THE ROLE OF DIVERSITY IN THE DESIGNING OF EFFECTIVE LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Antonia-Maria Hartofylaka, UK Open University

Introduction

The provision of support to the open and distance learners is a very interesting, multi-dimensional area, which covers a significant part of the Open and Distance Education (ODE) theory and practice. Nevertheless, Robinson (1995, p.225) pinpoints that a significant amount of the research and studies based on that subject have been developed on the basis of an analogous cultural context: the formal, institutionally based higher education of the developed world. The imposition of this context has created a false "norm" and has undervalued the importance of diversity in the development of open and distance educational support.

The present paper aims to reflect on the issue of context diversity and its implications on the designing and the implementation of a learner support system in the open and distance learning (ODL) settings. Specifically, it examines the context-specific factors - the geographical, the technological, the economical and especially the socio-cultural-, which an ODL provider should take into serious consideration, when deciding about the structure of a specific system of learner support (choice of media, supporters' roles, selection of accompanying material etc.).

In addition, this study touches upon the particular case of the internationally distributed online educational programs and the increased importance of the learner support systems for their well-functioning. Those programs are usually open to learners from all over the world, who bring their different educational, socio-cultural, religious, political or language experiences in a common pool (usually a web interface) and try to communicate with their fellow-students. In fact, this is the strength of such programs; however, this strength may easily turn out to be a weakness, if the educational effort is not backed by a culturally-sensitive learner support system, since there is always the danger of "unproductive" or even "provocative" declarations of those differences.

A. Context-specific factors, which shape the learners' needs

Robinson (1995, p.225) remarks that the myth of "the learner", according to which the distance learners have the same characteristics (and consequently, similar needs), is not valid. The learners are distinct personalities, with varying needs, which depend on their natural characteristics (age, gender, intelligence, physical and mental condition) and the socio-cultural ones (educational background, income, geographical position, cultural identity, ethnic and racial conscience, etc.). This paper does not touch upon the differences of the learners, which derive from natural reasons; instead, it focuses on the basic socio-cultural factors, which shape the learners' needs, and illuminates the influence on those factors to the designing of learner support systems.

Hence, the designing of a concrete learner support system requires a situational analysis of the context, in which the system intends to apply; therefore, a preliminary research on the basic factors, which shape the identity of each context, would provide the designers with valuable information, according to which they could develop effective systems of learner support. This paper distinguishes four interrelated context-specific factors, which are directly connected to critical decisions about the implementation of learner support (choice of appropriate media, methods of support, role of the supporters, etc.).

1. Geographical distribution of learners

Robertshaw (2000 in The Commonwealth of Learning Official Website, 2003) refers to the strong relation between the communication of distance learners and their distribution over a specific

geographical area. The contrasting cases of Hong Kong and Australia highlight the connection between those two elements. In Hong Kong, 6.5 million people live within a space of less than 1,100 sq. km. In addition, the branches of the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) are *"accessible within 30 kilometres and one hour of transportation by road, rail or water"* (Tam, 1999). On the contrary, Australia is a vast country *"with a land mass equivalent of the United States and with a population equivalent to that of the state of Pennsylvania"* (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). Hence, due to its specific geographical characteristics, the OUHK is more likely to take advantage of the face-to-face methods in the development of its student support system, than any Australian Open University, which has to find ways to overcome the geographical constraints of the country. Naturally, the quality of the national transport and communication systems influences the effects, which derive from the geographical limitations of a region.

2. Technological infrastructure

Tait (1995, p.236) identifies the direct relation between the geographical characteristics of each country (or region, in general) and the level of its technological infrastructure in the planning of student support systems. For example, the Scandinavian countries are characterized by small populations, which are *"dispersed over a distance and isolated due to geography and climate"* (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). Even though Sudan has the same population characteristics, the lower level of its technological infrastructure implies that the African country is in need of a completely different model of student support. Hence, the provision of online support may seem a reasonable choice in the case of Sweden but would not suit in the present context of Sudan – at least when covering courses, which are addressed to the major part of the population.

The equality between learners is a crucial matter, which the designers of student support systems may find difficult to handle. Robertshaw (2000 in The Commonwealth of Learning Official Website, 2003) stresses the problem of access in the newer forms of technology, which a significant amount of people face and *"the danger of segregating students"* according to their capability - or not - to follow the rapid development of technology. The designing of a student support system, which would comply with the distinct characteristics of each context, is a significant step to the restriction of inequalities in ODE. The provision of relevant resources by the educational provider (for example computers and internet access, which could be provided through the operation of fully-equipped, study centers) would also promote equality between learners in a great degree; unfortunately, this solution is not often feasible, due to economical restrictions.

