Cultural Effects in the Use of Discussion Lists for LL

When we base our online courses on collaboration between students, we are already making assumptions about how students can learn, which are culturally based. The basic idea we are used to in Western educational systems is that of the construction of knowledge instead of reproduction. This is an active process, where the teacher is an expert facilitator/enabler. The cultural assumptions which students bring to the classroom may be different, however.

Introduction: Assumptions about CSCL and Constructivism

For example in one study (Hong et al, 2001) it was found that rather than contributing to an online discussion, the Malaysian students waited for the model answer before sending in their messages. Whilst as Western constructivist teachers we are not aiming at the transfer of knowledge from the teacher’s brain to the students’ brains, the learners who come to us from other cultural backgrounds may have this goal in mind.

Brigid Ballard (1996) has analysed educational processes in three stages: reproductive > analytical > speculative. The reproductive stage is typical of primary and secondary education in Western cultures. Pupils learn to repeat what the teacher has taught them (although even at this early stage there may be elements of analytical activity as well). The analytical stage comes principally at undergraduate level; knowledge is no longer fixed but is open to question and criticism (1996:152) The speculative stage comes principally at postgraduate level; knowledge is constantly open to extension, revision and change (ibid.). Ballard also relates the typical style of learning to the “conserving” as opposed to “preserving” attitude of a society where the wisdom and artefacts of the past should be preserved; this is to be found in many non-Western societies. Attitudes to knowledge, to authority and to tradition (ibid.) are well known as cultural expressions (Hofstede, 1986) and attitudes to authority are viewed as representative features on the individualism-collectivism scale.

The Research

In view of experience and many thoughts on the role of learners from other cultures, I attempted with this research to find out the attitudes of learners from China and France by administering a questionnaire through email (to Chinese students) or a discussion list (WebCT for the French learners). Preliminary results may be seen in the following sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of Teacher</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B (10 students)</td>
<td>emphasised the pedagogical, plus knowledge transfer</td>
<td>emphasised need for fairness, objectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>also friendly/open/warm personality (1 Fre /2 Chinese)</td>
<td>also emphasis on interesting topics/activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>much in common</td>
<td>much in common</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of Learner</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>harmonious atmosphere, good atmosphere</td>
<td>listen attentively (11 Fre 3 Chi)</td>
<td>Do homework (7 Fre, 3 Chi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>study target, learn the knowledge, desire for knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>much in common</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A good lesson?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on harmony (5 out of 10 mentions) and student interest or gain</td>
<td>emphasis on interaction/participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Summary of responses to questions:
What does a good teacher do?
What does a good learner do?
What happens in a good lesson?

Style and content of students’ contributions

1. This article is based on the contents of a presentation given at EUROCALL 2003 Limerick. The table included may appear in another article, submitted for the ReCALL journal (review pending).
There was a noticeable difference in the style of messages sent by the European and the Chinese groups.

French and German students (also Swedes in a previous study) tended to take certain basic points “as read” and discussed more detailed points. This may be due to a different attitude to teaching and learning; on the other hand it may be due to better language competence which enabled them to express more detail in their comments.

Chinese students used a simpler style, but also made more points about the process of learning. This could be seen as contradicting my earlier premise that they view the expertise of the teacher lies in how to teach. Of course, the students may still see the expertise of the teacher as lying in the pedagogical area, with a different interpretation of what is involved, however. As examples students gave the following answers to question 1 above:

A good teacher, in my opinion, should be someone who is willing to take responsibility and have the ability to transfer knowledge to students, and give feedback to the student letting them know how they are doing about the course if possible. (Xuanling)

A good teacher may need good communication with foreign student (no problem for differen accent), be patient and helpful as well. (Sandy)

Being patient, responsible and teaching in an interesting way. (Yi)

They may think that the teacher is responsible for the student’s thought processes and it is the teacher who has to be aware when a student does not understand, rather than the student who has to pose the relevant question. The nature of these responses, two examples of which are quoted above, does not allow us to be certain on this point, but the frequent references to a good teacher’s attributes in similar terms suggest to me that there may be a different thinking behind these comments.

Email as a leisure activity

There is evidence from other studies of the use of CMC in education noting that students were inclined to use email and CMC for social rather than learning purposes:

- Teenage users sent social messages (Lai, 1997),
- Three were quite a few non-task-related messages (Veerman & Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2001)
- In another study (Hong et al, 2001) the authors emphasised the need for the teacher to enable in-depth learning with a group of Malaysian students. Students tended to carry out tasks briefly, at a minimal level, while waiting for the “correct” answer to be posted by the teacher.

The tendency was also for students to wait for the instructor to provide model answers and notes. (ibid.)

Hong et al noted that Students need to change from passive learners to active learners who explore, acquire and share knowledge (ibid.)

Internet Use in China

The view and use of email as a leisure activity has become noticeable among Chinese students coming to the UK over the last three or four years. Students are able to pick up software skills more quickly than before, but as experienced users of e.g. Instant Messenger they may adopt a style of communication which is not in line with our pedagogical aims. There are now an estimated 33 million internet users in China, of whom 51% are under 24 years old and 45% log on from work. The typical internet user is a single, male professional in his twenties and the the most popular use – keeping in touch.

Clearly, students with this background have experience of using CMC for “fun”. They may then need to be trained in the use of CMC for education, as well as the training needed to become active rather than passive learners as noted above.

Conclusions

This article has discussed whether students, particularly students from East Asia, view the use of CMC in the same way as we do as teachers. There is contradictory evidence
as to whether cultural differences are a factor in the use of CMC/CSCL. Further questioning would be needed to establish whether the Chinese students here are referring to the same ideas about learning but expressing them differently, or whether they are really using different basic assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning which is suggested by the available literature (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999).

The questions which have arisen in the course of this paper are not only in the areas of cultural difference, but also in the area of the Internet culture. I would like here to pose the questions:

- Has the Internet or CMC created its own culture?
- Is this an international culture or this merely a superficial overlay?
- Will the use of pedagogical CMC suffer from CMC being seen as a leisure activity in a leisure culture?

I would welcome any comments on these questions from researchers who read this magazine.

References


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