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## **Learning Transformations through Cross-Cultural E-Mentoring: Perspectives from an Online Faculty Development Forum**

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**Abstract:** Employing qualitative research methods, this study discusses the learning transformations of e-mentors from the United States and protégés from Sri Lanka who engaged in online problem solving tasks that were part of a faculty development forum.

### **Context for the Study**

The Government of Sri Lanka funded through a loan obtained from the Asian Development Bank, a six-year Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education, to develop a National Online Distance Education Service (NODES). As Abeyawardena (2007), Project Director of DEMP points out, the goal of the project is to provide higher education and professional development opportunities to a large number of students who qualify for university entrance each year, but do not have the chance to enter conventional universities in Sri Lanka. The lead author worked as a consultant to this project and developed a training program for online tutors and mentors using a blended format of face-to-face (F2F) workshops and online collaborative learning activities. She invited her colleagues at the University of New Mexico, co-authors of this paper, to serve as e-mentors (relationship established through electronic communications) for each of the small groups of faculty trainees or protégés who were tasked with using an inquiry-based method online to address a current social issue. For the protégés, the goal was to learn through critical inquiry with peers and the e-mentor how to tutor, mentor, and facilitate an interactive learning format online that led to transformative learning through the interplay of diverse cultural perspectives, and problem resolution through negotiation of meaning.

### **Purpose, Research Questions and Methods**

This paper focuses on an online mentoring experience between mentors in the United States (masters and doctoral students at the University of New Mexico) and protégés in Sri Lanka (faculty from universities and professional organizations) who engaged in an inquiry-based learning activity for three weeks using Moodle, the open source online Learning Management System. The purpose of this paper is to examine if cross-cultural online mentoring can facilitate transformative learning. The research questions for this study are: (1) What are the manifestations of transformative learning evident in cross-cultural e-mentoring relationships when online groups are tasked with a problem solving activity (presented as a disorienting dilemma) over a three-week period?, and (2) How can the unique tools of the online environment be utilized to facilitate transformative learning?

A qualitative research design was used to examine the research questions, employing (a) transcript analysis of the computer-mediated discussion where participant groups solved a social problem interacting with the international mentors who were present only online, (b) mentor reflections in a focus group panel discussion, (c) protégé journals, and (d) protégé evaluation of the e-mentor online activity in the final course evaluation using open ended questions. Results are discussed both from the perspectives of e-mentors and protégés. Transcript analysis, a form of content analysis using the computer-mediated discussion as data, was the method used to discover if and how the problems served as disorienting dilemmas and what transformations took place both for mentors and protégés. An explanation of why the problems were found to be disorienting can be found in statements that indicate the participants never considered the problems before or felt empathy toward those directly touched by the issues. Transformations are indications that participants changed their perspectives as a result of group discussions.

### **Definitions and Conceptual Framework**

We use the definition of mentoring developed by Daloz (1999). A mentor is responsible for supporting the development of a protégé. This includes helping the protégé gain the necessary skills and knowledge to function effectively in a particular environment. Protégés are lesser skilled or less experienced individuals. In the process of mentoring, mentors and protégés learn from each other and benefit from a worthwhile relationship for both parties.

While many definitions of transformative learning exist, for this study, we selected Mezirow's (2000) cognitive approach that defines transformative learning as a problem solving process that relies upon cognitive processing to induce transformative learning. In this approach, the protégé is outwardly looking, actively learning about the external world through dialog with others, generating and evaluating multiple solutions, and imagining new environments that can be created through actions (Mayer, 2001).

The cognitive approach to transformative learning begins with a disorienting dilemma, which leads to critical reflection and acknowledgment of the need to look outward for dialog with others. Disorienting dilemmas, prompt individuals to question their current frame of reference and search for another potential frame of reference. The problems posed to the participants of this study presented disorienting dilemmas that led to questioning familiar frames of reference. Based on LaPointe's (2006) discussion of how transformational learning can occur online, we also examined the role of online tools such as forums and wikis that could support and facilitate transformative learning.

The design of the online tutor mentor development workshop used a community building approach based on the online instructional design model, WisCom, developed by Gunawardena, Ortegano-Layne, Carabajal, Frechette, Lindemann, and Jennings (2006) for building online wisdom communities. Based on socio-constructivist and sociocultural learning philosophies and distance education principles, the WisCom model aims to facilitate transformational learning by fostering the development of a wisdom community, knowledge innovation, mentoring and learner support in an online learning environment, based on a "Cycle of Inquiry" module design. The community building approach used a blended format of F2F workshops and online training on Moodle, the open-source learning management system used for delivery of courses.

