

# **Global Web-based Training: A Literature Review on the Potential of Global Classrooms**

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## Introduction

In this information age, many ideals exist about the possibilities of a new global classroom. Many believe that “collaborative learning experiences...will transcend national boundaries” and that “new technologies for information and communication [will] allow us to look beyond our individual classrooms, make new connections, and see the world in new and more powerful ways” (Leu 121). However, these ideals are currently just that: wonderful ideas that we have yet to achieve. Most people who work with web-based training in a global context realize web-based training faces the following problems:

Inadequate technological capacities, the need for innovations in pedagogical methods, the monocultural character of existing online curricula and the absence of linguistic plurality in online programs, and the asymmetries between foreign providers and local educational authorities and institutions... (Marginson 77)

Currently, a true global classroom, with participants from different cultures speaking different languages while still communicating effectively, does not exist. The reasons for this lack of cooperative global web-based training include the lack of research available on creating an effective global classroom, the dominance of English as the language of the internet, and the difficulties of cost and access that arise in many countries. The following paper summarizes current research addressing the global online classroom.

## Current Research on the Global Classroom

### What Is Missing from Current Research on Web-based Training

Researchers are currently concerned about the lack of research addressing web-based training. This lack of research is particularly notable because “virtual schools require a different model of education,” which has not yet been perfected (Melnick 86). Research has not caught up with the changes that the internet has brought to the classroom. In his article *Placing Cybereducation in the UK Classroom*, Daniel Menchik addresses the apparent lack of academic interest in web-based training: “The lack of a journal dedicated exclusively to cybereducation, however, is notable” (Menchik 197). Instead, research on web-based training is difficult to find and is located in a variety of different journals.

In fact, current research on web-based training is often based on older theories, particularly those theories that address literacy and readers’ interactions with text, none of which “prepare us for the interactive text that is already reshaping literacy online” (McEneaney 352). Web-based training cannot be analyzed using conventional methods largely because of the “lack of normative linear structure” (McEneaney 355). Our previous methods of examination do not hold up under the pressure of the new media (Hamilton, et al. 851).

## **Who Is Doing the Research on Web-based Training**

Of the research that has been conducted, virtually all articles that address web-based training are written from a Western, and usually American, perspective. However, even these articles are limited. Finding articles that address global web-based training is extremely difficult. The shortage of appropriate research addressed by many academics and educators, therefore, applies even more to a global view of web-based training. In spite of this lack of research, we have learned some things about the role of the internet and web-based training on a global scale.

## **Language, Culture, and Politics in the Global Classroom**

### **How English Dominance of the Internet Affects the Global Classroom**

“In order to attend programmes online students should acquire the prerequisite skill of using the Internet as a learning and communication tool and a knowledge of the unofficial language of the internet—English” (Ngor 53). The English language’s dominance online impacts the potential global classroom in many ways. While the prevalence of the English language creates a common language, which can serve to add cohesion across cultures, it can also hinder the benefits students gain from a global online classroom. Nevertheless, the dominance of English, especially American English, is not always detrimental to students from other countries. For example, in the Asia-Pacific

The most dynamic element in global student flows is the demand-supply relationship between on the one hand the growing demand for foreign education in the large demographic pools of the Asia-Pacific, on the other hand the magnet of English-language and especially American education because of the advantages it confers... a higher education in an English speaking nation has status not just because of academic qualities but also the career benefits derived from learning to live and communicate in an English-speaking setting. (Marginson 84)

Nevertheless, not everyone is able to afford an English language education, and even highly educated people are limited by the almost universal use of English on the internet as to what they can communicate. “The predominance of English on the internet not only requires language capabilities but also forces a certain way of language-related thinking onto a broad variety of international scholarly cultures” (Kaase 270). Were more languages given prominence on the internet, it is possible that international scholarship would not only grow more diverse but generally improve due to a greater influx of ideas and theories. As it is, those who cannot read and understand English are severely limited in what they can accomplish in a global classroom.

The exclusion of other languages on the internet also implies a certain cultural imperialism that we have yet to overcome, a certain unwillingness for Americans and to some extent the British to

learn about other cultures, and an expectation that other cultures will adapt to the English language. While this view may accurately reflect the views of some Americans, it does not reflect everyone's opinions. Unfortunately, this is the message that English as the language of the internet sends.