3. Economical capabilities

> *"We haven't got the money, so we have got to think!"*
> (Ernest Rutherford, in Simpson, 2002, p.118)

The economical robustness of a society is strongly connected to the high standards of living, the easy access to all kind of resources and products, the rapid technological development, etc.; all those advantages normally lead to the construction of advantageous educational environments.

Nevertheless, the specific policy of each institution determines the way, in which it intends to overcome the possible financial disadvantages. As Rowntree (1992, p.175) underlines, ODL is not a *"cheap learning"*: on the contrary, it involves many different costs, such as cost of the development, academic staff, student support services, administration, marketing, etc. The present paper supports the belief that, although the dedication of money and time to the area of student support augments the budget of the educational institution in a direct way, it turns out to be a cost-effective solution in the long-term. Therefore, the deficiency in financial resources, which the low-budget institutions face, should not be confronted with curtailments in the specific area (which seems to be the most obvious and easy solution) but with the institutions' orientation towards cost-effective solutions, which enhances the providers' range of possibilities. A careful financial planning, which would take into account all the parameters for the implementation of a cost-effective model of student support, will rearrange the institution's economic capacities and will provide efficient solutions.

4. Socio-cultural diversity

> *"While education means spreading awareness and lifting taboos, it does not mean violation of people's customs and traditions. This must be kept in mind while planning a support system."*
> (Priyadarshini, 1994, in Robinson, 1995, p.225)

I. General issues concerning socio-cultural diversity and learning

According to Hofstede (1980, in Shrestha, 1997), the variation of national cultures is connected with the following dimensions:

- Power distance: the extend to which unequal distribution of power is accepted in a society
- Uncertainty avoidance: the degree to which a society can deal with ambiguity and tolerance to deviation from the norm
- Collectivism - Individualism: Individualism refers to the degree to which one attaches values to his/her own self rather than to collectivist values
- Masculinity - Femininity: Masculinity refers to the degree to which the values are "masculine"

Granger (1995 in Shrestha, 1997) pinpoints that those dimensions influence the learning environments in a significant degree, since they construct *"distances"* connected to the learners' knowledge, level of language ability, cultural background, prior skills, learning patterns and styles as well as goals and motivations, and, of course, to the environment, in which the learners inhabit. For example, there is an evident variation in the skills, which are considered to be important across cultures. The Western cultures give priority to the skills for the use of cultural tools, which are connected to literacy (for example reading and writing). In addition, children in Western cultures from a very early stage get accustomed to the widespread technological innovations, which exist in many houses; hence, the pressing of buttons, the interpretation of the visual messages of the television, even the familiarization with the computer keyboard, are common, everyday activities to them (Hebenstreit, 1984 in Shrestha, G., 1997).

Nevertheless, the acquaintance with cultural tools such as pens and books, television, household machines, etc. is not universally valid. For example, cross-cultural research has shown that the Mayan children seemed to have *"less involvement with machines, but some had roles in economic activities of the adult world, such as running errands to a corner and trying to weave"* (Rogoff et al., 1998). The different preferences in the development of skills derive mainly from the opposed considerations of the meaning of "socialization". In the Western cultures, socialization aims at preparing children *"for academic pursuits or to become individuals outside the ancestral culture"*; on the contrary, in non-Western cultures it intends to *"teach social competence and shared responsibility within the family system and ethnic community"* (Nsamenang and Lamb, 1998, p.252), in order to serve the common belief that a person's abilities are useless, if they are not used for the good and well-being of the social group (Dasen, 1984 in Nsamenang and Lamb, 1998, p.252).

II. Socio-cultural diversity and learning in ODL contexts

The cultural differences among learners are more than apparent in the ODE practice. Those differences are clearer in learning contexts, which provide learners from different socio-cultural background with the opportunity to interact with each other. For that reason, the online learning environments, in which globally distributed courses take place, form the object of analysis for many cross-cultural researches.

Kim and Bonk (2002) based on researches on the different interaction patterns among learners, which belong to different socio-cultural environments, provide us with valuable examples of those differences. Liang and McQueen (1999 in Kim and Bonk, 2002) examined the behavior among Asian and Western adult learners in an online collaborative learning environment and remarked crucial differences regarding their expectations from their tutors. Hence, the majority of the Asian students appeared to be mainly tutor-oriented, expecting direct instruction and direction from their teachers. On the contrary, most of the Western learners were peer-oriented and were seeking after the interaction with their fellow-students.

Of course, the concrete philosophy and values of the national educational systems, which form the previous educational experience of nearly all ODE students, influence the learners' behaviors in a determinative degree. Consequently, students, whose first studies are oriented to dissemination of knowledge, are more likely to attribute to their tutors the role of the content expert.

