

# The Ethics of Unlocking a Billion More Brains

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Keywords: online education; cross-cultural programs; global education; ethical practice

**Abstract:** Online programs that engage a global audience are often promoted as “democratizing” education worldwide. However, the ethics of expecting students globally to conform to Western academic values and processes is largely ignored. Until programs are designed and delivered with cultural intelligence and humility, their full value will be compromised.

## Introduction

Online education—including its most recent manifestation, the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course)—is increasingly promoted by institutions, policy groups, and social commentators as the answer to “democratizing” education nationally and globally. Claims range from the modest to the extravagant: “Nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty — by providing them an affordable education to get a job or improve in the job they have. Nothing has more potential to unlock a billion more brains to solve the world’s biggest problems” (Friedman, 2013, ¶ 1).

Yet distance education scholars for decades have questioned not only the effectiveness of using culturally specific content and culturally specific pedagogies with a multi-cultural, geopolitically diverse audience, but also the ethical justification for doing so (e.g., Anger, 1987; Thompson & Kearns, 2011). Unfortunately, such discussions of the moral nature of education and the ethical implications for teaching and learning at a distance have been largely lost in the current rush to “educate the world.” Important questions are being ignored by those who seem more concerned with competing in the commodified academic marketplace than with the negative impact of the standardization and conformity that characterizes many online courses offered globally.

Observers of early versions of online education frequently asked whether the innovation represented a promise or threat. Subsequent developments have made clear that the answer is “It depends.” Given the potential impact of online courses and programs, the field of adult education needs to focus directly on factors that minimize the threat while maximizing the promise.

Perspectives on this topic depend on an educator’s ideas about how education is defined and should be practiced within a particular context. Our focus is on higher education, the context within which we operate, although some of our observations and suggestions may be appropriate in other multicultural contexts.

## Underlying Assumptions and Norms of Practice

We base our discussion on several assumptions and norms expressed widely within the adult education literature. These norms are not universal, but they are ones that shape our own practice and interest in this topic. Below we briefly introduce these ideas as a framework for our discussion of the importance of cultural intelligence and humility for online adult educators.

## **The Moral Nature of Education**

*Assumption.* Adult education, including online adult education, reflects a moral-ethical relationship among participants.

*Norm.* Educators and students share an ethical responsibility for creating and maintaining an environment in which all participants are able to both learn and develop as human beings.

Teaching is a moral and ethical undertaking. Analyses of teaching “open on to normative perspectives, to questions about our fundamental values” as practitioners (Herman & Mandell, 1999, p. 17). Principles such as co-construction of knowledge, the value of diverse student experience, and student participation in decisions that affect them are often discussed as methodological or epistemological issues; however, we need to recognize their moral and ethical dimensions. Adult educators have a responsibility to implement their values in ways that respect the characteristics of a diverse population of learners.

## **Power in Practice**

*Assumption.* Adult education, including online adult education, reflects power issues prevalent in the larger society and globally.

*Norm.* Online adult educators should design and teach to limit the reproduction of inequitable systems of power and privilege, particularly in terms of whose voices are heard and whose knowledge is viewed as legitimate.

Power imbalances characterize much of adult education practice. In multiple activities and contexts, scholars have worked to uncover and understand power inequities that have marginalized different populations of learners (e.g., Cervero & Wilson, 2001). Each pedagogical activity and each context suggests different ways of “interrupting dominance” (Apple, 2000, ix), as well as different challenges to doing so, yet virtually all contexts have space within which this can be accomplished.

## **Cross-Cultural Online Adult Education**

*Assumption.* Cross-cultural online adult education is shaped by goals, content, and strategies that reflect the culturally shaped perspective of the designer-instructor and the offering institution. This perspective commonly embodies Western academic values and expectations, presenting challenges for students whose experiences and discourse traditions do not align with these.

*Norm.* As adult learners themselves, adult educators should continually reflect on the limits of their own culturally-based perspectives, strive to understand the challenges learners face in programs offered globally, and learn and practice strategies that foster the formation of non-hegemonic online learning environments.

