Cross-Cultural Collaborative Online Learning Platform: Prospects and Problems

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ABSTRACT

Online collaborative learning is increasingly dominating the educational landscape in Nigeria and the world at large where it serves as an accessible and effective pedagogic tool for professional development. With the rise in teachers' population and involvement in online learning, participants must ensure that diverse cultural nuances and expressions are better managed. This study explores instructors' and learners' perspectives on accessing emergent skills through cross-cultural collaborative learning platforms. It discusses relevant challenges inherent in exchanging teaching experiences and skills via cross-cultural learning platforms. Adopting a collaborative online learning theory, the study analyzes forty (40) interviews, questionnaires, and online communications. Results show (1) pedagogic strategies that enhance cross-cultural learning, namely, team identity and role-playing, establishing norms for group members, respecting cultural differences, (2) problems of online learning platforms, namely, the use of unclear diction/code, inability to share same vision, disrespect. The study suggests the need for mutual trust and training on best practices that promote cross-cultural collaborative learning.

Keyword: cross-culture, collaborative learning, collaborative online learning

Introduction

Online collaborative learning is increasingly dominating educational landscape in Nigeria and the world at large where it serves as an accessible and effective pedagogic tool for professional development (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). The spate of this instructional choice reflects current trends in globalized and interconnected world. Studies provide reports on the nature of online learning as proactive and learner-centered and one that conciliates diversity in learning styles and learners' needs with respect to time, content, place, learning resources and media delivery (Zhang, 2012). Although cross cultural collaborative online learning (CCCOL) expands transnational interests and facilitates teaching and learning outcomes (Liu, Liu, Lee and Magjuka, 2010; Zhang, 2012), it must be adapted to the cultural context in which it is delivered for it to be effective. This is because e-learning does not eliminate cultural differences, neither is it culture free.

If online learning is culture bound, and education system of one country not always applicable in another country which has different cultural expression, there is need to bring closely and synergize cultural tendencies to forestall inhibitive learning activities.

The research objective of this paper is to explore instructor's and learner' perspectives on accessing emergent skills through cross cultural online collaborative platforms. Therefore, the researcher examines: which pedagogic tools enhance professional developments and learning activities in an online learning platform?. Again, what are the challenges inherent in cross cultural online learning as against the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching/learning?

Literature Review

Any effective online collaborative learning accessed without consideration of the social and cultural dimensions of the learners involved may not achieve set targets. Culture is defined as the patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that people display as mental programs (Hofstede, 1997). It is only felt when it is shared with others. Learners access new information through a mental network, linking old information to the new item. Learners' value systems, norms and beliefs impact every facet of online learning from course and interface design, to communication in a socio-cultural space and to negotiation of meaning (Gunawardena and Jung, 2014). Since culture reflects success and failure of online collaborative learning, both instructors and learners must actively engage within the social and cultural dimensions of task design.

Collaborative learning is a pedagogic approach where learners are made to be accountable to their learning through interaction, and negotiation with peers (Chidi-Onwuta and Oko, 2018). It subjects learners to deep critical thinking aimed to master academic content and solve complex problems, leaving the instructor's role as that of a facilitator or "a guide-on-the-side" (McInnerney and Roberts, 2009, p.326). This learning strategy can be accessed through traditional face-to-face-class or online. Online collaborative learning provides learners opportunities to share ideas, skills, and beliefs, values, and time with their counterparts from diverse socio-cultural environments. It breaks the barriers of space, coverage, time, and environment inherent in traditional face-to-face classroom learning. From the interactionist perspectives, a great deal of language and other forms of learning takes place through social interaction (Spada and Lightbown, 2010). When L2 learners interact with one another, or with those who are cognitively competent in a language, they use a variety of interaction techniques and adjustments in their efforts to negotiate meaning. Language is a social activity and following Zamani (2016), its learning improves when it is carried out as a constructive and social activity.

Considering the social nature of online learning, the study finds online collaborative learning (OCL) theory relevant. OCL theory is propounded by Harasim (2012) who describes the model as one that focuses on collaborative learning, knowledge building, and internet use as a means to reshape formal, non-formal, and informal education for the knowledge age. Three phases of knowledge construction through discourse exist in OCL: (1) Idea generating - the phase of brainstorming, where divergent thoughts are generated, (2) Idea organizing - the phase where ideas are compared, analyzed, and categorized through discussion and argument, and (3) Intellectual convergence - the phase where intellectual synthesis and consensus occur, including agreeing to disagree, often through essays, assignments and other collaborative works (Harasim, 2012, p. 82). OCL theory appeals to this study because it is a model which maintains that learning activity should be informed and guided by the norms of the discipline and a discourse process that emphasizes conceptual learning and builds knowledge. Again since online learning is based on the concept of interactivity, which assumes communication, collaboration and engagement (Simms, 2003), OCL is a model that best accounts for it. It is therefore imperative for instructors to be trained on the importance of cultural factors that affect learners' learning experiences and academic performance in the online environments.

Although preponderant research which outlined the benefits of online collaborative learning exist in the literatures, (Wang, 2011; Kayumova and Sadykova, 2016), preparing both learners and instructors to be sensitive to and best manage cultural differences in online learning method is imperative and timely.

