A Non-Western Learning Perspective: A Review of the Impact of Culture in Adult Education

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Abstract

In the globalization era, classrooms of adult education are growing more internationally diverse. Educational leaders and teachers have been working with students and teachers who are from diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, understanding teaching and learning of diverse groups require an understanding of differences in educational beliefs and values. This paper aims to investigate how culture affects teaching and learning specifically in the adult education context by reviewing both theoretical research and empirical research. In this paper, culture is viewed through the lens of Hofstede’s national culture model. Findings reveal cultural values of adult learners are influential variables that may affect learning behaviors of adult learners who are from different cultural backgrounds to some extent. Cultural awareness of educators is helpful in providing a better learning environment. Without this awareness, adult learners who are from diverse cultural backgrounds may be placed at a disadvantage because of their different learning styles or behaviors.

Keywords: adult education; Hofstede’s national culture model; cultural awareness

1. Introduction

In the globalization era, classrooms of adult education are growing more internationally diverse. Educational leaders and teachers have been working with students and teachers who are from diverse cultural backgrounds (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). Thus, understanding teaching and learning of diverse groups require an understanding of differences in educational beliefs and values. The “Western and non-Western dichotomy” is one means of considering alternative perspectives to our understanding of learning and knowing” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2009, p.223), and culture is a part of defining Western and non-Western perspectives. This paper, therefore, aims to investigate how culture affects teaching and learning specifically in the adult education context by reviewing both theoretical research and empirical research. In this paper, culture is viewed through the lens of Hofstede’s national culture model, which is one of the well-respected models of culture and is used to predict human behaviors (Hofstede, 1980). The first section of the paper summarizes this model. Next, there is a discussion of whether educational
values can be borrowed. Following that is a discussion of the impact of national culture on adult learning. Discussed next are the implications—both for practice and for theory—of the research findings. The paper then concludes with a brief summary.

2. Hofstede’s National Culture Dimensions Model

The national culture dimensions model was first introduced in 1980 by social psychologist Geert Hofstede, who had worked in an international environment since 1965 (Dimensions of National Cultures, n.d.) in his seminal work, “Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in work-Related Values.” The model was developed from the results of a worldwide, cross-national survey of 116,000 employees of a large multinational organization, IBM Corporation, which had subsidiaries in 40 countries in the 1970s (Hofstede, 1980). The study aimed to explore the influence of cultures in employee values. He found that each country has different cultural values. These unique values, which distinguish one country from others, could be statistically grouped into four clusters called the four dimensions of national cultures including power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Power distance is the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power is distributed unequally. Individualism is a loose social framework where people take care only of themselves and family, while Collectivism is a tight social framework where people look after and are loyal to their groups or social network. Masculinity includes values like assertiveness, the acquisition of money and materials, and not caring for others, while Femininity encompasses values that are opposite from masculinity. Uncertainty Avoidance is the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and tries to avoid these situations (Hofstede, 1980). From the findings of his study, Hofstede (1980) concludes that organizational theories are culture-oriented; for example, some managerial theories that can explain American values are not valid for other countries.

The use of the cultural dimension model to predict managerial behaviors is the construct that later scholars have been relying on in business contexts (Yates & Cutler, 1996). However, the model has also been widely used to investigate impacts of culture in adult education (Cheng, 1998; Cronje, 2011; Gogus, Nistor, Riley, & Lerche, 2012; Keller, Lindh, Hrastinski, Casanovas, & Fernandez, 2009; Richards & Bilgin, 2012; Tapanes, Smith, & White, 2009).

3. Can educational values be borrowed?

According to Cheng (1998), one cultural dimension, the individualism-collectivism dimension, strongly affects educational attitude and practice. In the collectivist cultures of East Asia, education is viewed as a means of socialization; therefore, one educational goal is to instill norms and societal expectation in order to produce learners who are adaptable to the expectations of the society. This value
illuminates extrinsic motivation embedded in learning in Asian societies and explains uniformity characteristics of East Asian educational systems, which leads to the emphasis on examinations and competition. The pressure of learners to adapt to the system and society results in a lack of creativity and initiative in collectivist learners. In contrast, for individualist nations like Western nations, education is a means of empowering learners. Education aims to adapt to the needs of individuals. The rights of individuals take precedence over formality and standardization of schooling and curriculum.

From his review of the literature, Cheng (1998) concludes that educators and policymakers need to pay attention to the role and impact of culture on the educational process, and that cross-cultural educational policy borrowing is impossible or improper. He strongly believes that culture significantly impacts educational values and behaviors because these values and behaviors are deeply rooted in cultural traditions. Nevertheless, from a review of empirical studies that use Hofstede's national culture model as a framework for exploring the impact of national culture on adult learning, the findings show inconclusive results. Some studies confirm the impact of culture on learning (Cronje, 2011; Tapanes et al., 2009), but some show adverse results (Gogus et al., 2012; Keller et al., 2009; Richards & Bilgin, 2012). In addition, some studies suggest other factors that need to be considered as influential factors, such as the professional culture of STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and non-STEM professions (Gogus et al., 2012) and leadership (Jippes, Driessen, Majoor, Gijseelaers, Muijtjens, and Vleuten, 2013). These empirical studies are investigated in the following sections.

