

E-learning and Intercultural Literacy

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Abstract

An e-learning is knowledge-based learning integrating the use of digital technology in setting up learning environment. That establishes network in the field of education. First of all, the author elaborates the main e-learning characteristics which consist of knowledge networking, arbitrary learning, virtualized learning and interactive platform. Furthermore, the author discusses how to utilize digital repository, network service and access device in e-learning and to fully play an important role of e-learning for cultivating intercultural literacy.

Keywords: E-learning; Internet; intercultural communication; intercultural literacy; intercultural communication competence

1. Introduction

An e-learning is knowledge-based learning integrating the use of digital technology in setting up learning environment. And e-learning environment is one where the educational practices are partly or totally based on information and communication technology (Zhang, 2011). To be simple, so-called E-learning is the on-line studying or network studying. That establishes network in the field of education. The students can be on-line by PC, which is the new studying way by network (Zhen, 2001). It makes full use of studying environment of newly communicative institution and profound resources provided by IT technology, such as computer network, multimedia, professional content network, information search, digital library, distanced studying, on-line class and so as to realize newly studying ways (He, 2009).

Meantime, intercultural literacy is an urgent need in today's world of global interdependency. Heyward conceptualizes intercultural literacy as "the understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities which enable effective participation in a cross-cultural setting" (Heyward, 2004). An intercultural literate person, according to Heyward, processes understandings, competencies, attitudes and identities necessary of successful living and working in a cross-cultural or pluralist setting. This person has the background required to effectively "read" a second culture, to interpret its symbols and negotiate its meanings in a practical day-to-day context" (Heyward, 2004). Therefore, it is no doubt that intercultural literacy through E-learning can be adapted in different various intercultural communicative activities.

Thus, many existing E-learning modules can be internationalized using structured information on the context and specific culture. Taking advantage of E-learning contents is a promising concept for intercultural communication and promoting intercultural literacy. Moreover, the use of E-learning has proliferated owing to the adaptability of E-learning to education, because it promotes learner-centeredness in that it accommodates diversity in learning styles and in learners' needs with respect to time, content, place, learning resources and delivery media. E-learning is used to enhance traditional and existing teaching methods and to create new ways of achieving teaching and learning outcomes (Herselman, 2005). E-learning is furthermore based on the concept of interactivity, which assumes communication, collaboration and engagement (Simms, 2003). Simms, and the theory of constructivism, which asserts that learners are not passive recipients of knowledge transfer, but are actively engaged in constructing their own meaning (Van, 2004).

2. E-learning's characteristics

In recent years, following by the increasing popularity of technologies on web and computer, the scale of education expands continuously, E-learning, as a new learning model, gazes from both the Chinese Mainland and the international with its flexibility and convenience. At the same time, many research results show that E-learning makes distinct impacts on acquiring knowledge contents of intercultural communication, completion time of study and increasing learning efficiency.

Nowadays, people believe that E-learning will become the main studying ways in the future accounting of following characteristics of E-learning:

Knowledge networking

Studying knowledge of intercultural communication and knowing some information about intercultural communication, is no longer from a book, a journal or a library, but involving in words and images to present sound video and even three dimension scene largely enriches the expressive ways of knowledge and information, databases, or knowledge repository. The database or knowledge repository will re-divide knowledge system of intercultural communication and the contents of the database or knowledge repository will be re-combined into new knowledge system, learning and research methods of intercultural communication will also have new changes. Therefore, intercultural knowledge no longer exists in revealed form; learners need to explore and discover by themselves, and eliminate their cognitive blind spots' independently.

Arbitrary learning.

E-learning can provide profound and diverse learning information resources and knowledge repositories presented by hyper-text. E-learning is no longer regarded as the process of teachers' blind instillation and students' passive rote, but the cognitive process during which students assimilate and accommodate the new environment and new knowledge with their abilities, interest and former experience. Learners have many choices of learning resources, teachers, teaching tool, consultant material and etc, so as to realize free exploration of information and knowledge in the field of intercultural communication. Therefore, learners need to collect a large amount of learning resources in order to come to their own understanding of a specific problem, for example, intercultural adaptation of research on intercultural communication and then are able to provide a theoretical exposition of the viewpoints. Diverse as the learning resources are, learners should possess strong capabilities in information search and analysis to ensure that meaning construction is conducted in an accurate way.

