Chapter 19
Culture Matters!

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I have had my mantra since my first trip overseas – a six-month internship as an undergraduate spent in New Zealand – "Culture matters!" On my first international trip, I asked myself, "How different could it be? After all, New Zealand is an English speaking, developed country!" On my first day, I had to drive on the left side of the road instead of on the right. Can you imagine? They gave me the keys to a vehicle without considering this handicap. I circled the 'round-about at least 4 times before I felt comfortable that my brain had adjusted to exiting correctly. I literally had to practice that maneuver mentally: My first hint that managing cultural differences required different thought patterns and *practice*!

That same day, my hosts invited me to *tea*. So, I ate my dinner and then went to their house for tea. However, I quickly realized that my expected cup of tea was actually *dinner*. Fortunately, I analyzed the situation quickly and said nothing, except that, "I can't eat too much; I'm feeling a bit under the weather from the trip." In that brief trip alone, I experienced the challenge of language (the boot and the bonnet of the car versus the trunk and the hood), the lifestyle (tipping a server an equivalent of 50 cents was considered a compliment), accents ("You Yanks talk funny"), and other cultural nuances. I was not there long enough to discover – and be discomforted by – deeper cultural differences.

That deeper discomfort occurred when I became a Peace Corps volunteer in Zaïre, Central Africa (renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo). While we all underwent cross-cultural training, the scope of training only covered history, customs, and surface level differences. Later, however, once we were ensconced in remote villages, we became acutely aware of deeper differences: Why did our cook set the table to feed and entertain the local politician – "fonctionnaire" - whenever he visited our village? Why didn't the members of our cattle cooperative come to our meetings on time? When we built a cattle vaccination corral for the community, why did one landowner claim it for his own? Why did people laugh at us if we got angry with them for taking 6 months to build the fence around our chicken coop? Why couldn't we be friends with the women? Why did the poorest

people in the world insist in entertaining us with food and drinks they couldn't afford? Why did the villagers treat a particular man in the community with deference? We, the volunteers and other expatriates in the country, constantly discussed our challenges. Some we finally understood; others remained a mystery. At the conclusion of two and a half years, though, we felt quite comfortable – we accepted the differences even if we did not understand their origins.

After my Peace Corps services, I completed my graduate degree with a specialization in international development. I returned to the cultural environment as an overseas training consultant for 10 years, working with learners from more than 30 cultures. I began comparing my experiences *across* cultures, not just within them. I started to detect trends. Most obviously, people had different concepts of time. Formal status and roles did not equate to the actual 'hierarchy' or power within a community. It often took forever – by American standards - for my participants in a project management workshop to make a decision; there was an inordinate amount of discussion and decisions were usually made by consensus. Even problem solving and patterns of thinking were different across cultures! This was evident in the simplest activities: how people played certain games and strategized; how a tailor designed and sewed an outfit; how stick figures on a chart were not perceived as people in a training presentation. Villagers only agreed to a new approach to building schools after they had addressed all perceived risks A lecture, while common in schools, was met with sleepiness but role plays, games, and stories were adopted with relish. These are just some of the examples among hundreds that illustrated cultural differences in learning and teaching.

Later, back in the U.S., I became the Professional Development Manager for a software company, where employees not only enjoyed technology; they sought whatever was new and innovative. We had employees in the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and India,

plus dozens of telecommuters throughout the U.S. We also had an array of global customers that required product training. Charged with providing professional development for this global audience, I soon continued my mantra of 'culture matters' when I began incorporating elearning into our curricula. I was working on my doctoral degree in educational technology, focusing on cultural differences, so I had many opportunities to test some of my theories. For example, I detected that all of our learners easily digested elearning courses on low context topics, like how to use a computer software program. In contrast, the American learners - because of simple differences, like accents, spelling, and currency - rejected self-paced courses designed outside of the U.S. (in the U.K.) Learners outside of the U.S. rejected our courses on high-context topics, like leadership, because 'they don't apply here.' I was also teaching online for several universities. Online students from Asia were reluctant to participate in live webinars or chat (later discovering that they were many reasons, from lack of English proficiency to not understanding the value of a group activity over having an expert teach the course). Students in Middle Eastern countries were accused of cheating on exams when, in their worldview, they were collaborating and supporting their 'in-group.' Hence, I extended my observations of cultural differences and similarities into the realm of learning, where culture matters again, but particularly in distance learning.

Why do those differences matter, particularly, in distance learning? As the world moves towards cost-effective and faster ways to educate globally dispersed learners, *elearning* – in all it's many formats – has become the primary tool for globalized learning. Thus, as Janet Bennett stated in the foreword and as the chapter authors have so clearly illustrated, culture matters in elearning! In a face-to-face environment, culture matters but it's more forgiving: your learners will tell you – not just with feedback and words, but with looks, gestures, silence, resistance, etc. – when you

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