Student Expectations of Distance Education: A qualitative analysis exploring the culture, virtual geography and sociology of higher education at an Australian university

Dr. Angela T. Ragusa
Charles Sturt University

Abstract

The global marketplace for e-learning products and services varies widely among countries, courses offered and technologies (Bowles, 2004). Consequently, the use of virtual communication environments by distance education providers also differs by and within institutions internationally due to policy, infrastructure, workload management, and, often, self-motivated initiative (Wilson, 2005; Hawkey, 2004; Selwyn, 2003). As learning paradigms shift from traditional, tabula rasa, (Brooks and Brooks, 1993 in Palloff and Pratt, 2001) to a social constructivism (Semple, 2000; Vygotsky 1986), so too must methods change for working with global learners. Contextualized within educational policy and institutional imperatives, this paper presents qualitative feedback from distance education students in subjects at a rural Australian university who engage in no face-to-face interaction. Student perceptions reveal multiculturalism, geographical space, class, age, gender and ethnicity impact experiences of education. The paper concludes by challenging educators to reconsider how virtual geography impacts educational experience.

Introduction

In today’s global marketplace and Information Age, the type and design of virtual learning environments differ widely (Bowles, 2004) and influence both the process and purpose of communication outcomes. Geographies of space (both virtual and physical) and institutional culture impact learning environments to an unprecedented degree. To explore student perception of learning environments in “virtual geographies”, where the only dialogue occurring is that mediated by computer, this paper presents and analyses information gained from a qualitative questionnaire distributed in May, 2005 to an introductory sociology class at a rural Australian University marketed as a leader in distance education. Using theoretical insights from sociology, science and technology studies (STS) and education, an interdisciplinary/cultural studies approach is taken to ask how concepts of multiculturalism and differences in geographical space, class, age, gender and ethnicity impact the experience of education in virtual learning environments. Finally, it is argued that as interactions are negotiated according to situational meanings, epistemology, knowledge production and sociocultural reality, questions regarding the purpose, process and structure of education in multidynamic contexts must be revisited.

Literature Review & Contextualization

Education in contemporary Western societies exists in a different geographical space from education in bygone decades. In ancient times, educators regarded students as empty slates, tabula rasa, waiting to be written upon (Brooks and Brooks, 1993 in Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Developing from the works of Dewey (1938) and Piaget (1972), learning is now understood more as a process of praxis, or doing, as the paradigm “social constructivism” (Semple, 2000; Vygotsky 1986) reveals. To reach rural, isolated, and often structurally disadvantaged learners, some educational institutions adopted technology as a means to increase student
scope and enhance the marketability of education as a commodity. These structural shifts require culture and geography be considered in the planning, analysis and implementation of educational design.

Distance education (DE) is a result of this technological change and is a global phenomenon, with "over 130 countries developing or offering distance courses, many of them based on new information and communication technologies" (Shields, Gil-Egui and Stewart, 2004, p.120). Precisely defining what constitutes "DE" (DE) remains a contested issue. Adjectives such as "flexible delivery", "virtual", "correspondence" and "online" are found intermittently dispersed throughout the literature to describe non-face-to-face education. Although DE is not a new phenomenon, with correspondence programs existing during the 19th century, the addition of technologically driven communication systems is recent (Schiffer, 2004). Yet, still, DE lacks standardization (Bowles, 2004). Consequently, variation in global conditions present educators with issues of social justice and inequality regarding the quality and type of educational experience and products bought and sold.

Modern communication technology in learning environments has caused the "people of diverse nationalities [to] find themselves in increasing contact with each other. "Developments in transportation communication as well as the crisis of world ecology have created the so-called global society" (Hess, 1995, p.vii). In many countries women, underrepresented ethnic groups, gays and lesbians and other previously excluded groups have gained a greater voice which results in "public debates on diversity, pluralism, oppression, exclusion, inclusion, colonialisms, identity politics and other issues that can be glossed as multicultural" (Hess, 1995, p.vii). As this paper later discusses, electronic communication exchanges by DE students are more informal and frequent than in traditional classrooms. Student disclosure of personal and cultural details previously reserved for other, more intimate communicative interactions impacts such public debates Hess identifies. Thus, reflexive assessment of the new virtual educational classroom itself is arguably an important task.