Respect for and responsiveness to cultural differences is a common theme in the adult education literature. Discussions of culture reflect national, class, ethnic, age, or gender characteristics—among others—that influence both student learning and the choices and actions of the practitioner. The starting point may be to address culture as the “deeply learned mix of language, beliefs, values, and behaviors” that shape the lives of those in a particular national context or ethnic group (Wlodkowski, 2009, p. 2), but there must be further recognition of the variety of cultural expressions and characteristics within a given group, as well as the reality that cultures can and do change rapidly. Equally important is attention to the “multiple frames of reference” within which individuals live and learn and understanding of the “hybrid identities that are themselves fostered by the cultural flows facilitated by the Internet and the Web

(Gunawardena, 2013, p. 186). Taken together, these representations reflect the idea that “every person and human group is both cultural and multicultural” (Uzuner, 2009, p. 1).

### **Online Education and Cultural Intelligence**

A key factor implicit in the assumptions and norms discussed above is consistently ignored in decisions to design, deliver, and promote online courses globally: the *cultural intelligence* necessary to effectively develop and teach such courses.

### **Cultural Challenges in Online Education**

Given the very real challenge of accommodating individual cultural differences, online instructors in traditional Western learning environments have instead expected non-Western students—while physically remaining in their local environment—to “step out of their own culture and temporarily enter into the culture of the instructor” (Moore, 2006, p. 1), which usually is also the culture of most other students in the course. Although this “digital flow of power and domination” (Rye & Støkken, 2012, p. 193) may indeed benefit these students by expanding their perspectives and repertoire of learning skills, it also marginalizes their life experiences, “voices,” and approaches to learning and can limit their academic success by rewarding only those behaviors valued in Western academic settings. For example, the dominant pedagogical culture in China is group-based, teacher-dominated, and centrally organized, with examinations as the primary way to assess performance and outcomes and with academic success bringing honor and social status (Zhang, 2007). The Western higher education approach, on the other hand, is more likely to view students and teachers as (near) equals, to encourage students’ active interaction, and to value individualism, self-direction, and process over outcome. Further, educators from dominant cultures often specifically denigrate ways of relating, knowing, and learning indigenous to other cultures (Tan, 2011). Not surprisingly, studies of students in a variety of non-Western cultures report that cultural differences and unfamiliarity or discomfort with taken-for-granted expectations and processes often limit their engagement, success, and satisfaction with the online learning experience (Uzuner, 2009; Shattuck, 2005).

Current academic success is only one concern. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschoot (2010, p. 2) suggest that cultural conflicts arise not only from misalignment of teaching and learning styles, “but also because the growing ‘professional self’ struggles to maintain both a connection to the local culture in which the student eventually intends to work and a connection to the learning environment.”

Finally, an often-missed point is the potential benefit to dominant-culture students when educators take a more culturally responsive approach to design and instruction. Not only are they introduced to additional experiences and patterns of thinking and action, but they are encouraged to examine the extent to which their own attitudes and behaviors are cultural artifacts, “to situate themselves in relation to others, to perceive similarities and differences in personal opinions and reactions within the group, and start identifying the complex factors influencing their attitudes” (Gunawardena, 2013, p.196).

### **Cultural Intelligence**

Although scholars have identified a number of problems and challenges related to online programs delivered to a global audience, few models exist to guide educators in practicing more culturally responsive course design and instruction. One promising approach is Cultural Intelligence (CQ), a theory-based, rigorously tested approach to fostering intercultural awareness

and competence. Used extensively in business, CQ is beginning to be adapted to education, and we present it as a potentially useful resource for addressing the challenges related to online adult education that we have raised here. CQ does not involve mastering a set of specific rules for each culture, but rather fosters a flexible set of skills: the ability to pay close attention, to reflect on the meaning of underlying behavior, to seek out relevant information and advice, and to adapt resourcefully. Perhaps most important, it requires becoming aware of and willing to challenge one's own cultural assumptions, including those about what constitutes good teaching and learning (Goh, 2012). Our overview of CQ and approaches to developing it is necessarily brief, but we hope readers will follow up on the references provided for more in-depth information.

CQ is defined as “a specific form of intelligence focused on capabilities to grasp, reason, and behave effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity” (Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, Ng, Templer, Tay, & Chandrasekar, 2007, p. 337). This concept is related to that of cross-cultural competence but goes beyond it, viewing intercultural capabilities as a form of intelligence that can be developed and measured. CQ helps a person to comprehend situations characterized by cultural differences (CQ knowledge); direct attention and energy toward learning about and functioning in such situations (CQ drive); plan, monitor, and revise mental models (CQ strategy); and subsequently adapt and implement effective behaviors (CQ action) (Goh, 2012).

