Chapter 1
Designing Culturally Appropriate E-Learning for Learners from an Arabic Background: A Study in the Sultanate of Oman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Case studies on adult online learners in professional development courses in an Omani context found that cultural preferences had a significant impact on learning success. It was found that their preferences in the development of learning communities, for face-to-face needs, in online course flexibility, and interdependent learning were not accounted for in the learning design. Therefore, the problem identified was: how can learning be designed that accounts for culture in the design of learning for those from an Arabic cultural background, as in Oman? The research provided a solution in the form of design guidelines. These can be used as a practical and useful means for teachers and educators in designing online courses that are culturally compatible with the learning preferences in this context in the Sultanate of Oman.

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BACKGROUND

For Omanis to compete in an increasingly globalised world, they need to be equipped with the skills needed to function effectively in the marketplace. This is no easy task for the Sultanate of Oman; in 1970 it had only three schools for a population of over half a million. Oil was discovered in the Sultanate of Oman in the 1960s, but for years after, the then Sultan, Said bin Taimar, did nothing to help his people modernise and they continued to live as the ancient Arabs did. However, in 1970, a coup d'etat took Oman "from feudalism almost into the ranks of developed nations in only a quarter of a century, [a feat] unparalleled in the developing world."(Curtiss, 1995, July/August para. 2). When Qaboos bin Said took over power from his father he began the building of the country and its virtually non-existent education system (Curtiss, 1995, July/August; UNESCO-UIE, 2002). Development of the government was through the formulation of five year plans, and in the fourth Five Year Plan from 1991 to 1995, the Omanisation Policy was developed to provide jobs for Omanis and to train them so they could develop the skills needed to take over positions held by expatriates (Al-Dhahab, 2003; Al-Lamki, 1998; Al-Lamki, 2000; Ministry of Information, 2000). However, the rate of Omanisation was slow, and it became obvious that training and education was key means for success of Omanisation, and therefore reform was needed to increase the quality of education and training.

Since the early nineties, there has been concern about the quality of education. The World Bank (2001) reported that in Oman it took 12.6 pupil years to produce a graduate of the nine year basic education system, and most of those who graduated from school with high marks still required an extra foundation year at university. There were also concerns about academic and pedagogical deficits. Tibi (1991, cited in Pollack, 1998 p. 9) commented that "A student …learns natural science or technology exactly as if it were sacral knowledge from the Koran or Hadith". Memorisation skills have been the main method of learning across the Arab world. Rabie (1979, cited in Pollack, 1998) commented:

Students are given thousands of facts to memorize instead of the research skills that will enable them to find the facts when needed. Teachers and professors tend to cling to specific innovations instead of applying the principles of innovation, thus rendering the system rigid and conservative. Memorization, together with the authoritarian method of instruction, serves to inhibit rather than encourage students' ability to think and take initiative. The students' ability to develop realistic and imaginative solutions to whatever problem they may have to deal with is very much limited.