Despite the growth in application of virtual communication technology in education, the "Australian experience" with DE shows the limitations of research fails to include (Monolescu, Schifer and Greenwood, 2004; Palloff and Pratt, 2001; Brooks, Nolan & Gallagher, 2001), or give cursory attention to (Albalooshi, 2003; Lynch, 2004, 2002), culture as a fundamental variable of focus and overwhelmingly prioritize technology. The increased centrality of cultural awareness for effective educational experience necessitates educational research that prioritizes culture. Still, despite this need, research prioritizing culture amid educational discourses remains limited, even when the imperative for its inclusion is acknowledged (Jorgensen, 2002). In contrast, within sociology, analyses of social capital (Putnam, 2005; 2002), and particularly standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987), where it is argued that the standpoint of the learner can considerably impact learning outcomes, reveal the futility of positing notions of universality. Further, as Harding (1991) argues, the strength of standpoint epistemology lies in the production of knowledge created from within and by groups who are best positioned to reflect upon their situation, oppression and experience rather than the objective "expert" which characterizes positivist knowledge. Research conducted from the standpoint of the researched can lend insights otherwise precluded by methodology. Using this theoretical paradigm to question lingering notions of the "universal learner", I shall proceed to explore learners' expectations and understandings of the reputation and worth of a university degree earned via a distance education.

Methodology and Findings

In May, 2005, a four-page survey containing open and closed ended questions was mailed through the postal service to university students in an introductory sociology DE subject. Of
the 177 active\(^1\) students, 69 completed and returned the survey resulting in a response rate of 39\%, which is acceptable\(^2\) for this methodology. The demographic profile is presented in the table below:

### Demographic Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Respondent Self-Description &amp; Quantity by Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male - 10 Female - 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td>Urban – 40 Rural – 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity(^3)</td>
<td>“Australian” – 56 European – 8 North &amp; South American – 2 Asian - 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19-29 – 16 30-39 – 26 40-49 - 23 50-59 - 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative analysis of two\(^4\) survey questions reveals several themes relating to how student expectations of education are shaped by issues of culture, geography and technology. Although the sample demonstrates cultural variation in the traditional sense, this analysis operationalised culture as organizational, learning, and social.

In the first question, students were asked what expectations they held regarding the DE subject’s organization and learning tools. From the 48 responses received, 5 broad student expectations of DE emerged:

1. **Structural consistency**

Five students reported the need for consistency between internal and DE subjects, which they identified as lacking. Additionally, two of the students believed there should be less variation specifically across DE subjects, while another articulated variation stemming from lecturers’ receptiveness and willingness to provide communication and learning assistance using virtual environments.

2. **Organization and Assessment**

Eleven students identified the need for educators to understand DE as different in kind from face-to-face education, and hence meriting different organizational structure. Specific issues noted include the need to acknowledge differing realities of self-paced learning, less reliance on traditional resources, such as academic journals, which may exhibit cultural bias, and the

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\(^1\) Active students refers to those who submitted each of the 3 required assessment items. In DE at this university, it is common for students to enrol yet never partake in any of the subject requirements. Hence, although such students were mailed surveys, their non-participation was expected and not included in the findings.

\(^2\) According to Neuman (1994), response rates for mail surveys commonly range between 10-50\%.

\(^3\) Ethnicity is defined as country of birth. From the non-Australian born students, countries represented include: Canada, England, Germany, India, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, and Wales.

\(^4\) Question 1: What expectations did you have of a distance education class? In other words, how did you expect the subject to be organized and what learning tools did you anticipate receiving? Question 2: Do you think getting a university degree entirely by distance education has the same academic reputation as a degree earned by internal study or a combination of distance and internal? Please elaborate.
expectation that DE subjects would be delivered equally to all irrespective of physical location:

As you can appreciate journals and recommended texts are very hard to access from my region and when they change at the last-minute it is very confusing and you feel very despondent. Sometimes I feel very alone with regard to the lecturers not realizing some students are very geographically isolated. (ID 29)

and socioeconomic status:

I am distressed by the cost of textbooks. My family make sacrifices so that I can purchase a textbook. In this subject a better text was suggested but I could not afford it. I have struggled with the difficult text for financial reasons. This is unfair. All materials to complete work should be available to all students. .access to my local university library costs $50 per year. Even this is a big ask. Surely the wealthy are not the only once entitled to an education. (ID 11)

3. Learning material expectations

Student expectations regarding learning materials were divided between satisfied and dissatisfied. Eighteen students found the materials they received to be as anticipated. However, 15 identified other resources they believed would enable them to compete better with internal students to achieve higher grades.

4. Communication expectations

The degree to which technology is/should be used within DE is contested within the literature. Among these respondents, there is also variation. Seven students reported satisfaction, saying service exceeded expectations, with the level of communication they experienced with both classmates and the lecturer using technology (forum and e-mail). In contrast, five respondents stated they needed more forum interaction and better means to communicate. Again, the principal deciding factor stemmed from perceptions of isolation:

The only thing I found that I didn’t receive was lectures. I found it hard not having a feel of the personality of the course. Made the course feel more isolating. (ID 53)

I expected more regular contact on the forum between students and the teacher on a regular basis. On-campus students have classes and lectures which means they have access to more information than DE students. I have studied courses on campus and by DE at University and I believe that on-campus students have a distinct advantage over DE students. I believe the forum should be used more in discussions of course content and to provide definitions and overviews of course content to bridge the gap. (ID 21)

5. Subjective agreement in ability and effort

Assisting in the falsification of the “universal student” myth, both questions show variation in student reporting of subjective and perceived ability required. Whereas five students believed the subject was harder than anticipated, two put forth how they were “spoon fed” (ID 39) and “expected harder” (ID 14).