Indeed, reciprocity is currently a very large concern for global or area studies: "reciprocity is imperative" in any form of cultural collaboration, but such reciprocity is unfortunately quite uncommon in the education community both on- and off-line (Zezeza 70). However, of all the articles available on the topic of global classrooms, none mentioned any benefit English speaking students could gain from learning in a global online setting where English would not dominate the classroom. The only benefit described for English speakers would be they could learn about different cultures; however, the people from those cultures would have to describe everything in English.

## **What Educators Will Have to Consider to Make a Global Online Classroom Effective**

While English remains the dominant language of the internet, global online classrooms must accommodate those who are learning in their second language. For example, in Michelle Selinger's report entitled *Implications of a Global E-learning Programme*, she points out the difficulties that occur when students learn in their second language. She discussed the following:

To learn effectively through a second language, students need to have a high level of cognitive development. For students to succeed in learning through their second language, 'their first language system, oral and written, must be developed to a high cognitive level at least through the elementary school years'...Tasks in the second language must also promote cognitive development and not be 'watered down.' (Selinger 228)

At this point global online classrooms face another dilemma: cultures across the world do not have the same teaching styles. For example, "British education has been dominated by Piagetian developmental psychology; American education dominated by the notions of behaviourist psychology; European education underwritten by gestaltian traditions in which grand ideas are the object and end point rather than a particular skill" (Selinger 225). Teaching differences also arise in cultures that are more oral than literary, or place more value in face-to-face contact than internet contact. However, even these generalizations on international education are not beyond criticism. In fact, research that compares learning styles is often criticized because it is "based on perceptions of the learning behaviour of cross-cultural students. [Researchers] fail to demonstrate understanding of how these students conduct their learning, nor do they acknowledge...prior learning and cultural influences" (Selinger 226).

"E-learning materials can be customized for different cultures, particularly with e-learning tools that make use of reusable learning objects, so that different approaches can be taken that take account of cultural differences when teaching the same content" (Selinger 227). However, we need further research on the learning styles of non-Western cultures before the global classroom can benefit everyone involved in the global online classroom. (An example of a global course

that accommodates the needs of other cultures is discussed in the section entitled: **What Educators Are Learning from Current Practices in Global Online Education.**)

In addition to the language and cultural barriers, instructors in the global classroom must consider the new technological problems that could arise for students in an online classroom. “The incorporation of computer technology into the classroom has also been accompanied by an increasing number of students who experience anxiety when interacting with computers” (Matsumura 403). This anxiety is particularly acute for students who are new to the online environment. Other issues such as technological failures, scheduling and timing conflicts, and student alienation or confusion because they are outside of a typical face-to-face environment, are also concerns for students in the global classroom (Little 359-360).

## **How Government Control Affects Internet Use**

The dominance of American or English language websites poses a problem for online learning because many American websites are blocked out by some foreign governments. For example, “many Internet sites cannot be accessed in China. Foreign web sites such as the cnn.com is blocked out by the Government” (Ngor 53). Those who teach in the global classroom must consider that members of other countries can be offended by some of the content found online.

Beyond the language barrier, the internet raises important cultural issues. The internet is an open environment, a window through which users are in touch with the rest of the world. This means that some elements of information related to the culture of some countries might offend either the religious or political agenda of some governments and be unacceptable to individuals themselves. Such an environment generates a type of resistance towards this new information and communication technology. (De Roy 889)

This quote poses one of the challenges global online classrooms face: American instructors must realize that participants from other nations in web-based training are not exchange students at American universities. All educators who want to teach in a global online classroom will have to consider what can and cannot be taught in the other countries that will have access to that online classroom. “Appropriate measures should be taken to avoid culture shocks via electronic networks. Training and consultation should also be applied to demonstrate the benefits of sharing information and communication in societies that lack this ‘information exchange culture’” (De Roy 890). However, this ideal will be a difficult one to reach under specific governments.

