Accommodating the Needs of International Students in Online Learning: Issues, Strategies and Research Directions

The Challenge

The world is undergoing a tremendous transformation toward globalization and virtual communities. The higher education institutions in the U.S. feel the impact. Globalization of education and the emergence of online learning are two of the inevitable changes in American higher education predicted by Levine (Levine, 2000). The foreign student population in the United States has witnessed an almost three-fold increase from 145,000 in 1970 to 582,996 in 2002 (Zikopoulos, 1992), and these students contributed nearly $12 billion dollars to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2003) in 2002. Levine (Levine, 2000) predicted that “the most successful institutions will be those that can respond quickest and offer a high-quality education to an international student body.” At the same time, online learning is witnessing exponential growth. As reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Newman, 2001), more than 1,100 colleges and universities were offering courses via the Internet, and spectacular future growth was expected. On the other hand, however, most faculty members in higher education institutions have little training on either the theoretical or the practical aspects of teaching and learning. Online teaching and the increasing international student population pose new challenges to them. What advice should faculty developers provide to professors? The paper intends to shed light with respect to this question.

Literature on international students and online teaching remains as two separate areas of investigation. This paper aims to synthesize literature from these two areas and explore issues specific to international students in the online learning environment. What problems and issues do international students have in the online environment? What strategies should faculty members take to accommodate the needs of the international students in the virtual classroom? What future research questions should be addressed in this area? We have conducted a literature review to provide answers to these questions and to provide a conceptual framework for future research. The result of the literature review will be provided in the paper.

The Study

Traditionally, interests in international students have come from research areas such as counseling, higher education student affairs, international education, and communication. Literature from these areas has been reviewed to identify international students’ difficulties in studying and living in the U.S. We have tentatively categorized these issues into three groups: academic difficulties, personal problems, and social concerns. These problems are usually caused by the language and cultural differences between international students and the host country. These factors are interrelated, and they all impact students’ academic performance. To examine whether these same problems exist for international students in the online learning environment and what other issues that these students have with Web-based instruction, we have reviewed literature related to online teaching and learning. The literature suggests that many of these problems not only exist but may be worsened in the online environment.

To identify strategies that professors can use in accommodating the needs of international students, we have examined theories and research from the field of instructional design in addition to the research areas mentioned above. We have synthesized a model to conceptualize online teaching that can better meet the needs of
international students. Based on the model, we have derived instructional design principles to guide faculty members in teaching online courses. Good teaching is good teaching. These guidelines are consistent with good instructional design practice that truly takes into consideration the needs of the learner, encourages student interactions and collaborations, provides prompt feedback, respects cultural diversity, and makes learning relevant and meaningful for students. We speculate that these guidelines can not only improve faculty members’ online teaching of international students, they can also enhance professors’ teaching skills in general.

As a new area of inquiry, online teaching and international students has a very limited empirical base. Much research is needed. The paper will point out the potential research directions in this area.

References