4. Impact of national culture on adult learning

Research studies have been conducted to find the impact of national culture on various educational elements in adult learning contexts, such as success in curriculum reform (Jippes et al., 2013); behaviors of teachers and students in online learning environments (Cronje, 2011; Gogus et al., 2012; Richards & Bilgin, 2012); and perceptions and attitudes of teachers and students in online learning environments (Keller et al., 2009; Richards & Bilgin, 2012; Tapanes et al., 2009). These studies show inconsistent results of the impact of culture on educational behaviors.

4.1 Culture as an influential factor

Some research studies have confirmed Hofstede’s national influence concept and report that national culture affects teachers and adult learners’ behaviors (Cronje, 2011; Richards & Bilgin, 2012; Tapanes et al., 2009). In the study of the impact of individualism-collectivism culture in online courses of two universities, online learning courses are hypothesized to be influenced by the teachers' and adult students' cultural values (Tapanes et al., 2009). The findings indicate that, unlike individualist
learners, collectivist learners felt that their individualist teachers were not aware of cultural differences in the online class and that learning was not relevant to their cultural context. Moreover, students from a low level of uncertainty avoidance culture felt that a consideration of cultural background is important, and they would prefer having information about different cultural perspectives that they might experience in an online course. In addition, Individualist and low uncertainty avoidance students reported being more motivated to participate in online course-related activities than collectivist and high uncertainty avoidance students. Collectivist learners are reported as being more silent and alienated because of cultural reasons than the Individualists.

In a case study of interactions of professors from South Africa and Master’s students from Sudan, during a two-year Internet-supported Master’s course in Computers in Education, Cronje (2011) found that culture influences students’ behaviors with regard to their self-confidence and their leadership in taking initiative. Furthermore, Sudanese students who are from a high power distance culture are reported as having a lack of confidence and initiative. There is also a relationship between their high level of uncertainty avoidance culture and their high demand for guidance.

In a cross-cultural study of behaviors and attitudes of a virtual team project of students from two different cultures, Australian and Singaporean, researchers found that behaviors of adult learners from the two countries are consistent with Hofstede’s findings (Richards & Bilgin, 2012). They also found that the Australian students were less collectivist, more individualistic, and less relationship- oriented in running the project; they were thus more universalistic and rules focused, more masculine, and less avoiding of uncertainty. In contrast, The Singaporeans were more collectivist, more feminine, and more avoiding of uncertainty. Individualist Australian students are goal and achievement driven, resulting in their attitude that people should get marks according to their contribution, while collectivist Singaporean students are relationship oriented and tend to maintain good relationships with project members. For the collectivists, good team relationship is more important than the project. According to the findings, Richards & Bilgin (2012) found that 50 percent of Australian students agreed to put the project before people, compared to only 25 percent agreement of Singaporean students. Only 22% of Australian students think that having good team relationship is more important the project, compared to 37 percent of Singaporean students. A higher percentage of agreement that “team rules may not always apply” is shown in Singaporean students’ attitudes, as compared to the Australians.

4.2 Culture as a non-influential factor

Some studies do not report culture as an influential factor in adult learning (Gogus et al., 2012; Keller et al., 2009). In their study, Gogus et al. (2012) integrate
Hofstede’s cultural dimension model with the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) to investigate the impact of culture on educational technology acceptance among Turkish learning technology users. The findings demonstrate that adult learner behaviors, like the acceptance of educational technology among Turkish users, are influenced by professional cultures like STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and non-STEM rather than national culture.

In the study of the impact of national culture on e-learning implementation, the findings show that there is no significant difference in attitudes toward e-learning between Swedish university teachers who are from a low uncertainty avoidance culture and Argentinian professors who are from a high uncertainty avoidance culture (Keller et al., 2009). Interestingly, Argentinian professors are slightly more positive (60 percent) toward changes or the e-learning format than Swedish teachers are (40 percent). The researchers suggest culture change as a cause of the similar attitudes toward e-learning between the two countries. They indicate that because of social change, Argentinean society is not much different from Swedish society regarding Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions (1980).

### 4.3 Other possible influences

Research studies in the field of cultural influence in adult learning have suggested other possible factors that may impact diverse classroom behaviors. These influential factors include, but are not limited to, language (Tapanes et al., 2009), influences from foreign cultures (Swanson, Frankel, & Sagan, 2005), and other types of culture such as the professional culture of adult learners (Gogus et al., 2012).

Besides national culture, language is a part of classroom practice. In a study of the impact of culture in culturally diverse online classes of two universities, unexpected results reveal that there are relationships between differences in language used by students and online class participation (Tapanes et al., 2009). Minority students who use different languages than the majority students have less participation in online courses as they may felt more intimidated to participate because of their language abilities.