Several of the works on cross cultural online learning have been addressed from different perspectives. For example, Wang (2011) investigated the instructional design for forming a cross-cultural group and designing the assignments for online cultural collaboration projects. Designing online academic activities for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds is good but the awareness and acting based on the fact that learners in online platforms come from distinct learning environments should take primacy: a demonstrably low-context style learning and high-context style environments. Again, Kumi-Yeboah (2018) explored instructors' perspectives on designing a cross-cultural collaborative online framework, especially instructional strategies that promote designing online learning. His work is very relevant to this study but it's timely to consider the challenges beneficiaries of online design encounter as a result of their world views orchestrated by their environment and experience.

Other empirical studies have assessed the design and implementation of cross cultural collaborative online frameworks for online instructors. Lacking in literature is a research which explores instructors and learners' perceptions on accessing emergent skills especially when learning involves learners from divergent cultural environments. Again, intercultural communications and sensitivity to cultural differences must not be downplayed. It is against this backdrops that this study explores instructors' and learners' perspectives on accessing emergent skills via cross cultural collaborative learning platforms, highlighting the challenges, benefits and the key best practices in promoting cross-cultural learning. This study is a response to Mittelmier, Rienties, Tempelaar, and Whitelock (2017) and Kuni-Yeboah (2018) call for future researches to be conducted on best practices to manage cultural differences in online collaborative platforms and how to promote cross cultural collaborative activities. These can only be actualized by appraising learners and instructor' perspectives on this subject.

Methodology

The research adopts the paradigms of quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative aspect of the study generated data through oral interview, questionnaire, and online communications using forty (40) respondetnts. Two groups of people were involved in the study: a group of English teachers under an online professional development platform called INELT (International English Language Teachers), consisting of teachers from Nigeria, Cameroun, Ghana, Canada, UK, India, China, etc. The platform was set up to enable teachers from these countries to share their teaching experiences, skills and contribute in training young teachers on emergent English language teaching practices and skills.

Topics and challenging issues are weekly brought up and discussed extensively from their cultural and environmental perspectives. The researcher gathered the online communications from this platform for over a period of three months especially when such communications involved divergent opinions that sometimes led to disagreements and name-calling. Participants in this platform served as both instructors and learners especially young teachers. The structured questionnaire was administered online to respondents who responded to the issues raised in it. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), a purposeful sampling technique was used to identify and target the specific individuals representing the spectrum of knowledge and experience relevant to the study. The second group is made of learners from Global Health eLearning centre. Global Health eLearning is an online UK programme that offers courses aimed at increasing knowledge in a variety of global health technical areas. The courses are organized into post graduate certificate, post graduate diploma, and Masters in Global Health. The duration for the

three programmes is three years but learners can obtain any of the certificates or degrees in pre-requisite order.

The interviewed participants are those that offered a course/programme between 2014-2017 who fell between the ages 23 -46. The students who come from Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Canada, US, UK, etc, are engaged in weekly academic activities where the facilitator guides their learning activities. Every learner is accountable to his learning and is required to make relevant contributions and collaboratively access learning with people from these cultures. They were assessed based on their participation and involvements in the programmes. The researcher verbally interviewed some of the respondents on phone using structured questions capable of eliciting their perceptions about engaging in an online learning activity with people from diverse culture and learning experiences. The content analyses of the respondents' information were made. Prospects of such online design and problems associated with learning with people from diverse cultural affiliates were generated and annotated.

Findings
Content Perceptions of Learners in a Cross-Cultural Online Programme

Table 1
Question: What Were Your Experiences Accessing Learning Skills Through Virtual Classroom (Online) Especially When It Involved People From Different Cultural Backgrounds?

Perception	Yes	No	Total
Promotes intercultural communications skills and sensitivity to cultural differences.	90%	10%	100%
Misinterpretation of ideas/codes	90%	10%	100%
Builds academic development and self discipline	85%	15%	100%
Learners' independence	85%	15%	100%
Team identity and role play	80%	20%	100%
Active research	70%	30%	100%
Inability to access learning experiences from same world views.	70%	30%	100%
Social affective learning	60%	40%	100%

Table 1 reveals that 90% of the participants associated intercultural communications and sensitivity to cultural differences to cross-cultural collaborative online learning (CCCOL). Academic self development and discipline, learners' independence, team identity and role play, and social affective learning also were all associated with cross cultural collaborative online learning (85%, 80%, 70% and 60% respectively). However, CCCOL was seen by respondents as a strategy that gives rise to misinterpretation of ideas (90%) and inability to access learning experiences from same world views (90%)..

Table 2.
Question: How can we Minimize Problems Associated with CCCOL?

Perception	Yes	No	100
Introduce content activities that can accommodate learning across cultures	70%	30%	100%
Respect for colleagues	65%	45%	100%
Use of clear codes	60%	40%	100%
Set clear deadlines that will facilitate active participation	60%	40%	100%
Encourage student-to-student interaction	55%	45%	100%

Following from table 2, introducing content activities that conciliates learning across cultures is a major factor that can minimize dissimilar communications associated with cross cultural collaborative online learning. Other factors include: respect for colleagues (65%), use of clear codes and setting clear deadline (60%), as well as student-to-student interaction.