E-learning can change our traditional teaching and learning model, and is an effective solution which can meet learners own learning needs. By the use of E-learning, learners can arrange their own learning time and space in the office, hotel room or at home according to their own choices and schedules. In this way, learners will increase their own learning freedom and really enjoy their own learning very much.

2.3 Virtualized learning

E-learning completely has reversed the traditional mode of face-to-face teaching, and separated from limited physical space. Human makes use of computer and communicative technology to create virtual library, virtual class, virtual community, virtual city and even virtual country, virtual objects created in virtual space world improve largely studying subjects' ability of cognition, enlarge space of cognition. The restriction in real world on human's practical activities disappear in the world of network, virtual object is not restricted to attribute, state and regulation any longer, practical activities disappear in the world of network, virtual object is not restricted to attribute, state and regulation any longer, practical activity set free from restrictions of space, climate and some other outer restrictions. Resorting to technology of virtual world, we can construct any real object even to our content and even can image fantastic object(Liu, 2004). For example, learners want to communicate with foreigners from their own target language, they easily take advantage of the World Wide Web which can provides learners with " real world examples of integrated knowledge, rich source of authentic language and culture material, and retrieval of timely and abundant information" (Magoto, 1995). At the same time, learner can listen to radio and watch the films again and again from some Websites. on virtual language situation.

2.4 Interactive platform

Traditional ways of learning, featured by centralized teachers, could no longer meet learners' needs for personalized learning. E-learning has been established a new learning platform which provides a Web-based platform and a new way for people to learn a special knowledge. Now, E-learning platform is an open information platform built on two-way interactive electronic information communication applications; platform design is base on the computer network and software and database technology, with two-way interactive features and advantages. It should take full advantage of technology in design, use appropriate means in order to provide learners with conscience, which can provide the conditions for the operation and maintenance. It is no doubt that learners can discuss some with others including foreign teachers online, ask questions which may be answered later, or it can arrange online help.

In this way, E-learning will develop online study better, instead not merely on how to utilize information technology to enlarge class in traditional face-to-face teaching (Chen, 2010).

3. E-learning for cultivating intercultural literacy

From the above the characteristics of E-learning, we have known many advantages which E-learning platform for training learner's intercultural literacy. E-learning offers new learning environment which is being developed to support and supplement the traditional learning modes, and refers to new pedagogical and educational approaches together with opportunities provided by information technology. E-learning aims to promote learning that is continuous, individual, autonomous, and self-directed and is also independent of the time and place of study. In such a new learning environment, learners are to be able to take responsibility for their own learning, while teachers are facilitators supporting the learning process. Just as scholars point out that as online language learning shifts in focus from single classrooms to long-distance collaboration projects, the focus of learning will also expand beyond language learning to an emphasis on intercultural competence, cultural learning, and cultural literacy.

E-learning services have evolved since computers were first used in education. There is a trend to move towards blended learning services, where computer-based activities are integrated with practical or classroom-based situations. Generally speaking, E-learning platform comprised three main components, such as digital repository, network service and access device.

3.1 Digital repository

Digital repository, in the broadest sense, is used to store any digital information and all kinds of materials. As well as teaching materials, repositories can be useful for a wide range of institutional resources and collections. Examples include undergraduate dissertations, showcases of student work, past examination papers, digitized images used locally and collections of sound recordings from lectures or other activities. Educational material and its use differs from that in research repositories and will need a different approach. However, digital repositories for intercultural communicative learning are considerably more complex both in terms of what needs to be stored and how it may be delivered. Especially, there is no special digital repository for intercultural communication research and learning. Thus, digital repository is the core of E-learning of intercultural communication. The purpose of a digital repository is not simply safe storage and delivery but share and reuse different information for improving intercultural communicative competence. This means that E-learning platform is interactive and is used to build up a new mode of learning some knowledge of intercultural communication from digital repository. Meanwhile, users of digital repositories and teachers may produce web-based courses or classroom courses, face-to-face or distance-learning, full courses or short digital "nuggets". The digital repository should be neutral to the pedagogic purposes of the material just as a library has no influence over where or when a book is read, or whether it is used for a key education purpose or to prop up the leg of a table (Dunean,).

