Arab Learners' Cultural Values and Their Interference with e-Learning

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Abstract: This paper is set to identify the role of cultural norms on the adoption of e-learning practices in Palestine as an instance of the larger Arabic culture. This stream of research is currently receiving mounting attention, as e-learning systems and practices become a global issue, which crosses various cultures and boarders.

The paper relies on the experiences of the researcher, his observation and experience in teaching both online and traditional courses at university level. Focus group discussion and interviews were also employed to deepen understandings of various research issues.

This research proposes that domestic culture dimensions of collectivism and relationship-orientation of the Arabs greatly impact their appreciation of e-learning. Oral-interactivity and synchronous chatting were also basic drivers for Arab students to value e-learning. However, the need for structurization, and continuous management and follow up were found crucial for the success of these solutions among Arab learners.

This analysis presents concrete guidance for global firms in the domain of electronic learning and training to understand the role of the diverse cultural scope on e-learning. The guiding strategies stemmed out of this report can be applied in other Arabian countries, as they more or less have similar cultural norms and practices.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an explanation of how the Arab learners' cultural values influence the way they perceive and benefit from these technology educational solutions.

Electronic or E-learning which encompasses the extensive use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education, is receiving mounting attention in all circles as most Internet accesses these days are turned into broadband which facilitates design, delivery and interaction with learning material, which makes these technologies more interactive, scalable, and effective.

However, it is to be stated that E-learning in its different flavors and settings are built to satisfy the western and developed society's development needs, and thereof, have a western cultural bias. This might make these educational solutions not fully compatible with other cultures, such as the Arabic culture.

It is quite obvious that habits and cultural norms that are perceived through traditional learning both inside and outside classrooms, which are sometimes termed as learning "naturally", will impact the way how learners perceive and view electronic and web based learning methods.

The paper will rely on agreed upon definition of culture and to use this definition to examine how this culture will impact e-learning. In particular, it will demonstrate how cultural factors interact with and influence students' learning and engagement in both synchronous and asynchronous learning modes.

The main goal of this paper is to raise awareness about the cultural factors that may affect E-learning and to provide guidance for courses and content developers for the needs and requirements of Arab learners.

In all societies, culture is strongly linked to national identity and ethnic foundations. Based on the prominent work of Hofstede (1980), the trend has been to think of national groups as having the same patterns of thought, action, and values.

In recent times, culture is viewed as an entity that crosses ethnic and national boundaries. Hence, according Branch (1993) to culture covers all patterns formed by religion, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, profession, ideology, gender,

and lifestyle. This definition of culture supports the impression that every individual and organization is both cultural and multicultural.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The impact of culture on education has its roots in traditional education before it extends its branches to electronic or Internet based learning. Teachers accommodations for students cultures within the same class and the struggle between teacher culture and student's culture is a subject of extensive research in education, (Moore, 2006). Moore reports on problems and difficulties evolve if the instructor's pedagogical values are not compatible with students' assumptions about how teaching should be done.

Building educational systems and practices on certain set of values, in a world of diverse context has its severe consequences on the learning processes and their outcomes. According to Gramsci (1971) this practice is stemmed out of a phenomenon he called "hegemony" which refers to a bunch of assumption of the dominant group or culture who view their values as common sense, or interests that serve for all. Several scientists have investigated the question of cultural hegemony in traditional learning, and many of them have proposed methods of incorporation of multiple cultures in education. Such theories include. Ladson-Billings, (1995) proposed the "culturally relevant pedagogy", while Gay (2000) developed the culturally responsive teaching". "Culturally sensitive instruction" was put forward by Boyer, (1993).

Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, and Tan (2005) classified the issues influencing the effectiveness of Electronic learning. They analyzed 423 empirical studies that compared face-to-face education to electronic learning. They came to conclude that electronic education is still a form of education, and the factors that impact the effectiveness of electronic education are more or less the factors that affect the effectiveness of traditional education.