Freedman and Liu (1996 in Kim and Bonk, 2002) identified the different learning processes, which culturally dissimilar American learners showed in a series of electronic interactions. According to them, the Asian American students *"tended to ask fewer questions from either teachers or students, were less likely to use trial-and-error or experimental methods in their work processes, and they were more hesitant to being watched when working with computers than their non-Asian American counterparts"*.

The communication patterns across international students also vary. For example, in their research on the online collaboration between Finnish and American students, Iivonen et al. (1998 in Kim and Bonk, 2002) underlined the *"cultural difference in spoken and unspoken languages between Finns and Americans"*, which has been practically revealed by the larger amount of e-mails that belonged to the American students. In addition, Kim and Bonk (2002) interpret Hall's following categorization of the communication ways as a *"function of individualism and collectivism"*:

- Low-context communication emphasizes how intention or meaning can be best expressed through the explicit verbal message (and is more likely to be found among Western cultures)
- High-context communication emphasizes how intention or meaning can be best conveyed through the context (e.g., social roles, positions, etc.) and nonverbal channels (e.g., pauses, silence, tone of voice, etc.) of the verbal message (and is more likely to be found in the Asian cultures)

Thus, individuals, in a general sense, who belong in Western cultures and who *"value independence, achievement and being unique individuals"*, seem to interact in a more direct and explicit way than members of collectivistic cultures, who express their need for interconnectedness with others through their *"indirect, implicit and reserved"* communication style (Kim and Bonk, 2002).

III. The factor of socio-cultural diversity in the designing of learner support systems

The aforementioned examples show the direct connection between the socio-cultural circumstances, under which the learners live and act, with their varying positions and attitudes towards learning. Hence, they imply the need for differentiation of the support services according to the learners' distinct cultural circumstances (Robinson, 1995); in order to be effective, the ODE support services should be designed as culturally-informed and culturally-sensitive systems. As Priyadarshini (in Shrestha, 1997) states, *"bypassing analysis of learner's cultural environments can add considerable difficulty in the learning process. Providing a social context for learning is, therefore, extremely important for reaching some groups"*.

Nevertheless, practice has shown that many distance education providers plan their support systems based on their own presumptions, without taking into consideration the real needs of the learners. The reasons, which usually cause the mismatch between the students' needs and the relevant support systems can be found in either the actions of the institution, which is responsible for the development of the support services (improvised designing, improper training of the educational staff, curtailment of the expenses in the specific area) or in the institutions, which use existing – usually successful - learner support systems, without adapting them according to the specific needs of their context. In those cases, the socio-cultural values and norms of the designer prevail at the expense of the values of the "host" country and lead to ineffective support.

B. The additional value of learner support in the international online learning environments

The role of learner support in the online distance courses, which represent the 3rd generation ODL, is considered to be more integrated into the course development than ever before. The content in the online courses is not predetermined; on the contrary, it strongly depends on the new information that

the tutor and the students research and share it with all the members of the learning group. In addition, the well-functioning of the online communities requires the constant communication between members, which usually takes the form of discussion/negotiation about the course content, participation in group activities, etc. Consequently, the "online tutors" have enhanced responsibilities, since they have to deal with academic, counseling and administrative issues at the same time. Hence, tutors are no longer considered only as the content experts but as *"partners in conversations that seek to construct knowledge"* (Thorpe, 2001); therefore, they *"need even more skills of learning facilitation than the conventional tutor of a second generation distance education course"* (Thorpe, 2001). In such contexts, the borders between learner support and course design cannot be easily identified. In addition, new possibilities for support have been created, for example the student-student support. Thorpe (2001) refers to the valuable help that the ex-learners of a specific course can provide to the potential learners, who are interested in the same course, by sharing with them their educational experience. In addition, the more experienced learners (academically or vocationally) can turn out to be great supporters of their less experienced fellow-students.

Nevertheless, the most significant characteristic of the online distributed courses, which also forms one of their greatest advantages, is the ability to bring people from diverse cultures closer by creating multicultural learning communities. It is generally accepted that the multicultural collaboration adds value to the students' learning experience, since it offers them the chance to view the world from a wider perspective. However, the achievement of constructive collaboration is not an easy task, due to the significant differences among students, some of which have been already analyzed above. In addition, the different mother tongue of the fellow-students adds another diversity, which may cause inequalities in the teaching-learning process.

The learners' ignorance about their fellow-students' different cultural background may lead to unpleasant circumstances, which may harm the educational environment; besides, the tendency to stereotype is common in a significant amount of people. Reid (2002) refers to the case of an Islamic student, who protested *"against the ignorance and stereotyping, which often insists that all Arabic speakers must be Lebanese, that all women who wear a scarf must be Lebanese and that all female followers of Islam must be oppressed"*.

