INTERCULTURAL SENSIBILITY IN ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

Attention to cultural diversity is a necessity for online higher education in management. Beamer (2004) postulated the Model of Intercultural Sensitivity to conceptualize the intercultural competence dimensions that can develop. The Complementary, Intercultural Learning Model (Beamer, 2016) emphasizes the importance that students are able to encode and decode the differences in messages emitted by people of various cultures. The aim of this research is to analyze the verbalization of intercultural content of online students participation and their learning products for an online masters in human resources direction. The content of participation and the learning products of 108 participants based on the system of categories proposed by the Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and enriched by Intercultural Learning Model has been analyzed. The most frequent category found is adaptation, so cultural difference is the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and encourages behavior appropriate to that culture.

KEYWORDS

Online Teaching and Learning, Higher Education, Management, Intercultural, Higher Education Institutions, Content Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

As Zhu, Handford and Johnstone Young (2016) noticed, culture and interculturality is framed in online promotional discourse at higher education programs. "*There have been paradigm shifts and theoretical debates within the field of study of intercultural communication with regard to what culture is*" (Zhu, Handford and Johnstone, 2016, p. 3). Interculturality is used as an umbrella term covering a plethora of terms referring to, for example, cultural diversity, cultural differences, hybridity, cultural identity and even multiculturalism: a term which has a distinct connotation. Nonetheless, two theoretical frameworks stand out for their acceptance of the analysis of interculturality.

Bennett (1986, 1993, 2016) and Bennett and Bennett (2003, 2004) highlight the importance of being more interculturally competent. Move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism seems to be very relevant for intercultural competence and the major change in the quality of the cultural experience. Bennett (2004) postulated a framework for conceptualizing dimensions of intercultural competence in his Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS constitutes a progression of worldview with orientations toward cultural difference that understand the potential of increasingly more cross-culturally complete experiences. Three ethnocentric orientations, where culture is a central experience in reality (denial, defense, minimization) and three ethnorelatives orientations, where culture is considered an experience (acceptance, adaptation and integration) are postulated.

The Intercultural Learning Model (Beamer, 1992, 2004) emphasizes the importance that participants are able to encode and decode the differences in messages emitted by people of different cultures. The model proposes spiral learning, which is characterized by the ability of students to go deeper into cultural differences. Building knowledge from this model involves engaging repeatedly with the same issues to structure increasingly complex mental representations (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2001; Bernal, 2003; Blignault & Ritchie, 2009; Boksberger & Melsen, 2011). The assimilation and accommodation of new concepts is part of this learning process. The construction of new meanings around diverse cultures appears fundamental (Hofstede, 1984; Koschman, Hall & Miyake, 2002; Koschman, Suthers& Chan, 2005; Juwah, 2006;

Garrison& Arbaugh, 2007; Kanuka, 2011). This construction implies that students are competent to generate other cultural messages, analyze communication, challenge stereotypes, pose questions and understand diversity. Cultural values and practices influence business communication. Beamer (2004) analyzes the relationships among the cultural environments of firms and the structure of these firms. He examines how companies and individuals communicate and concentrates on the underlying cultural reasons for behaviour.

Complementarily, Hofstede (1984, 2005) proposes four dimensions to simplify the analysis of the intercultural fact. These dimensions have been commonly used in analysis from a management perspective. Every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential ways of acting that were learned throughout their lifetime. "Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of a group or category from people of others." (Hofstede, 1984, p.3). The first of these dimensions is the power distance index. The power distance index measures the degree of inequality in society: power distance can be defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that. Secondly, individualism and collectivism, which measure the degree of individualism in society: individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; while collectivism, as its opposite, pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong and cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Thirdly, role stereotypes, which highlight key differences between feminine and masculine societies and general norms and family. Finally, the uncertainty avoidance, the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Torras and Mayordomo, 2011; Mok, 2015; Piyush, Jackie, Tamand Kim, 2015; Porto and Byram, 2015;Prats, 2007). The aim of this research is to analyze the verbalization of intercultural content in the online students' participation and in their learning products for an online masters in human resources direction. According to the theoretical model described, this research focuses on the analysis of behaviors that students display in an online learning environment in relation to their intercultural sensibility. The objectives of this study are to describe:

1.   The intercultural sensibility verbalizations, that is, the behaviors that students exhibit in online learning environments according to ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism positions.

2.   The intercultural sensibility verbalizations of the students that increases functionality and adjusts to the educational content.

2.   METHODOLOGY

2.1 Procedure

The nature of the aim leads us to use a qualitative methodology based on observations. This methodological option has been selected because the subject of the study involves attitudes for which experimental manipulation and strict control is difficult for various theoretical reasons. We needed to consider attitudes in their context, and this process required a limited period. We needed to obtain data on the interaction between participants. Finally, this complex process was too lengthy to be reduced to a mere set of variables. The units of analysis were related to the categories of previously established dimensions, in accordance with the level of analysis proposed. An online masters course was analyzed. In the context of an e-learning platform, Blackboard, used by 108 students, we observed the teaching–learning processes of four learning activities that corresponded to one subject in online higher education. This course involved an online learning environment activity. Learning activities were selected based on two criteria. The first criterion consisted of choosing types of activities that included knowledge socialization (conversation forum, debate forum, team work, and individual work): these types of activities are found frequently in electronic learning environments based on asynchronous written communication.