Therefore, the use of digital repositories is tied solely to web-based delivery of E-learning, or is widely used to support all forms of learning based on digital material, depends on the mode of use and not on the technology. No doubt, digital repository plays an important role in e-learning of intercultural communication, and also is one of important knowledge repository of intercultural literacy.

3.2 Network service

E-learning can provide computer-based learning (CBL), computer-based trainings (CBT) computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) and technology-enhanced learning (TEL) through web-based platform. Basic network platform provides the transmission of multimedia information flow for E-learning, is the base of application platform, including the narrow basis of the network platform, enterprise computing and storage platforms, information system, strategic management, information system security under Internet environment, basic application service platform and interface technologies. Application platform is the platform implemented through a variety of ways, it is the core part of E-learning platform (Zhao, 2011).

A supportive environment is required to derive intercultural understanding from an intercultural experience. Such experience should help create a welcoming environment (cognitive and affective), otherwise learners may become jaded and disillusioned with the experience and may derive no benefit from it (Sen, 2003). To create a safe environment in an e-learning context, the following should be kept in mind:

In the case of educational web documents, the audience is international and, therefore, the site must communicate to multiple users from multiple cultures. If communicators have uncommon cultural patterns, then problems of asynchrony, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and discrimination can arise in communication.

3.3 Access device

New learning environments are being developed to support and supplement the traditional ones. The term new learning environment refers to new pedagogical and educational approaches together with opportunities provided by information technology. A new learning environment aims to promote learning that is continuous, individual, autonomous, and self-directed. It is also independent of the time and place of study. In a new learning environment, trainees are to be able to take responsibility for their own learning, while trainers are facilitators supporting the learning process. Many of the elements of the new learning environments are still under experiment (Korhonen,). Some possible benefits for participants are following:

- Flexibility-Because it is possible to attend class and/or using e-learning portal (e.g. making homework) when it is convenient for participants (24 hours per day and 7 day per week);
- Accessibility-participants in e-learning process are not collocated anymore (same time/same place). Participants from various geographic regions can attend to a class which is not locally available. This also lead to reduced travel costs and lost time due traveling;
- Own pace of study-participant can set their own pace of study and can adjust the pace of study to other obligations (e.g. family, work, sport). Participants are not anymore bind to semesters and strict timetables;
- Accommodation of different learning styles of participants through different activities- because for example some participants prefer studying with help of multi-media and other prefer studying wit reading text materials (Nedelko, 2008).

In E-learning, basic access device including application service platform and interface technologies is the core platform implemented through a variety of ways, and is also an open information platform built on two-way interactive electronic information communication applications. Furthermore, E-learning in universities is knowledge-based learning integrating the use of digital technology in setting up learning environments. An E-learning environment is one where the educational practices are partly or totally band on information and communication technology. There can be a combination of presentation and distance learning, online and offline, solitary and group learning. But here also what is specific of academic E-learning, as compared to other types of E-learning is the central role of knowledge as the means for understanding in depth the significance of whatever is studied.

E-learning environments can provide the contextual opportunities for intercultural experiences, involving risk taking, emotional reactions, spontaneous exchanges and the reflective processes for developing self-awareness and awareness of others (Belisle, 2008).

4. Conclusion

E-learning has completely changed our traditional education concepts and provided us with a new mode of learning or teaching, in which learning (or teaching) is no longer a book of knowledge, a couple of books but the relevant professional knowledge that transferred into the forms of dada stored in the database. Under the support of database, the knowledge system of intercultural communication will be re-divided, learning content realignment will occur, and learning research methods and new changes will occur too, learning content maintain timely and constantly renew. It's no doubt for us to utilize digital repository, network service and access device in e-learning and to fully play an important role of e-learning for cultivating intercultural literary.

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