Their findings clearly indicate that electronic learning is by no means exempt from the difficulties stemmed from cultural norms. Moore (2006) claimed that electronic environments is more vulnerable to cultural conflicts than traditional systems as both teachers and learners are participating in the educational processes from their native cultures, i.e. while stay situated physically and socially in the different cultures. This according

to Moore will pose shift cultural challenges to higher level.

There exists considerable number of studies that treated cultural intervention with electronic learning. Thompson and Ku (2005) studied the interaction of Chinese students with online learning. The study revealed that Chinese students were less critical and narrow-minded in online chats than their US counterparts. Thompson and Ku referred this observation to the fact that Chinese culture is highly collective and feminine, which tends to respect group endeavors, agreement, affection, compassion and emotionality. Tu (2001) et. al (2000) also investigated Chinese online learners. They too stressed the significance of social domestic context and cultural norms and showed how they tend to rely on non-oral signs and cues in their interface with online courses.

Al-Harthi's (2005) investigated cultural interferences of Arab students studying in American universities. The researcher remarked that these students were rather afraid and nervous concerning their participating in online courses. The researcher associated this to their inability to act independently in their learning efforts, which reflects Arab culture's high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991).

Shattuck (2005) investigated Asian and Middle Eastern students taking online courses delivered by an American university. They both found that cultural discrepancies hamper students' communication and success in online courses, producing a feeling of isolation, alienation, and conflict with the dominant educational culture at these universities.

Goodfellow, et al. (2001) studied the performance of non-English native students pursuing their education in UK. The researchers found that their difficulties with languages and their inability to use English professionally and other difficulties related to environment in UK greatly affected their academic achievement.

Morse (2003) found that the low context group highly appreciated the opportunity given to them by the online courses to participate in the discussion and to reflect on other people's opinions, which he termed as "outwardly oriented". On the other hand, he discovered that the high context participants are more "inwardly oriented," as they tended more to value the time afforded by online courses to think more about their own contributions. This study also revealed that students from high context cultures stressed that the lack of face-to-face communication hinders their ability to learn and to form social

relationships, whereas low context students had not had any difficulties in the lack of face-to-face contact which impacted their learning abilities positively or negatively.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) studied the discrepancies in attitudes and behavior of American and non-American students, again at graduate level, in regards to Asynchronous discussions. None American participants expressed their satisfaction in regards to the system as it gives them opportunity to dig into issues at their own pace, and to understand issues from various angles which greatly improves their level of understanding of material much better than traditional and face to face lecturing. The same study revealed that None American were reluctant and less enthusiast in expressing their opinion and showing disagreement, they may consider challenging and criticizing other's ideas culturally inappropriate, and/or they may "not know how to express disagreement appropriately in English.

Anakwe and Christensen (1999) studied the influence of individualism and collectivism on online education. The study concluded that distance and online learning is more compatible with cultures that tend to have high individualism attitudes that collectivism. Tapanes, et al. (2009), investigated the same theme through collecting data from 40 online students from two American universities. The study found that students from collectivistic cultures to be less motivated to participate in online courses than those from individualistic cultures.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodologies are adopted in this research, as the research aims to analyze and understand attitudes and behaviors on performing and practicing certain set of actions, namely electronic and distance learning. The research team believes that qualitative research fits better with the research question of this paper as the research theme is exploratory in nature, and needs to go deeper into the issue of interest and explore nuances related to the problem at hand.

The paper relies heavily on the technique of participant observation, which is considered to have some strength, particularly in organizational research. Participant observation in organizational research tends to investigate core issues from within inside the organization. The arguments used by many organizational sciences scholars, backing this research approach list the use of personal involvement, expertise, and deep knowledge of issue at hand of the research question, Evered and Louis (2001).

Iacono, Brown, and Holtham, (2009) asserts that better knowledge can be generated by functioning within the organization. Sometimes participant observation arises from an ongoing working situation, as is the case when the observer is an industry practitioner [ibid]. It involves participating in a situation, while, at the same time, recording what is being observed. It offers the chance to obtain unique insights into the organization or social group.

