



Culture and Online Learning: Global Perspectives and Research

Jung, Insung; and Gunawardena, Charlotte Nirmalani, eds.
Stylus Publishing, Llc., 2014

Book Review

Tags: online education | online learning | online teaching | racial and ethnic diversity | student diversity

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Date Reviewed: September 7, 2016

This helpful collection of seventeen essays addresses two important concerns within religious and theological studies: culture and online learning. Scholars of religion are giving increasing consideration to culture. (A search of Amazon for books on “religion and culture” yielded a hundred pages of “hits.” The first four books were simply entitled *Religion and Culture*.) Furthermore, more and more courses in religion and theology are offered online. Surprisingly, little research has been done in culture and online learning, and this book seeks to address this lack.

Authors in this collection hail from Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Australia. (Unfortunately, none are from Africa.) The book appears as the third in a series, *Online Learning and Distance Education*. Editors Jung (from Japan) and Gunawardena (from Sri Lanka, teaching in the U.S.) write solely or collaboratively in eleven of the seven essays. The essays are grouped around eight themes: (1) learners, learning, and learner support, (2) non-native speakers, (3) facilitating learning, mentoring, and professional development, (4) learning design, identity, gender, and technology, (5) visual culture, (6) leadership, (7) quality, and (8) research.

Many of the authors wrestle with a definition of culture. In the first essay, “Perspectives on Culture and Online Learning,” the editors write, “Culture impacts every facet of online learning, from course to interface design, to communication in a socio-cultural space, and to the negotiation of meaning and social construction of knowledge; thus a definition of *culture* that is flexible, dynamic, and negotiable is more appropriate to understand the online learning context” (1).

Interesting insights are scattered through this collection. In “Online Identity and Interaction,” Gunawardena notes that students from Sri Lanka and Morocco “look to the online medium as a liberating environment that equalizes status differences” (35). In “Emerging Visual Culture in Online Learning Environments,” Ilju Rha (South Korea) urges online educators to integrate more visuals in their online courses. In “Accounting for Culture in Instructional Design,” Gunawardena, Casey Frechette (US), and Lumila Layne (Venezuela) introduce the Wisdom Communities instructional design model (WisCom), which “was developed to inform the design of collaborative online learning experiences” (57). (For more about WisCom, see <https://prezi.com/1unppl6dh2a/-new-model-new-strategies-instructional-design-for-building-online-wisdom-communities/>.)

In “Transformative Learning through Cultural Exchanges in Online Foreign Language Teaching,” Kerrin Ann Barrett (US) includes tips for instructors, such as “remember to breathe,” and tips for learners, such as “show your creative side in activities (asynchronous and synchronous)” (146). In “International Interpretations of Icons and Images Used in North American Academic Websites,” Eliot Knight (US), Gunawardena, Elena Barberà (Spain), and Cengiz Hakan Aydin (Turkey) write, “Many of the images and icons used in online environments depend on the meanings, concepts, metaphors, objects, and so on that are bound to the particular cultural context in which they were designed” (149).

Just as neither religion nor culture is monolithic, neither is online learning. This stimulating collection from around the world will help online teachers to negotiate better the various cultural divides and thus offer our students better online learning experiences.

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