Governments who know telematics are aware of the power of the internet and other networks to publicise and spread sensitive or embarrassing information. These obstacles make access to information and to the development of acquisitions impossible. Some countries need to show a real political disposition to propel their people into this new global village. (De Roy 891)

Nevertheless, some dictatorial regimes are increasingly allowing access to the internet, both generally and in the implementation of specific education programs. The increasing availability of the internet and the education it provides can “increase transparency, reduce corruption, and make government more responsive to citizens” (Kalathil 43). However, it would be premature to

assume that citizens have unlimited access under dictatorships: even when certain information is not officially blocked, citizens will at times limit what they look at out of fear of being discovered and severely punished (Kalathil 45). Nonetheless, we must not forget that even citizens of nations that Westerners are often tempted to discount are able to access web-based training.

## **How Web-based Training Acts as a Democratizing Force**

In spite of sometimes stringent government control, web-based training can function as a democratizing force, even in ways that are at times counterintuitive. Cybereducation can be “a medium for activism, individual expression, resource distribution, cross-cultural equality, and a means for removal of institutional barriers to new learning environments” (Menchik 199). Inclusion of web-based training into classroom curriculum allows students to access and manipulate software (and at times hardware) with which they would otherwise be unfamiliar. Additionally, since “the Internet is characterized by decentralization,” more people of different backgrounds theoretically have access to web-based training and the knowledge that it can provide (Kaase 269).

The use of the internet and web-based training in the classroom can lead to changes in the way the classroom is run. These changes can be positive for students and can lead to a more democratic learning environment: “teachers can use ICT [Information and Communications Technologies] to promote alternative assessments,” which challenge and motivate students (Hamilton, et al. 842). Teachers using web-based training can theoretically allow students who excel in different areas to shine in ways that had not previously been possible. The use of web-based training might also encourage students who would normally be marginalized to participate in new ways.

## **What Limits Web-based Training as a Democratizing Force**

Nevertheless, we must realize that the internet is not an exclusively democratic form. Not everyone who promotes web-based education both nationally and globally is doing so for goals such as worldwide cooperation and improvement: “There are numerous business interests represented in the arena of cybereducation, making the line that separates benevolent, authentic concern for student learning enrichment from self-interested entrepreneurship difficult to ascertain” (Menchik 197).

We must also consider the motives of donors and governments, and their reasons for funding internet access. Take for example the dilemmas Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) face in Tanzania:

Donor agendas are of particular interest in the context of ICTs. Tanzania's donors are very keen to encourage networks within ‘civil society’. NGOs are thought to tend toward jealous isolation or open one-upmanship; therefore Tanzanian civil society is considered to be weak and in need of capacity building. NGOs need to be ‘professionalised’ in the image of western NGOs, and this requires a more sophisticated technological operation. (Mercer 57)

Before Tanzania receives money to develop its internet capabilities, Tanzanian organizations must present themselves the way their donors want. As is often the case, Tanzanian organizations are faced with the need to conform to Western standards before they can receive any economic aid. This is not to say that it is impossible to combine business savvy with a legitimate motivation to improve the world; however, we must consider corporate, government, and individuals' motivations when they fund or encourage web-based global education, because to fail to do so would be both naïve and potentially harmful to the state of worldwide education.

## Technology and the Global Classroom

### How the Digital Divide Affects Web-based Training

“The digital divide is the inequalities in access to the internet, extent of use, knowledge of research strategies, quality of technical connections and social support, ability to evaluate the quality of information, and diversity of uses” (DiMaggio 310). The digital divide exists in America, but since this paper focuses on the global classroom, this section will only refer to the “global digital divide.” We must face the discrepancies that global users face in their encounters with the internet in general and web-based training in particular. In some areas, connections for the internet are simply not available (Vittachi 88). As of 2000, there were 360 million internet users worldwide; however, this figure only represents 5 percent of the world’s population (DiMaggio 312).

Not surprisingly, the countries where internet access is most limited tend to be among the poorest countries in the world, and in these countries that poorest citizens have little or no access to any sort of web-based training. Additionally, the predominate use of English on the internet and therefore in web-based training also limits the access of citizens in other countries, and again particularly citizens in poorer countries, where an education in English is often difficult to obtain. Making the digital divide more apparent is the fact that “the internet might be seen by some types of people in developed countries as a pastime....Its need and value are not fully understood in a [developed] society ‘stuffed’ with information” (De Roy 883).