This study is set to investigate students' experiences in electronic learning, and how their practices are stemmed out of their domestic cultures. The data sets of this study are collected throughout the years of experience the investigators have undergone in teaching and observing students through 3 years of time, the period of the involvement of the investigator with the e-learning at the local university where he teaches. The collected data comprised of the cumulated experience of the phenomena, including thinking, believing, perceiving, observing – and the things to which these acts are related such as ideas or material objects. According to Merriam and Simpson,(1995),these are eligible source of data sets for such kind of research.

The researcher was an observer during the course, collecting qualitative data through the observation of activities and engagement and also carrying out a focus group in the final week of the course to gain a deeper understanding of particular issues related to the active participation of learners.

In addition to observations, Semi-structured interviews were arranged and employed to collect data. Throughout the interviews participants were allowed to reconstruct their experience within the context in which it occurs, and to reflect on the meaning the experience holds for him/her.

This study focuses on students from the Northern Part of West Bank, Palestine, pursuing their education at the Arab American University, a university adopting the American teaching style, and launching some initiatives in Electronic and distance learning as support for traditional learning. The sample population is a homogeneous one with the same cultural basis such as languages, religion, history, norms and values. They even share many similarities in their socio-economic and political structure. Participants in the research have taken as a minimum one online course or some components of their courses are done online. The sample population consisted of more than 200 students.

4 MAIN FINDINGS

Throughout the research period, the researcher continue observing students behavior in relation to their learning practices in the e-learning courses, and try to categorize their behavior in regards to their views and utilization of the available learning resources. The remarks compiled throughout the observations are categorized into themes so that their impact on the overall learning processes is easily assessed.

The main findings of the research will be summarized as students learning habits and then see how they can affect their interaction with electronic learning.

1- Students in general tend to be oral-based, as they enjoy communicating their knowledge orally, i.e. they highly value the spoken language. Students enjoy listening and speaking, this was very clearly indicated by the level of their involvement when oral interaction was involved in the electronic course. The majority of students (over 80%) who participated in the study revealed that they prefer oral presentation over textual or documental information.

2- Participating students tend to be very social and in favorite of collaborative and collective activities much more than self or individual efforts. Students showed high level of enthusiasm when there are group activities. That was clearly indicated by their tendencies towards participating in synchronous group discussion over the E-learning portal.

3- Students are very keen to synthesize personal relationship with instructor and with other course participants, and they consider this as very crucial for them to enjoy learning the material and benefit the most from it. The more students have lively and close relationship with teacher the more then tend to put efforts and to spend more time with the Electronic courses.

4- Students are always in favorite of high structurization in their teaching endeavors. Structurization, includes specifying what exactly to study, how much material is required, setting up times and deadlines for assignments and exams, and specifying the rewarding mechanism and grading policies beforehand. This issue has very much to do with the fact that students should be forced to participate in the learning activities, and not to give them the feeling that their obligations are relaxed via the e-learning system. Majority of students participated in the study are not independent learners, as they need continuous guidance and

encouragement throughout their learning processes. Most of them feel lost in the flexible nature of online learning, and are desperately seeking some kind of support or structure.

5- Students are addicted to the teacher-centered approach of learning. Even in an online courses, students requires some kind of higher authority, with better knowledge and experience to guide them through the learning processes. This phenomena has to do with society hierarchy and structure which requires some kind external promoter for their actions deeds.
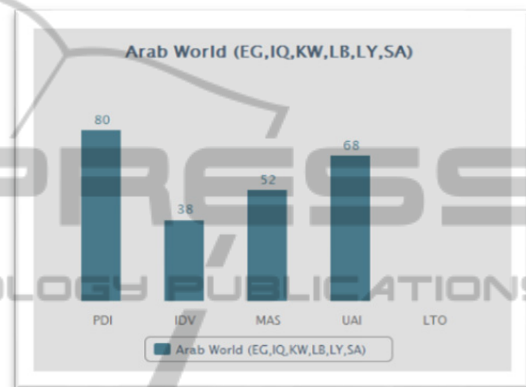