For example, knowledge of both the value and limitations of theoretical constructs of cultural variability—individualism-collectivism; power-distance; uncertainty avoidance; etc.—can lead to questioning of taken-for-granted ways of practice and subsequently inform the development and teaching of courses that reflect the characteristics and support the learning goals of a diverse population of students. Similarly, instructors with well-developed CQ will be less likely to misinterpret the meaning of student behaviors or to use culture as a stereotypical explanation for unexpected behaviors. Rather, they will be more likely to question first impressions, seek information, and be ready to respond in ways that build and maintain the teaching-learning relationship. And, in modeling this approach for their students, they foster students' own CQ.

### **Developing Cultural Intelligence**

Given the assumptions and norms discussed above, teaching with cultural intelligence is an ethical imperative for those who teach diverse audiences and who wish to help students develop cultural intelligence. Many of us, however, regardless of our best intentions, are unprepared to address the complexities that arise in the “throwntogetherness” of online courses offered globally (Rye & Støkken, 2012, p. 194). General principles of inclusion need to be concretized in the development of specific knowledge and skills reflecting cultural intelligence.

Cultural intelligence can be developed and enhanced in a number of ways, including guided or independent learning activities and self-reflective experience. Formal approaches include the ORID (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional) method, a form of focused conversation led by a coach in order to analyze facts and feelings, discuss implications, and make informed decisions. Prompted by questions reflecting the four aspects of the method, participants discuss specific examples of their online experiences of teaching culturally diverse students. Although the conversation is led by a coach, the aim is to foster an informal atmosphere and to let the discussion move naturally through the four levels. Developed by the Canadian Institute for Cultural Affairs, this framework has become the foundation of many cross-cultural training workshops (Maltbia, 2011).

Some research suggests that faculty prefer to learn from other faculty, those who understand the curriculum and what it means to teach (Thompson, 2003). Peer coaching is a formative, collegial process whereby pairs of faculty voluntarily work together to improve or expand their approaches to teaching students from various backgrounds. The peer coaching process involves three major steps: (1) consultation to identify the focus of the coaching, (2) online observation by the coach, and (3) a debriefing session where the coach shares his or her observations. Benefits include support by someone with similar goals; decreasing the sense of isolation that can be caused by a new or challenging experience; and the opportunity to have a sounding board and source of new approaches. Mutual peer coaching involves a reciprocal relationship in which each faculty member selects an area of focus related to culture for consultation and works with the coaching partner to improve in a particular area (Maltbia & Power, 2009).

Personal preference or resource limitations might suggest self-study as the preferred professional learning approach. The Cultural Intelligence Center offers resources on its Website, including self-assessment and self-awareness tools(<http://www.culturalq.com/selfassessgo.html>). And, as Brookfield (1995) has noted, the scholarly literature on a topic, such as that referenced here, can offer an autodidactic substitute for interaction with colleagues.

### **Promise or Presumption: The Humility Factor**

*Humility* encourages self-reflection, questioning of taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, and revising one's own mental models in response to new knowledge; as such, it is of great importance for designers and teachers of courses that enroll a diverse student group. However the educator is not the only one who needs humility. To date, humility has been severely lacking in the institutional rhetoric around online programming offered globally. Few observers doubt the promise of online programming. Many, however, question the extent to which that promise has been realized. Scholars' mixed and cautious assessment suggests the need for an *institutional* humility which recognizes that, in their current form, such courses are seldom the unalloyed gifts to diverse populations of learners promised in the rhetoric. Humility at this level would mean giving up the pretense that "the best" U.S. professors can (or should) educate the world via courses that lack cultural intelligence in design or pedagogy. Given the lack of research on the impact of globalized education on diverse communities and societies, current claims for this approach are not only inflated, but also unethical in promising what they seldom deliver.

By working to enhance their cultural intelligence, practitioners can embrace humility in their own work; fostering institutional humility is a thornier challenge. However, faculty who have increased their own cultural intelligence and who understand the decision-making structure of their institution will be better able to leverage their formal and informal influence on institutional decisions through peer networks and shared governance channels. The result will be more modest than that of "unlocking a billion more brains," but also more ethically defensible: promotion and provision of courses that are not just commodified, fiscally sustainable products, but rather *sustaining* activities that support and strengthen the learning projects of diverse individuals, groups, and communities (Thompson & Kearns, 2011).

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