The digital divide is even apparent between men and women. Women are more affected by the lack of access to the internet than men, though this should not imply that men in rural or impoverished areas do not also experience a general lack of access to information technology. “Around 60 percent of the world’s women do not read or write—and if they did, it wouldn’t be in English, the language of the Net” (Vittachi 88). Thus, many women internationally do not have access to web-based training, which only serves to continue their marginalization.

In every country there are differences between who has access to the internet, where they can access it, and at what cost. “The internet is reproducing cross-national inequalities in use of newspapers, telephones, radio, and television because diffusion largely depends on economic development and research and development investments that are unequally distributed across societies” (DiMaggio 313). Local governments also contribute to the lack of internet access in countries. “Governments are regularly setting up obsolete frameworks, over-regulation,

artificially high charges on imported telecommunications equipment and telecommunications” (De Roy 891).

## How Cost and Access Problems Affect the Global Classroom

The cost of internet access can hinder the potential of the global online classroom. For example, in Poland high internet access charges prohibit students from accessing the curriculum outside classes; very few students have internet access at home (Selinger 232). In China, full internet access for all university staff and students is not yet feasible, due to underdeveloped telecommunications networks (Ngor 52). In South Africa, because of limited access nation-wide, few students have access at home (Selinger 231). For developing countries, before citizens can access the internet, leaders must decide the cost of internet is worth the trouble. In Africa, for example

The development of installation of new information technologies implies a level of financing that sometimes goes beyond the available resources....The dedication of some individuals, the availability of funds and loans and, above all, a change of perception among political leaders towards the impact of information technology are essential elements contributing to the appearance and development of electronic networks in the poorest nations. (De Roy 891)

Access to the internet is also an issue. Many countries simply do not have the basic technology (e.g., telephone lines) to provide internet access for the whole country. The following quote is about China, but it relates to many developing and developed countries:

Even those who possess personal computers with modems still have a problem in accessing the internet due to a shortage of telephone lines and high connectivity costs. Bridging the technological gap depends on speeding up the network access by introducing advanced broadband communications. (Ngor 53)

Many educators are concerned about the effects moving toward web-based training will have on current students. Professor Jerome Young claims courses that are exclusively web-based are “appropriate for only the most advanced undergraduate and graduate students” (570). Such a claim clearly runs counter to current practices. Young continues by describing concerns about the economic needs of students who will take web-based training courses; he is concerned that many poorer students will struggle with the economic strain of obtaining the necessary materials to participate in web-based training (571).

## How Instructors from Different Countries Will Interact with Technology

As mentioned above, most students involved in global online learning are being taught by English speaking teachers. However, if educators hope to make global online classrooms truly global, they must consider how foreign teachers will become technologically adept. This is a concern for many teachers who are new to the online world. For example:

With such a fast-booming industry, human resources are a major concern in China. Education presents one of the major solutions; however, China's ability to train young people has so far failed to keep pace with the economic expansion and influx of foreign investments....The many and varied design programmes of China share the problems of dated teaching methods, inappropriate curricula, lack of funding, trained faculty and facilities. (Ngor 48)

The illiteracy rate and qualifications of teachers in many countries are another challenge for the establishment of truly global online classrooms. For example, researchers are concerned about the education and qualification of teachers in developing countries. The research that has been done tends to show that developing countries will have a long way to go before their teachers will be a part of online global education.

Ministries and development agencies trying to devise more efficient and effective programmes have few locally based research findings to guide them; nor do they have the capacity to assess formatively which strategies are working and which are ineffective. What evidence there is suggest that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the efficacy of training, and that teaching methods in schools are slow to change in ways that reflect aspirations of improved pedagogy which training is intended to promote. (Lewin 692)

## Current and Past Global Classrooms

Global classrooms, in the sense that we mean them, do not really exist. However, programs do exist that teach the same classes in many countries and some universities have experimented with teaching members from at least two culturally distinct countries in the same online class (e.g., students from Taiwan and Texas). However, before we consider future successes for global classrooms, we must consider the setbacks global web-based training has faced in the past.

### How misconceptions about the global classroom led to failure

When educators and educational companies first realized the need for global education, many problems arose. "With competition driving the frenetic race to launch e-learning companies there was little scope for careful exploration and considered judgment, despite the sums of money involved" (Marginson 95). Companies failed to consider the value of face-to-face teaching and the necessary adaptations for effective online teaching. American companies also assumed that foreign students would immediately sign up for their classes because "any American/English-based degree" is a good degree. This logic proved to be faulty, and many companies lost a lot of money. As a result, "serious investor money has vanished from the industry leaving universities to fund themselves" (Marginson 99).