Figure 1: Hofstade Arabic cultural dimensions (PDI: Power distance, IDV: Individualism, MAS: Masculinity / Femininity, UAI: Uncertainty avoidance, LTO: Long term orientation.
Source: http://geert-hofstede.com/arab-world-egiqkwlblysa.html

4.1 Impact of Learning Habits on e-Learning

Collectivism and socialism of students in this area and Arab students in general seem to induce students to work together more than students in the Western societies. This is why chats (both voice and text) in our courses are much more popular than the discussion forum. Students ability to use online course to form a stance together, or a debatable issue is much more attractive and efficient than forming a personal opinion alone. This trend can be easily explained by the fact that Arab culture tends to be more oral and collectivists. This means that in general they tend not to like the distance aspect of the e-learning approach, at the same time they found it attractive because of the interactive and collective nature of the activities. The student's culture appreciates close association and prefers visual and people-centered, interactions.

Throughout my experience with the students, it was quite clear that they prefer to do their

assignments and tasks in real-time. And they tend to share their ideas with their colleagues when possible and not to form an individual opinion, especially when there is a debatable issue, with which it is not easily possible to formulate a stance for.

Online collaboration on projects requires them to work at the same time on the tasks, with a kind of group thinking, and online real time discussion. That is to say collaboration on tasks where students have to build on each other's work has not been so successful. This was quite clearly pronounced by the preferable synchronous chats by the students over the wiki facility provided by Moodle.

This observation is crucial in the way of assigning online tasks for students. Online assignments should promote online synchronous discussion as much as possible. This will allow students to learn from each others synergistically, and allow them to generate and synthesize new knowledge. The assignment that promotes discussion among students is the one which does not imply division of tasks into sub tasks for students, but rather the one where all students are asked to work on the same task at the same time.

Interaction and networking are strongly rooted in the students' Arabic culture, this means that students will like the course and be attached to it the more it promotes interaction and communication. As one student has put it; "it is much more attractive to participate in the synchronized chat than to write in the Wiki. Via chats teacher and all students see your participation, and they may like it, which give me a sense of pride and self fulfillment"

Students inclined to have a collective conclusion or opinion, stemmed out of their strong incline towards collectivism, an culture norm which opposes individualism, see figure (1) above. This is still another indication of the direct interference of the cultural pillars with students learning style.

Another very critical issue raised by participant students has to do with their willingness to participate in online over face-to-face discussion. Many students, especially female students expressed their satisfaction and convenience with the online chatting and discussion, as it does not involve facial and in person confrontations. For female students and for significant percentage of male students, face to face argumentation and disagreement would lead to embarrassment, emotional and psychological one. "Over the web, you don't real feel it, even if it is expressed in writing, you parley feel it, and in most cases it passes with only few people feel it" Areen has commented. The Arabian society is a place where opinions do matter a lot, and the person's position is mainly a reflection of his or her opinion over some issue.

Many students have talked about the opportunity online learning give them to talk in public with no teacher presence. They expressed relieve over the ability to express opinion without the instructor presence. These stances, are related to the fact that Arabian society is hierarchical, and respect of elder people is a quite common practice.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper is arguing that cultural norms are crucial factors to be taken into account when e-learning material are designed and presented to learners with various cultural settings. The paper tested the interaction of learners of one Palestinian university throughout years of teaching using both traditional and electronic means.

The paper has demonstrated that socialization and collective activities are crucial aspects to be taken into account when designing electronic learning for Arab students. Arab students, as the cultural norms dictate tend to interact and respond with higher enthusiasm with collective and live activities. Students are inspired by their colleagues at the other end talking and text interacting in a synchronous than in asynchronous mode. Arab students are found to prefer oral than textual interaction via the electronic learning systems.

The research project is at its beginning, and more cultural components like power distance, sense of time, the balance between image and meaning, and the influence of context, will be analyzed and integrated in future research activities and publications.

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