Due to the distinct character of the internationally distributed online courses, the role of learner support seems to be more critical than ever before and certainly requires the enhanced skills and commitment from the part of the supporters. According to Kim and Bonk (2002), *"the instructors, who facilitate online collaboration among multicultural students need to be aware of cultural differences in the learners' online collaborative behaviors and such differences need to be taken into account to foster online collaboration among culturally diverse learners"*. The gathering of information concerning the learners' differences (language, customs, beliefs, social contexts) and the supporters' sensitivity towards that matter needs to be developed in specific methods and techniques in order to respond to the learning difficulties of the culturally different learners (Shrestha, 1997). The constant collaboration between the supporters (of the same institution as well as of the broader ODE community), the inter-institutional support groups, and the realization of guided seminars prepared by experts in learning support systems (Randell and Bitzer, 1998, p.139) are some effective ways, in which the supporters can develop their knowledge and skills.

Conclusions

Learner support constitutes an integral part of the educational process in all educational settings. In the open and distance learning environment in particular, where the physical contact between the people involved in the educational situation is not the rule but the exception, the provision of support to the learner acquires greater importance and conforms to the general principles of ODE: **learner-centeredness, openness and equality, collaboration**.

Hence, the realization of concrete learner support systems requires respect and conformity in the diversity of the learners' distinct needs, which, in a significant degree, are shaped by context-specific factors. The geographical distribution of the learners in relation to the transport and communication systems of a nation, as well as its technological infrastructure and the general economical capabilities,

influence the general educational environment of the learners and should be taken into account in the designing of student support systems. Furthermore, the respect in the socio-cultural diversity of the learners is another crucial factor in the development of the appropriate ODE student support services (even though practice has shown that its value has been repeatedly underestimated). Therefore, the provision of support in online learning environments, in which learners from all over the world have the opportunity to collaborate, acquires even greater significance.

References

1. (THE) COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING OFFICIAL WEBSITE (2003), Available from: http://www.col.org [retrieved 02 September 2003]

2. KIM, K.J. & BONK, C.J. (2002), *Cross-cultural Comparison of On-line Collaboration*, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, vol.8, issue 1, October 2002. Available from: http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol8/issue1/kimandbonk.html [retrieved 2 September 2003]

3. MOORE M. AND KEARSLEY G. (1996), *Distance Education: A Systems View,* Wadsworth Publishing Company.

4. NSAMENANG, A.B. AND LAMP M.E. (1998), *Socialization of Nso children in the Bamenda Grassfields of Northwest Cameroon,* in Woodhead, M., Faulkner, D. and Littleton, K. (eds), Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood, London, Routledge.

5. RANDELL, C. AND BITZER, E. (1998), *Staff Development in Support of Effective Student Learning in South African Distance Education,* in Latchem, C. and Lockwood, F. (eds), Staff Development in Open and Flexible Learning.

6. REID, C. (2002), *Identities and Anxieties in Online Communities*, Ultibase, May, 2002. (Paper originally presented at the Eight International Literacy and Education Research Network (LERN) Conference on Learning, Spetses, Greece, 2001). Available from:

7. http://ultibase.eu.rmit.edu.au/Articles/may02/reid2.htm [retrieved 13 August 2003]

8. ROBINSON, B. (1995), *Research and pragmatism in learner support,* in Lockwood, F., Open and Distance Learning Today, Routledge, London.

9. ROWNTREE, D. (1992), *Exploring Open and Distance Learning*, Kogan Page, London.

10. ROGOFF, B., MOSIER, C., MISTRY, J. AND GONCU, A. (1998), *Toddlers' guided participation with their caregivers in cultural activity,* in Woodhead, M., Faulkner, D. and Littleton, K. (eds), Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood, London, Routledge.

11. TAIT, A. (1995), *Student support in open and distance learning*, in Lockwood, F., Open and Distance Learning Today, Routledge, London.

12. TAM, S.W. (1999), *Developing Countries and the Future of Distance and Open Learning in the Twenty-first Century*, JIST, vol.3. no.1, June 1999 ISSN: 1324-0781Available from: http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/docs/old/vol3no1/article3/index.htm [retrieved 21 March 2003]

13. Thorpe, M. (2001), *Learner support: a new model for online teaching and learning.* Available from: http://www6.open.ac.uk/h80xresources/MThorpe/MThorpe.pdf [retrieved 15 April 2001]

14. SHRESTRA, G. (1997), *A Perspective on Cultural and Linguistic Problems Associated with Distance Education in Developing Countries*, Information and Communications Technologies for Development. Available from: http://www.undp.org/info21/text/public/pb-pers.html

Author

Antonia-Maria Hartofylaka
MA in Open and Distance Education (OUUK)
25, Trembesinas str., P.Psihico, 15452, Athens, Greece
thellon@hotmail.com, eodem@otenet.gr