Perceptions of Instructors in Cross Cultural Collaborative Online Programme

Table 3:
What Are Your Perceptions of Delivering and Accessing Online Teaching/Learning Experiences, Respectively Especially When It Involves People from Different Backgrounds

Perceptions	Yes	No	100
Diverse experiences to online learning	70	30	100
Inactivity of some learners/inability to meet the set deadlines	60	40	100
Difficulty in grouping learners according to their academic ability based on their backgrounds from the outset.	60	40	100
Difficulty in attending to the learning and cultural differences of students.	40	60	100
Inactivity of some learners due to language barriers and communication issues	35	65	

Table 3 reveals that diverse experiences are associated with CCCOL, recording a high percentage of 70%. Inactivity of some learners, their inability to meet set deadlines whenever contents activities are required of them to do (60%) as well as inability to group learning and cultural differences by instructors are factors also seen in CCCOL (40%). Language barriers according to the respondents are inherent in CCCOL.

Table 4. Samples of Cross Cultural Communications Gathered In The Online Platform **(INELT)**

    1. Why do you prefer to post socio-political issues that affect Africans and African Americans?. It seems you like to use this platform as a social experiment for those of us who are Africans. If we have other non-African cultures represented here, why always seek an emotional response from us and not others?

    2. I can't accept as an experienced educator with a proven international standing to be attacked for my professional and pedagogic choices.

    2(b) Your pedagogic choices are provocative sometimes

Discussion

Tables 1 and 2 highlighted the experiences common to CCCOL. The major experience according to the findings above is that it practically promotes intercultural communications and sensitivity that the learners do not have same cultural background and experiences. The answers provided by respondents which focused on promotion of intercultural communications and sensitivity to cultural differences include: exposure, knowledge sharing, learn from people from other cultural backgrounds, respect other learners' views, etc. Intercultural or global communications give rise to misinterpretation of codes and unclear information processing as evident in the learners' perceptions table since learners may come from low-context style learning environments while others, high-context style environments.

The finding is in keeping with Swierczek (2018) who studied two very learning patterns of East Asians and their peers in Europe and South Asians to establish how cultural values impact learning performances. His results showed that East Asians who have high-context learning culture were more involved and active in e-learning than their counterparts (European and South Asians) who have low-context learning culture. CCCOL also engenders academic development, self discipline, learners' independence, team identity and role play, and active research. The responses by the learners which focused on the factors above include: self confidence, exposure, triggers hard work, easy learning, and encouragement. In CCCOL, every learner is accountable to his learning so, it triggers commitment to learning activities and assignments which are not common with the traditional face-to-face classroom learning.

Table 2 revealed that the problems associated with CCCOL can be majorly minimized by introducing content activities that can accommodate learning across cultures and remove potential cultural barriers. The responses that are linked to this point include: long term orientation, direct question and answer and timely feedback, introduction of relevant online resources, personal assessment, and team work. The finding is keeping with Kumi-Yeboah (2018) who identified through instructor's perspectives that group work, self-introduction, amongst others are strategies that facilitate CCCOL. Respect for one's ideas and active student-to-student interaction are listed by respondents as major factors that can promote global communications and end other challenging issues common to online learning. The result also is in consonance with Kumi-Yeboah who observed that expressing interest and respect for fellow learners, building relationships -interacting with others regularly promote online learning across cultures.

Diverse experiences, inactivity of some learners, inability to meet the set deadlines, difficulty in grouping learners according to their academic ability, language barriers and communication issues are associated with CCCOL as shown in Table 3. The respondents' comments that are linked to the issues include: learners come into online programme with experiences common to their environment, delay in making input, more involved and active students, avoid uncertainty learning situations, etc. Since learners in CCCOL come

form different countries with varying educational structures and systems, the tendency for their diverse experiences is high. Again, since online courses are developed based on personal values, preferences, expectations, and experiences (Liu, et al, 2010), some learners in online programme may not possibly align freely with the objectives of those courses.

The cross cultural communications drawn from the online plaform (Table 4) indicated that our personalities, cultural backgrounds and exposure will always form a scheme through which we view and interpret things. Instructors or online administrators must create atmosphere for constructive argument and avoid setting pace for cyber bullying.

Conclusion

The study explored instructors' and learners' perspectives on accessing emergent skills through cross cultural collaborative learning platforms, examining which pedagogic tools enhance professional developments and learning activities in an online learning platform and the challenges inherent in cross cultural online learning.

The results showed that team identity and role playing, establishing norms for group members, and respect for cultural differences are the strategies that enhance learning activities in a cross cultural online setting. Misinterpretation of codes, unclear information processing, inability to share same vision, and disrespect for fellow learners are problems found to be linked with online learning across cultures. The implication of this study is that a culturally inclusive learning environment must consider the diversity in cultures of learners. The study suggests the need for mutual trust and training on best practices that promote cross cultural collaborative learning.

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