lives. These multicultural common platforms create very effective and democratic learning environments in diverse societies having different cultural values, beliefs and perceptions. On the other hand, some people consider them as instruments of disseminating the values and discourses of a dominant culture; moreover, teaching approaches insensitive to diverse cultures may harm local values, causing misunderstandings and cultural degeneration. This paper discusses, based on the research by the first author during his one-year stay in Japan and joint research activities conducted by the co-author and his overseas colleagues in the past years, that the societal and cultural differences among individuals and societies in terms of cultural values, learning processes, 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 — avoiding misunderstandings — 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

*Shorter version of this paper was presented at the ICCI Summer Seminar (British Hills, Aug. 29th - Sep. 1st 2002)

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, pp. 22–25).

There is a strong tendency to use the term globalization as a synonym for Westernization or Americanization. Dudley (1998, pp. 22–25) 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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. In this paper, we mean by global learning networks “Networks of people who want to learn and share through the Internet on a global scale”.

Harasim (1994, pp. 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, pp. 10–13) 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. This has been demonstrated and proven, for example, in the research into intercultural cooperative learning conducted by a group of Japanese researchers (1999).

The international research at the National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME) headed by the co-author of this paper has been defining new prospects for the future of higher education since early 1990s. Positioned as a coordinator between higher education and research institutions in Japan and abroad, NIME has promoted research activities with the following objectives:

- 1) Conduct experiments on educational exchanges between Japanese and overseas institutions of higher education using leading-edge communications technology;
- 2) Research and develop effective methods of utilizing media technology, and new approaches to distance education exchanges and their content;
- 3) Promote the understanding and research of culture and civilization in one's own country and other countries; and
- 4) Explore the possibility of constructing global learning networks for distance higher education.

The international research group has been pursuing these objectives by organizing international symposia and workshops on the teaching and learning via GLNs and their cross-cultural case studies, and through research in international distance education exchanges using network technologies such as communication satellite or terrestrial ISDN-based videoconferencing system. (For the original research data and outcome of the accumulated research activities, refer to; NIME Research Report 04, 1998, NIME Research Report 08, 1999, the proceedings of '02NIME International Symposium, 2003)

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, pp. 24–25) 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.

Latchem (2002, pp.11–12) provides several factors that determine the effectiveness and efficiency of learning networks as follows:

High-level political support;

A developmental rather than technological factors;

Clearly defined target groups, users' needs, and measurable goals and performance standards agreed to by the members;

Sound business plans and management;

Strong partnerships with government, NGOs, educational and training providers, and business;

An online structure that can underpin socio-economic and educational development;

Policies and procedures that embrace action research, mentoring for change, and the principles of adult learning;

Affordable programs and services matched to community needs; and

Ongoing monitoring of programs, services, costs, revenue and usage.

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, indi-

vidual differences, and technology related differences (Rice et al., 2001, pp. 193–198). O’Hair and the others (1996, cited in Heiskagen et al., 2001, p. 233) argue, “Communication is difficult to separate from culture because they are language bound. Moreover, culture influences how language is used to interpret the world”. It is vital to bear in mind that failing to address intercultural differences might cause serious misunderstandings. There are many examples of how business firms may fail when they try to translate their slogans into other languages without careful study of local cultures and languages (Sitka, 1998):

— In Taiwan, the translation of the Pepsi slogan ‘Come alive with the Pepsi Generation’ came out as ‘Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead.’

— In Chinese, the Kentucky Fried Chicken slogan ‘finger-lickin’ good’ came out as ‘eat your fingers off.’

— The American slogan for Salem cigarettes, ‘Salem — Feeling Free,’ got translated in the Japanese market as ‘When smoking Salem, you feel so refreshed that your mind seems to be free and empty.’

— When Parker Pen marketed a ballpoint pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say, ‘It won’t leak in your pocket and embarrass you.’ Instead, the ads said ‘It won’t leak in your pocket and make you pregnant’.

Some people fear that dominant languages invade their languages through the Internet. Zheng (2001, pp. 135–139) 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 words, 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?”

Many people claim that there is American or Western dominance on the Internet, at least for now. This dominance demonstrates itself English as the common language, number of web sites and education providers, information and reference resources, visual materials, etc that have Western or American origin. Some of the serious Internet-based concerns are as follows:

- Cultural hegemony
- Dilution of local languages
- Degeneration of local cultures and people
- Losing control on national education
- Source of intercultural misunderstandings

Not everyone shares the same perspective. For instance, Hongladarom (2001, pp. 315–321) 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 win-

dow 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, p. 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 the most important survival strategies for any society. He comments that Japan's inter-cultural relationships have usually been task-focused relationships whose purpose has been to enrich their primary domestic community relationships. 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 buildings 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, p. 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 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, p. 26).

