

Multimedia as a Cross-Channel for Cultures and Languages

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world many communities have been constantly struggling to maintain their customs, traditions and language. Many communities have been on the move from place to place due to various factors of social change, such as war, search of food, land, and climatic calamities. Such forces have given rise to different cultures and languages through fusion or the creation of new cultures. The cultures not only exist within nationalities and ethnic groups, but also within communities, organizations and other systems. A language is an integral component of cultural identification (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). Matsumoto (1996, p. 16) defined culture as, “the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.” A culture is dynamic in nature; if static, it will cease or lose its identity in due course of time. Cultural values are affected and reinforced by languages. A language is a representation of a different way of thinking as well as a different way of speaking. Languages have significant influence on the cognition (Gudykunst & Asante, 1989; Pincas, 2001).

WHAT IS MULTIMEDIA?

Recent advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have resulted in the integration of the basic multimedia technology with the personal computer. Thus now it is possible to offer pedagogically useful services through this interactive medium (Peters, 2003). In its simplest form multimedia can be defined as, “an integration of multiple media elements (audio, video, graphics, text, animation etc.) into one synergetic and symbiotic whole that results in more

benefits for the end user than any one of the media elements can provide individually” (Reddi, 2003, p. 3). One of the basic advantages of multimedia tools lies in presenting learning materials in multiple (i.e. audio, visual and textual) formats. Jacobson and Spiro (1995) argued that complex information is learned more effectively if the learning experiences are presented in multimedia formats. Learners’ interests and motivations can be increased by the integration of rich and dynamic multimedia into the learning experiences (Smith & Jones, 1989). Student learning can also be effectively increased by combining multi-modal dynamic simulations with audio, when the audio media is an integral part of information to be learned (Moreno & Mayer, 2000). Hoyer (1999) experienced effective teaching, research, counseling and learner support when interactive multimedia modules are integrated with services such as teleconferencing.

Multimedia has many uses in education as an instructional tool and as a product development tool. The booster factor to the development of multimedia technologies has been its pedagogical implications and effects on teaching and learning practices. Incorporating multimedia elements supports a paradigm shift in the pedagogy. The traditional teacher-centered or technology-centered approach of multimedia instruction has been supplanted by the constructivist learner-centered approach (Relan & Gillani, 1997; LeFoe, 1998; Richards & Nason, 1999; Tearle, Dillon & Davis, 1999; Abbey, 2000). Multimedia applications have created new opportunities for instructional designers to present instruction through dynamic integration of words, static and dynamic graphics and verbal information. Multimedia technologies have been found to be useful in enhancing learning and learner satisfaction, and increasing the visibility and appeal of existing programs. These technologies also support portability, modular-

ity, visualization, efficiency in instructional design, and learning consistency (Oberlin, 1996; Hede, 2002; Yildirim, Ozden, & Aksu, 2001).

MULTIMEDIA IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Communities and societies over time have adopted different measures for the preservation, transmission and advancement of their languages and cultural heritages. Education and communication are two effective measures. Owing to the dynamism of communities, the educational sector has been constantly witnessing structural, pedagogical, procedural and technological changes. These changes are inevitable. Increase in the demand for learning and increase in socio-cultural infusion has resulted in increasing pressure on educational providers for new ways of delivering instructional programs. The world has expanded and contracted in terms of population and space respectively. As a direct consequence, different cultures and languages have realized the increasing importance of having a dynamic and vibrant means of communication in place, which can help them maintain their identity, and observe progress in a multicultural learning environment. Odasz (n.d.) states, "The world's diverse cultures jointly represent the full cultural genome of humankind's search for individual and group identity and meaning" and exert pressure to record this important "shared story of humankind". The sooner actions are taken to save the cultural knowledge of our ancestors, the better will be, as it is feared that nearly half of the world 6000 languages may disappear in one lifetime. Odasz (n.d.) recommends, "The vast cultural knowledge of our elders must be recorded via multimedia storytelling for preservation while they (our elders) are still with us."

UNESCO has also been very concerned about the preservation of cultures of indigenous people (around 350 million individuals in more than 70 countries) representing more than 5000 languages and cultures. The cultural heritage of some of them is nearing extinction, if no action is taken to save them (http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2946&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html). On 10 December 1994, the United Nations General Assembly declared the *International Decade of the World's Indigenous People*. To mark the significance of cultural diversity of indigenous populations, the *International*

Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is celebrated every year on 9 August.

The transfer of knowledge from one region to another or from one generation to another requires educational or learning material understandable to many. A Universal Networking Language (UNL) is being developed by the United Nations University. The UNL is the global lingua franca of computers and will be providing services for any pair of languages from over 180 countries. Yoshii, Katada, Alsadeqi, and Zhang (2003) found that although the content on the Internet is growing, much of it is written in English, rendering it unsuitable for those who do not understand English. If they wish to access that content they are made to learn English, and thus for such non-English speaking people, the language learnt sometimes is inappropriate. Tools have been developed to translate material from one language to other, but such translation may not be free from errors and may misrepresent the actual sense of context, and may also suffer from cultural imperialism (Phillipson, 2002). Thus it becomes very pertinent to keep certain issues related to cultural sensitivity and languages in mind while developing multimedia content.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY FOR MULTIMEDIA DESIGNING

Pruitt-Mentle (2003) revealed that people with different cultural backgrounds have different expectations and attitudes towards educational software. And educational software developed in one country may suffer from cultural biases. To overcome cross-cultural barriers of verbal and non-verbal communication or symbols as practiced in a particular country, Pruitt-Mentle recommended the learning of such cultural differences while designing multimedia learning resources, rather than to deny or ignore such diversity.

Since a variety of personnel are involved in instructional design, Gunawardena, Wilson and Nolla (2003) advocated understanding of the cultures of all involved, such as course designers, teachers and students. Everyone has his own background culture and attitudes and societal norms on the instructional product. An essential concern while designing multimedia applications for diverse community groups is to be aware of cultural influences. This creates the need to develop cultural sensitivity and awareness among designers and instructors

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