In the second question, students were asked to consider the academic reputation attached to a DE degree to assess whether the socio-cultural stigma previously identified within the literature to “correspondence degrees” (Palloff and Pratt, 2001) exists among contemporary
students. Fifty-six students responded to this question. Although responses married, they can be categorized into expressing three broad sentiments:

A. Judgment

Thirty students chose to answer this question by judging/defending whether internal or DE delivery is better as a learning mechanism. From this group, 15 believed taking internal classes is better than studying via DE, as they have experienced it, with 4 citing similar employer preference for degrees earned using internal study. Three students expressed embarrassment, with one noting “you do not have to tell anyone that you study externally” (ID 68) and another saying:

people tend to see distance education as being more laid-back than normal campus going education. Full-time students are more hard-working etc. – least that’s the opinions of some I know (ID 48)

However, dissatisfaction with DE does not appear to dissuade enrolment. For example, a student who believes internal study has a better reputation with employers wrote that DE remains their preference:

Actually, I don’t believe that a lot of people (employers in particular) give the same credence to a degree earned via distance (entirely) as they would for one earned on campus. I have realized that this is because they believe that when they hire somebody who has earned a degree on campus, they are hiring the cultural capital gain from that University. However, I do not care what they think. I loved doing it via DE and wouldn’t have to be on campus. I didn’t at school! (ID 70)

I think for me, I would have a greater understanding [studying internally], I wouldn’t take so long to complete it therefore life would be totally different. However this would mean our family would have been totally uprooted. (ID 56)

Generally, students preferring internal study describe it as conducive to “more beneficial...discussions with lecturer” and “more immediate communication” (ID 69), and containing “far more hands-on experience and [a] better learning environment” (ID 27). Internal study was often described as “regular education” and 5 students described its better academic reputation and credentials, while others criticised DE for being “textbook learning” (ID 38) and suggested that they “didn’t expect it to be so isolated from other students” (ID 15). Interestingly, only one student identified technology as responsible for the “non-development of ideas due to lack of verbal communication and debate amongst students due to computer and time delay” (ID 67). Just one found DE to require “much less work...less comprehension of ideas, less time spent on study” (ID 14) whereas others simply put faith in the system:

I do believe some subjects cannot be learned by distance education as they may require communication skills and/or interaction with others or physical skills which need to be taught and monitored but I would imagine such courses are not available via DE. (ID 13)

In contrast, the 10 students defending DE as better than internal delivery tended to focus on self-discipline and motivation/initiative, offering comments such as DE is “a credit to the person” (ID 6) and describing how
distance is possibly much more challenging than onsite as you must be very
dedicated, highly literate, capable of good time management, and have an inquiring
mind as you don’t have the feedback and input that on-site students have (ID 12)

As a student of both delivery styles explains, simply sitting in a classroom does not ensure
greater learning results:

Yes. I have experienced both types and know that participation in a “classroom” does
not equal more comprehensive learning. It’s what you make of it. (ID 32)

This ideology of individualism is echoed by those unsure whether DE and internal education
are comparable. Among the 7 students answering “depends”, the most common factor used
to determine the reputation of a degree was “individual effort”. Other variables cited were
degree purpose, professional recognition, and university reputation and experience delivering
DE.

B. Defence

Thirty six of the 56 total respondents expressed indignation that there should be any
difference between degrees obtained internally or externally. Seventeen students expressed
sentiments either explicitly or implicitly along the lines of “a degree is a degree”, while 12
others took a more critical stance acknowledging the academic reputation of degrees is
contingent upon the work which is done and whether assessment items are consistent. Only
one student thought to compare degree quality across universities as a measure of quality and
workload. However, 4 students identified changing community attitudes towards DE and
University study, more generally, as reasons why DE is “a viable and reputable means” (ID 4)
to receive education. Two cited technology as the reason DE and internal degrees are “the
same”, “because of the clarity e-mail/phone can provide” (ID 46) and “because of technology
at this day and age” (ID 44).

C. Ambivalence

The last category of responses centres around the theme ambivalence. Eight students
expressed sentiments of confusion, with 4 saying how they were unaware DE degrees could
have a different reputation, and how they “hoped” an externally-achieved degree would be
equated with one undertaken internally. Two others understood DE as viewed by others as
“different but not inferior” (ID 48 and 53), while another 2 believed reputation was entirely
contingent on university or faculty reputation, irrespective of delivery mode.