Learning Network Related Roles of Related Parties

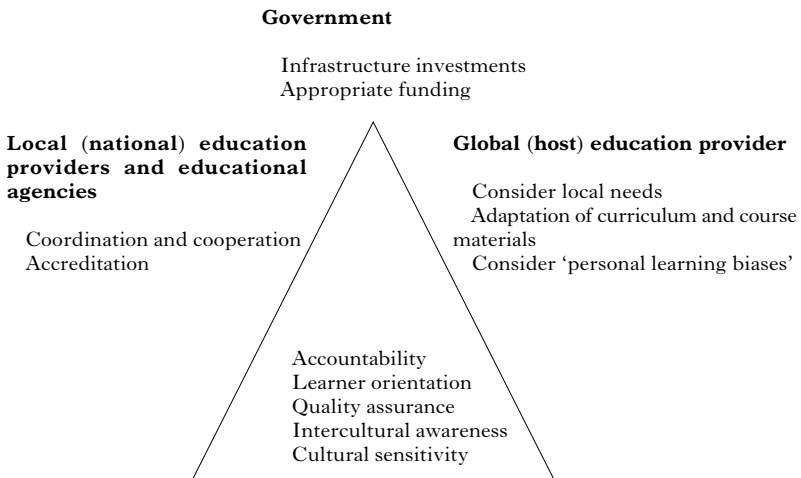
While GLNs represent enormous opportunities to provide intercultural, democratic common platform for learners, they become harmful when learners are passive receivers of certain values and discourses exported by the sender. Goldsmith (1993) writes “There is no better way of destroying a society than 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, p. 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, p. 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. Fig. 1 exhibits the learning network related roles of related parties: governments, local and global education providers.

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

Fig. 1. The Learning Network Related Roles of Related Parties



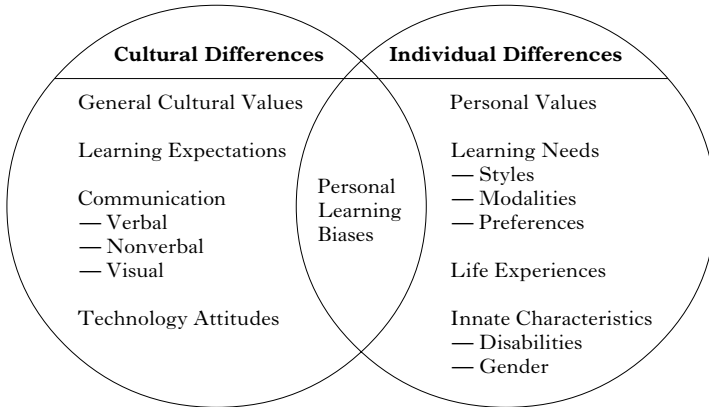
regard to taking necessary measures to get the full benefits of multicultural learning networks while avoiding their negative influences. Furthermore, governments should eliminate the barriers to the free circulation of ideas, information and knowledge across the learning networks (e.g. investment in network infrastructure).

Sadlak (1998, p. 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, possible misunderstandings should be avoided.

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 which members of the culture interpret instructions (Reeves, 1997, pp. 27–30). Fig. 1 exhibits “personal learning biases” as an intersection of cultural and individual differences among people. Rice et al. (2001, p. 192) assert that all instruction must pass through this *bias filter* as it is processed by the

Fig. 2. Personal Learning Biases



Adapted from Rice, et al., (2001, p. 192)

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, pp. 198–199).

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, p. 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. The table below depicts the possible differ-

Table 1. Different Cultures and Different Meanings

Door handles	In many countries, round doorknobs are very unusual. In continental Europe, door handles are long levers.
Animals	<p>Owls are seen as wise birds in the U.S., as brutal and stupid in some parts of Asia.</p> <p>Dogs symbolize loyalty or search and retrieve in the U.S., but are food in some parts of Asia.</p> <p>Pigs are used to represent a bank in the U.S., but are unclean and unholy to devout Muslims and Jews.</p> <p>Rabbits may be seen as symbols of ability to reproduce quickly in the U.S., but as food in Germany and vermin in Australia.</p>
Facial Expressions and Gestures	An eye might be interpreted as ‘the evil eye’. Foot-prints may be offensive in the Orient as the underside of the foot is seen as crude or obscene.

Adapted from Rice, et al., (2001:197)

ent meanings to which different cultures attach.

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 other cultures and 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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