2.2 Participants

The contributions and learning products of 108 participants, 82 women and 26 men, from OBS Business School's online masters in human resources direction have been analyzed. All the students participate online. The students featured are from Spain (26.68%), Colombia (21.6%), Ecuador (34.56%), Mexico (7.56%),

Peru (5.4), El Salvador (1.08%), Nicaragua (1.08%), Argentina (2.16%), Equatorial Guinea (1.08%), Albania (1.08%), Bolivia (1.08%) and Uruguay (1.08%). The participants are students enrolled in the subject: the new role of the human resources director. This subject reflects on the role that a HR Director should play at companies in the future and moves towards a new vision of the human resources management role. This new role implies the director as the strategic partner, promoter of organizational transformations, discoverer of talent and facilitator of effective competency trainings. The didactic sequence analyzed involves a month of student work.

2.3 Analysis

This analysis will focus on the methodology of analyzing online interaction. As dialogue and interaction are seen as important drivers of interculturality, researchers often want to analyze the interactive processes. Thus, a holistic approach is needed, allowing researchers to analyze the whole process of interaction and online discussion (Gee and Handford, 2012; Glaser and Strauss, 2012; Ravithand Mittenfelner, 2016).

The course will take quantitative content analysis of transcripts of asynchronous discussions (discussion boards/for a) as a starting point: data which could open up the discussion of content analyses of other types of interaction (online wiki work, interaction in video data, etc.) will be analyzed. The main purpose of this analysis is to provide categories of how to analyze student-student interactions and products in order to make evidence denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, integration, power distance, individualism-collectivism, role stereotypes and ambiguous or unknown situations. The content analysis was carried out in a total of 314 verbalizations and 108 learning products. A four-phase procedure was established:

Phase 1 consisted of captured data: copied from boards, saved as text files, and ordered chronologically. This data corresponded to 1 teacher and 108 students, (electronic messages, students' and teachers' documents), during the time they carried out the activities being considered.

Phase 2 consisted of developing the intercultural sensibility protocol for observational methodology. The protocol is a document that collects the results of discussion between researchers around the theoretical integration of Zhu, Handford and Johnstone Young (2016), Bennett (1986, 1992, 1993, 2014, 2016), Bennett & Bennett (2003, 2004) and Hofstede (1984, 2005). The protocol defines, characterizes and exemplifies intercultural sensibility based on references. The development of the protocol involved two researchers. This phase was critical to ensure rigor in data analysis.

Phase 3consisted of establishing a procedure for inter-observer reliability based on the Cohenk index. Researchers worked in pairs to guarantee the precision of the observation protocol, which we considered to be very important in relation to the research objectives. Reliability was calculated by fragments and by the dimensions and obtained adequate results: activity one's fragments' Cohen k index¼1.00; activity one's dimensions' Cohen k index¼1.00; activity two's fragments' Cohen k index¼1.00; activity two's dimensions' Cohen k index¼1.00; activity three's fragments' Cohen k index¼0.85; activity three's dimensions' Cohen k index¼0.89; and activity four's fragments' Cohen k index¼0.79; activity four's dimensions' Cohen kindex¼0.78.

Phase 4 consisted of the implementation of intercultural sensibility protocol. The deployment meant that researchers shared criteria of fragmentation, concept, characteristics, and examples set in two protocols. The text fragments emerged codified into dimensions and factors. Finally, we obtained frequencies for each of the dimensions and factors.

From these frequencies, percentages were calculated to find the proportion of each size and frequency over the total. Therefore, despite using the qualitative methodology, the final results are presented as frequencies and percentages. The complexity of the procedure was aimed at ensuring the methodological rigor of the investigation.

2.4 Results

The results show that ethnorelativism values have been verbalized in 12% of student contributions. The category that appears most in the verbalization of the participants is integration (51%) followed by adaptation (40%) and acceptance (9%).

Table 1. Categories development of cultural sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity	Definition	Percentage
Denial	The verbalizations of the participants demonstrate the lack of positive aspects in forming groups with participants of different nationalities. The importance of interculturalism is disdained and therefore it is not considered necessary to develop cultural sensitivity.	0%
Defense	Participants activate the protection mechanism verbalizing reasons or motives to distort the contribution of peers. The participants act in defense of their own person, group or institution considering that there is risk with the participation of people from other countries.	0%
Minimization	The verbalizations evidenced a reduction of the importance of the contributions of the participants related to their belonging to another culture. Also included in this category are reducing the number of significant contributions in this regard.	0%
Acceptance	Interculturality is qualified as positive and adequate. It includes verbalizations in which the participant clearly expresses an opinion in favor of cultural diversity.	9%
Adaptation	The verbalizations show accommodation or adjustment to the companions of other nationalities. The adjustment is adequate and works for the benefit of the teaching-learning process.	40%
Integration	There are elements that show the approach of the participants and their configuration as a cohesive working group.	51%

3. CONCLUSION

The results show that awareness of cultural differences and willingness to integrate participants from other cultures emerges in online education. In spite of this, it is necessary that the institutions of online higher education promote interculturality to reach levels closer to cultural integration. Even in the contents in which cultural sensitivity is necessary for understanding, interculturality does not appear unless it is approached explicitly in the classrooms. At the era of global information, ethnorelativism values are relevant for the understanding of the manager's work.

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