People’s national culture may not reflect their culture due to their extended stay in foreign countries. In the study of Swanson, Frankel, & Sagan (2005) effects of culture differences in business students and professors’ interaction, and improvement strategies across four cultural diverse groups (Chinese, New Zealand, Polish, and American), findings reveal that the limitations of their study are their ignorance of influences of other cultures based upon travel or extended stays. They suggest that experiences in foreign countries could be another influential factor that could impact business students’ classroom behaviors.
Another factor that is reported as an influential factor in adult learning is professional culture. In a cross-cultural study of the acceptance of educational technology of technology users, Gogus et al. (2012) found that professional culture like STEM and non-STEM intertwines behaviors of technology users. STEM professionals appear to have lower computer anxiety, which could be a result of low uncertainty avoidance culture of their profession. However, Gogus et al. (2012) mentioned their study limitation that they do not determine differences in technology infrastructure or technology availability of participants, which may be the cause of the differences in behaviors of technology users.

5. Implications

As classrooms become more internally diverse, many cross-cultural studies, especially in online environment contexts, have explored classroom behaviors of culturally diverse adult learners by using Hofstede’s cultural dimension model as their theoretical framework. Their findings in regard to the effects of culture are inconclusive. Nevertheless, Hofstede’s cultural model (1980) has been raising cultural awareness in business organizations as well as educational institutions, especially those involving online classroom interaction of diverse learners. Regardless of the effectiveness of his model in predicting classroom behaviors, cultural awareness is a starting point when dealing with internationally diverse classes.

5.1 Implications for practice

Research findings have raised cultural awareness for both traditional face-to-face and online classes. An understanding of cultural differences, especially those who have individualist versus collectivist culture, those who have low power distance versus high power distance culture, and those who have low uncertainty avoidance and high uncertainty avoidance culture is important for practical reasons. For online learning in particular, educators need to be aware of the special needs of collectivist and high uncertainty avoidance online learners in order to help them be successful in individualist and low uncertainty avoidance settings (Tapanes et al., 2009).

Since research studies have shown that cultural differences do exist in online classroom environments (Cronje, 2011; Richards & Bilgin, 2012; Tapanes et al., 2009), educators need to provide equal opportunities regardless of their cultural background, which may impact their learning styles and educational values. Without knowledge of their learning behaviors rooted in their national culture, educators may unintentionally place at a disadvantage students who have cultures different from the dominant culture students. Educators should make online learning environments more welcoming to the students who have different cultural backgrounds by identifying cultural biases in learning material (Bennett, 2001), providing more guidance, and
giving detailed instructions for assignments and tasks that might help high uncertainty avoidance learners.

Collectivist and high uncertainty avoidance online learners face disadvantages and barriers in online environments (Tapanes et al., 2009). With an understanding that minimal classroom interaction or participation is a part of different educational values, teachers should motivate high uncertainty avoidance learners and collectivist learners by providing security and comfort levels in sharing different opinions and experiences. In regard to the acceptance of educational technology, educators need to identify special needs of high uncertainty avoidance learners. Technology training or peer learning may help high uncertainty avoidance learners learn better. In addition to cultural differences, language difficulties of minority students also exist in online classroom participation (Tapanes et al., 2009). Group work and writing assistance programs could help motivate adult learners with language difficulties to learn.

5.2 Implications for research

From a review of the literature, Hofstede’s model has some gaps that later research tries to fill, such as its focus on culture at the national level; also, there is a lack of attention to other levels of analysis and an ignorance of multiple variables. Gogus et al. (2012) build upon Hofstede’s model and suggest a utilization of professional culture of STEM and non-STEM professions as a lens through which to look at adult learners’ behaviors at a group level. Other researchers suggest other influential factors like language (Tapanes et al., 2009) and influences from foreign cultures (Swanson, et al., 2005) as possible variables that might affect learning and educational values.

Weaknesses of Hofstede’s model found from the review of literature of later research studies. First, cross-cultural research needs to pay attention to not only culture at the national level, but also at group levels such as school culture, and professional culture. Second, researchers need to consider multiple variables other than cultures such as language and influence from foreign culture due to traveling or extensive stays in other countries.

Although, extensive research has been conducted in the area of cultural influences on classroom behaviors; this research centers around the impact of culture on diverse students. Thus, the gap in these research studies is the consideration of culture differences from the teacher’s point of view (Swanson & Frankel, 2002). With the growing number of multinational educational institutions, service providers or teachers are from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds. In order to have a better understanding of classroom behaviors, cultural differences of teachers should be
considered by exploring cultural differences in teaching styles to provide useful information to the body of research.

6. Conclusion

Hofstede’ cultural dimension model has been widely used to predict learners’ behaviors, and there is evidence that cultural values of adult learners play a role in adult education. These values affect their learning behaviors to some extent. Thus, to provide a better learning environment, if not educational equality, educators need to be aware of cultural differences. Without this awareness, adult learners who are from diverse cultural backgrounds may be placed at a disadvantage because of their different learning styles or behaviors. Although there are other influential variables that may affect their learning, an awareness of the differences due to cultural differences is a starting point in interacting with internationally diverse students.

References