## What Educators Are Learning From Current Practices in Global Online Education

Keeping past lessons in mind, universities and private educators can intelligently provide global education. However, few programs currently exist that can truly be considered global classrooms. In fact, those who currently practice global education either limit access to students from two countries, or they teach the same curriculum in many countries but keep students from each country separate.

For example, “the Cisco Networking Academy program is a comprehensive instructor-led, web-based curriculum designed to teach Internet technology skills and prepare students for industry certification” (Selinger 223). The curriculum is prepared in English and then translated into the language of the countries in which it will be taught. This can be problematic, particularly when instructors must translate concepts that do not have exact equivalents, but “new tools and network architecture are now available to provide more customization and localization” (Selinger 229). However, Cisco is still conducting research to help them improve their program. They are particularly concerned with the tools they provide to help instructors teach the course and adapt to teaching online instead of face-to-face. One important aspect that Cisco has discovered is the following:

What was common to all countries was the lack of experience and understanding of how traditional instruction interfaces with web based teaching materials. Many instructors are unfamiliar with e-learning and in some cases good teaching can be abandoned as students are set to work on their own with little mediation between the web based resources and students, or between students and teachers. (Selinger 237)

The increasing use of web-based training globally allows for increased cross-cultural contact and understanding. Teachers in a variety of countries are increasingly opening their classes to different cultures: in some cases students from other universities, even those located in different countries, are allowed to take classes, and curriculum and syllabi are often available on the internet, thereby allowing individuals outside of the conventional classroom to access them (Kaase 275). Increasingly, foreign language courses use web-based training to allow students to access individuals from other cultures (Reynolds 22). However, even these types of cooperative and culturally beneficial exchanges at times imply certain assumptions regarding cultural superiority:

The global classroom capability of telecommunications is of particular interest to the foreign language teacher because the target of the curriculum is a remote culture, a distant place... [and web based training allows] communicating with *the native*. (Reynolds 22, our emphasis)

Though global web-based training and cooperative education can allow for increasing diversity, but such diversity often coexists with ideas of cultural superiority and imperialism. Though Westerners are willing to let others take the courses they create, they maintain a distinct sense of their own cultural superiority, and expect any foreign students to function only in a secondary

role. Few Westerners appear overly concerned that non-Western students have optimal course experiences.

The current rise of for-profit education, though problematic with its implications regarding the roles of professors in the future, has actually allowed for an increase in global web-based training. “A developing trend toward the globalization of higher education is apparent with a number of institutions moving toward truly global operations, such as the University of Maryland, the British Open University, Monash University of Australia and the University of Phoenix” (Morey 131). Though many educators are uncomfortable with such institutions, it is undeniable that they have brought an international presence to web-based training. Many of the courses offered by these institutions are conducted online; thus, as long as users have access to sufficiently high-speed connections, they can take these courses from wherever they live. Indeed, courses are increasingly designed for international participants, in order to tap into the lucrative market that they provide (Morey 132).

When foreign students learn in an English-based online classroom, there are many possibilities for bringing cultures together. This is prevalent in the EFL Project between Taiwanese students and American students. “With the help of computer technology, [the program] allowed the students to state their positions on their own culture and cultural practices and exchange their views with those held by speakers of the target language (Liaw 59). However, this program also brought up areas that need improvement in a global online classroom. “Technical problems remain an issue to be overcome and finding better matches between computer-assisted learning tools and pedagogical objectives is a topic that demands further investigation” (Liaw 60).

## Conclusion

Currently, the biggest dilemma facing the global online classroom is the lack of research on how to create and conduct it effectively. Researchers show the challenges the global classroom faces (i.e., English language dominance, cost and access problems, and conflicts between governments), but they do not offer solutions for the barriers. Teachers and institutions are conducting web-based training for two countries simultaneously, but whether or not members from both countries benefit from this experience remains to be seen.

We suggest conducting further research on the possibility of opening up the internet and web-based training to members of cultures where English is not the first language spoken. We also recommend conducting research on realistic ways to bridge cultural gaps in global web-based training.

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