The learners participated in an online group activity to solve a complex social problem in the capital city; garbage disposal, traffic congestion, street children--all problems common to many developing countries. A mentor was assigned to a group of 10-12 protégés from diverse professional backgrounds who were tasked with solving one problem either using a problem solving approach, a role play or a case-based reasoning format. There were a total of 59 protégés and 7 mentors. The mentor used his or her expertise in conducting interactive learning activities online to help organize the task, move the group toward the goal, share resources and perspectives from a different cultural context, and ask questions that helped to frame and reframe the problem. The protégés, who had first-hand knowledge of the problem, shared their diverse perspectives on it and responded to the mentors' questions to organize the group activity and negotiate meaning to arrive at a solution.

The groups were informed that the process of arriving at a solution was as important as the product, and the activity received a group grade. Two unique tools of the online environment were used to facilitate transformative learning: (a) the asynchronous, small-group discussion forums and (b) small-group wikis in Moodle. The course design offered a safe environment where protégés and mentors from two cultures were not afraid to share ideas and experiences and learn through conversation and the exchange of information.

## **Results**

Research Question 1 asked: What are the manifestations of transformative learning evident in cross-cultural e-mentoring relationships when online groups are tasked with problem solving activity (presented as a disorienting dilemma) over a three-week period?

Transformative learning occurred at two levels. First, participants indicated that their perspectives of online learning changed. Second, participants reported that their attitudes toward the large societal issues changed. Most of the protégés initially met the requirement of using online technology with doubt and apprehension, as reported in their journals and answers to the open-ended questions from the final course evaluation. One protégé said, "I thought online learning is an inefficient one. (But now I feel that it is very much better than the F2F learning.)" Another protégé thought that only "IT (Information Technology) people" could create discussions online. "I didn't expect that we gain any knowledge through e-learning." However, after engaging in a few online activities themselves, the protégés felt that sharing knowledge with people from diverse backgrounds was easy/easier in online forums. The informal online forums, in particular, provided a place to introduce themselves and tell about their hobbies, interests, personal philosophies, even share funny stories. This helped create social presence and set the stage for building a community.

Protégés welcomed the support, information, resources, and dialogue offered by the mentors, which they found motivating and helped them progress through the discomfort experienced by the disorienting dilemmas. One protégé wrote in the course evaluation, "They (the mentors) gave lots of new information relevant to the topic (web links etc.)." Another protégé said, "The e-mentors gave a different perspective in different context, which is really important." Protégés motivated mentors to frequently check in with the course so that they could keep up with the postings. This was then

extremely motivating for some protégés: “I was really motivated if he has posted something and tried to continue/move forward from what he has asked us to do. When he has addressed me with my name, I was felt like flying!!!”

As in a typical mentor/protégé relationship, the mentors learned a great deal from the experience. One mentor’s greatest sense of disorientation was in the cultural differences he experienced. For example the protégés frequently referenced Sri Lankan politics and history, and although he was researching those topics in his spare time, he was not able to communicate at the same level. This was a consistent theme for a majority of the mentors. It was difficult to be considered a ‘mentor’ for protégés in another country when the knowledge of the customs and traditions of the country were limited to basic research conducted as the interaction began.

After the problem solutions were presented, participants reported reframing their original perspectives about online learning. One protégé wrote in the final course evaluation, “I feel that online learning is a very versatile activity which can move beyond borders of learning and help the community also.” Online collaboration also taught the protégés how to resolve differences online and make group decisions. One protégé said “I never believe we could do such things online.” With time, protégés became comfortable and even creative with their online interaction. A clever approach by the protégés was highlighted in the transcripts. One protégé was assigned to be the Minister of Transportation, but s/he never participated in the discussion forum. So another protégé responded to the group with a clever message stating, “Our Transport Minister is out of the country,” and then offered an alternative role to lead the meeting.

Participants also reported reframing their original perspectives about the societal problem posed. One protégé wrote in the final course evaluation, “Actually we see street children every day and sometimes regard them as ‘nuisance.’ When we were assigned to do this as a group activity, I was thinking what to write! After discussing the topic for one week, I think all of us got interested and see the real picture of street children and really wanted to do something for them by actually doing! ... I think all of us will see them differently when we meet them next time. As a result of this learning issue let us get together and try to help them not only online but in a real situation.” Because learners were provided with such a real-world problem, they were able to easily transfer the material to a more personal context.

Research Question 2 asked: How can the unique tools of the online environment be utilized to facilitate transformative learning?