Discussion & Conclusions

Demographic portrayals of DE learners in regional Australia describe the population as “a
wide cross section of students in terms of gender, age and employment status” and
geographically dispersed (Kilpatrick and Bound, 2003). This distribution is consistent with
national and international studies of DE learners, this sample also tends to be “older, mature,
self initiators interested in outcomes who are taking time away from family and careers to go
back to school” (Schiffrer, 2004: 23), who are "more sophisticated" (Leebron, 2004) and
responding to shifting trends in corporate and other sectors (Bowles, 2004). However, it
does not confirm their tendency to be male (Schiffrer, 2004: 23) and unlikely to be from a
minority population, if one identifies as minorities the 5.75% (reported in Table 1) of this
sample who were first-generation immigrants.

Although the physical limitations imposed by geography, particularly rural geographies,
impact individual choice and availability of learning style, governmental and university data
reveal consumers of DE tend to reside in urban locations because of infrastructure requirements. This reality is crucial because though some advocates of online learning claim it possesses great potential to expand educational opportunities within regional and rural Australia in response to an increasingly global knowledge economy, the low student uptake reveals multiple factors at play. Along with the structural constraints imposed by the availability of communication technology, the norms and traditions accompanying education extend beyond technological opportunity. Education requires socialisation. "The teaching and learning environment in a traditional classroom is perceived as vastly different from that in the online environments," due to different communication cues and interaction opportunities (Lynch, 2002, p.66). Just as students learn via the socialization process how to be a student in face-to-face classrooms, so too must participants in virtual geographies acquire new learning norms. Furthermore, this sample is not representative of the structural limitation imposed by the statistic that of the “only 207 fully online courses at Australian universities...90 per cent were at a postgraduate level, generally in specialised subject areas” (Bowles, 2004, p.27).

Changing culture, whether at the institutional or individual level, is no simple feat. The research presented here presents the need to ground “best practice” for educational delivery in student, future employer and academic/pedagogical expectations. The themes demonstrated by question one provide a foundation from which to argue that the concept of culture must be applied to the university as a whole entity. Lack of policy and university standardization in the organization of subjects, irrespective of delivery style, can, and indeed will, lead to student dissatisfaction. Furthermore, although the Internet is touted as available globally, in multiple languages and cultures, critical review reveals it is only available to the world if “one has the linguistic keys” (Winchester, 2005). When students struggle with the fundamentals of language, dialogue, so crucial to electronic pedagogy, is stymied. Administrative policies need to exhibit greater cultural awareness, at least to the extent that amid a host of variables, including socioeconomic status, levels of language proficiency cannot be presupposed.

This research exposes the need to consider what I identify as the “virtual geography” of learners: the learning culture created by the removal of the physical classroom. Perhaps harder to assess, and possibly more subjective as each learner is located in their own geographical space and time, the expectations DE learners bring to the virtual classroom are based largely on past experience in “brick and mortar” classrooms and their, often limited, experiences with other DE subjects. Student expectations implore us to not equate virtual with just technology, which reduces the complexity of analysis virtual geographies of DE require.

This paper has purposely neither prioritized discussions of technology, nor focused learning evaluation exclusively on technology. In contrast, it prioritizes learning culture and location (geospatial, life course and educational) to learn firsthand the needs students identify as crucial to their DE experience. Student voices reveal technology does play a role in DE. Yet, at least for questions of expectations and delivery mode, technological issues are less important than structural concerns. Consistency between delivery modes, subject organization, availability and quality of learning materials, communication and lecturer availability and correspondence to subjective expectations/levels of effort and exertion are the issues of highest importance to students in this study. Generalized under the umbrella “organizational culture”, within the social institution of education, such concepts seem to recently have been sidetracked in favour of prioritizing technological advancement, particularly at the university where this research was conducted. To the extent that learning is measured by government and industry driven performance indicators, I argue the analysis of institutional culture must accompany measures of quality for DE. Lack of institutional standardization translates into heightened variation among subjects. Given that students cite consistency in assessment items, learning materials and learning achievements as reasons why
DE and internal education should been comparable, care should be exerted to minimize variation. Finally, dichotomization of student response in preference for internal/external delivery (as question eight responses reveal) accentuates the complexity in generating characterizations of “typical” DE students. This research has made problematic conceptions of the universal student and, by applying a sociological lens, points to standpoint theory for further analysis. As globalisation increases cultural diversity in classrooms, and epistemology continues to reflect learners’ socioeconomic backgrounds (gender, class, race, sexuality, age, nationality, etc), educators must ensure practices and policies for DE/virtual learning promote social equity and justice.

References