Mentors were curious to find out what asynchronous conversations would be like when participants are located on opposite sides of the world. Would there be time/space to establish social presence? The protégés felt that the chat forum was effective for brainstorming sessions as long as the “communication protocols are followed.” These included no questioning and no criticizing during the sessions, and the groups were small enough that it was relatively easy to keep track of all the ideas presented. The use of the Wiki was referred to by a protégé as like an “online writing pad,” and many felt it was an excellent tool for collaboration because it enabled students to achieve group goals and to work towards a common vision. One protégé even suggested that technology facilitated participation from students who otherwise may be reluctant to contribute during a F2F class.

After working with the platform, one mentor, who works as an online course developer, described Moodle as being relatively less structured than other environments she was accustomed to. She had to “reprogram” herself in order to navigate this environment. In fact, another mentor mentioned he wanted more synchronous communication to “close the gap” in the dialogue. During the focus group, one of the mentors described how she used outside tools, such as Yahoo! Messenger to synchronously communicate with learners. She felt this minimized the virtual distance in the group. In fact, she still communicates with some of the protégés even after the learning experience. Another mentor mentioned that she used email, as did most other mentors, to communicate with the protégés. These additional communications have lasted past the problem solving task they were engaged in. In fact, one of her protégés may even visit one of the mentors in Albuquerque. Likewise, one mentor took advantage of the contacts she had established and planned a trip to Sri Lanka, where she had the opportunity to meet several of the protégés.

Even with this additional contact through external sources, many of the protégés feared feeling isolated from the mentors and wanted to have more interaction with them. Some hinted that it was possible to misread or miscommunicate ideas in text, which made them realize the importance of being in constant contact with their online students. Feedback received from the tutors and online mentors were welcomed and helped reduce their feelings of isolation. One protégé, who was also a tutor by profession, commented, “Now I know what my students feel when they get feedback from me!”

All of the mentors mentioned the helpfulness of the user profiles in increasing the social presence of the group. The user profiles included a description of each person, with an image, which could not be a picture of the person. One mentor mentioned that she often reread the profile of the protégés so that she could better understand their background. It was suggested by one mentor that photographs of all participants be included, instead of using images. On the other hand, by not using photographs, learners and mentors alike did not have to be prejudged based on their outward appearance. Instead, they could only be judged on the information they shared with the group.

Mentors discussed the difficulties and disorientation of guiding a group of learners from an unfamiliar culture through a problem uniquely based within that culture. While mentors were experts in interactive learning formats, protégés held the cultural expertise to find a solution to the problem assigned. One mentor felt that this duality of expertise enabled mentors and learners to ask questions and be experts within the discussion forum. This, he felt, contributed to a sense of community within the group. Despite different cultures & different 'first' languages, protégés and e-mentors, who had never spoken by phone or F2F, were able to communicate effectively in this online environment.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Transformative learning occurred in a variety of ways for the mentors and protégés and was supported by the online tools used. The complex, real world problems posed to the participants of this study presented disorienting dilemmas for the protégés. Working together online with mentors in the United States under a short timeframe led to critical reflection and acknowledgment of the need to look outward for dialog with others. In the midst of activities, some mentors and protégés expressed

anxiety. The need for dialog with others matched the design of the cross-cultural exchange, enabling protégés to bring cultural expertise to the learning task, while mentors brought theoretical and instructional design expertise to the collaboration and problem solving process. This balance was one of the strengths of this cross cultural mentoring exchange, and the exchange supported the growth and intellectual development of both the mentors and protégés.

Overall, the protégés expressed having a positive learning experience from this course. They felt that working with the online mentors kept them on track with their tasks and that they provided quick responses, feedback, and guidance to help them achieve their goal. Participants have new insights concerning a) the value of well-designed online learning, b) themselves (self-images) as being able to learn online, and c) the people directly impacted by the societal problems. One protégé commented that the solutions proposed would not have been possible F2F as the online forum alleviated space and time constraints of F2F problem solving. Participants' new insights were accompanied by changes in feelings and increased caring toward the problems and people involved. Participants have begun to see themselves as part of the solution. A protégé's transformative learning could be captured in the following statement: "Regarding street children's issue I had no idea of this issue earlier. But when I went through this discussion, I felt like actually we have to do something to help these street children and to eradicate this problem. I felt more concern on them even when I am walking along the streets what actually they are doing, and felt sympathetic over them."

More research must be conducted on the transformative experience of using significant learning scenarios in cross-cultural online learning environments in which participants become aware of global issues, are mentored to explore diverse perspectives, devise and evaluate solutions, and then take action.

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