Research on Cultural Factors in Global E–Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Simply put, *e-learning* refers to Internet-based learning. E-learning can take place by reading a piece of *information,* such as a Web page, or completing a package of *instruction*, both of which are designed to impact learning and performance (Rosenberg, 2000). E-learning has rapidly gained momentum, especially in large international companies, due to the globalization of business. Businesses in the current global economy need to provide fast-changing information to large numbers of employees and customers at dispersed locations more efficiently than ever (Rosenberg, 2000). Although traditional classroom instruction is still the primary mode for delivering training (Sugrue, 2003), e-learning enables the delivery of content to global locations in a timely manner (Hartley, 2001).

Although e-learning promises learning opportunities for anyone, anytime, and anywhere, reliably producing successful learning outcomes is a challenge. Unfortunately, e-learning programs often suffer high dropout rates (Wang, Foucar-Szocki, Griffin, O'Connor, & Sceiford, 2003). There are various reasons for this, but with e-learning, "the lack of cultural adaptation is a leading reason why e-learning fails to work" (Dunn & Marinetti, n.d.).

This article addresses e-learning as a method for both education and training in a global economy, and it questions how e-learning can effectively reach a multicultural audience. It provides a theoretical overview of various cultural dimensions, and addresses the importance of considering multicultural factors and strategies in the design of e-learning.

BACKGROUND: INCREASING GLOBALIZATION AND E-LEARNING

Two phenomena characterizing business and education in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century are globalization and the use of Internet technologies (Jelen & Alon, 2004; Lim, 2004). *Globalization* is an ongoing process of breaking down barriers among nations and is often compared with the following phenomena: internationalization, liberalization, universalization, and westernization:

Internationalization refers to the increased interaction among people from different countries. Liberalization refers to the reduction of regulatory barriers. Universalization refers to the spread of people and cultural phenomena to all corners of the globe. Westernization refers to the process of greater homogenization and of the world becoming more western. (Scholte, 2000, cited in Kaloudis, 2003, p.3)

Globalization is viewed as "a multifaceted, historical development with differential impact according to the place and the specific dimensions involved" (Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004, p. 292). Effects of globalization have been observed in developments such as increased outsourcing and offshoring (Parry, 2004), street demonstrations opposing free trade (Mejia-Vergnaud, 2004), and men's attire (Zelinsky, 2005). It is no longer possible for global companies to grow without projecting beyond the boundaries of a single nation; they face new challenges. For example, it is estimated that 100,000–170,000 jobs were lost in the U.S. between 2000 and 2003 due to offshoring (Parry, 2004), which indicates that the lost jobs are now maintained

in other countries, and that some of them are likely operated under the management of U.S. companies. In addition, companies have to work smarter and faster to keep abreast of the information revolution created from globalization. However, they are suffering from a "leadership crisis," as they desperately need leaders who can manage multiple cultures; the consistent corporate culture and a variety of local cultures (Wellins & Rioux, 2000).

An answer to this problem can be provided by *technology-mediated interventions*. Historically, technological innovations have enabled globalization. Rennen and Martens (2003) explain that globalization has been driven by economic incentives for the last several centuries, going back to the Industrial Revolution era. Technological innovations in transportation and communication, such as the steamboat, railroad, airplane, electric telegraph, satellite technology, and computer technology, have provided a force during the process of globalization in much the same way as international standards, such as Greenwich Mean Time, improved time-sensitive communications for international activities (Rennen & Martens, 2003). Since the late twentieth century, Internet technologies have helped overcome physical and political boundaries in order to deliver information and instruction globally and instantaneously. Rapidly developing Internet technologies are making e-learning a reality for global organizations (Jelen & Alon, 2004). E-learning has provided an avenue to meet their business goals by keeping employees informed of the current developments, thus improving their performance and the business' bottom line.

MAIN FOCUS: CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN GLOBALIZATION AND E-LEARNING

It seems apparent that globalization and e-learning are here to stay, but both trends deal with complicated situations in which different cultures are encountering one another, often in a way that is forced and resisted. This presents a major challenge for all parties involved.

But before discussing the issue of cultural clashes, it is important to define what a culture is. Hofstede (1980) defines culture as "the collective mental programming of the people in an environment" (p. 43). Trompenaars and Woolliams (2003) explain culture as "a series of rules and methods which a society or organisation has evolved to deal with the regular problems that face it"

(p. 363). From these two definitions, we can glean that *culture* is a shared mentality by a group of people in a particular environment that directly affects how they approach issues. There are many levels of culture: (1) national (country), (2) regional, ethnic, religious, and linguistic, (3) gender, (4) generational, (5) social class, and (6) organizational/corporate (Hofstede, 1991). With so many levels, cultural traits pervade virtually every aspect of life. This makes it difficult to clearly explain the concept of culture.

Several researchers have attempted to clarify the meaning of culture. For example, Hofstede (1980) characterized national cultures according to four dimensions:

1. **Power distance:** "The extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally" (p. 45).
2. **Uncertainty avoidance:** "The extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and tries to avoid these situations by providing greater career stability, establishing more formal rules, not tolerating deviant ideas and behaviors, and believing in absolute truths and the attainment of expertise" (p. 45).
3. **Individualism (as opposed to collectivism):** "Individualism implies a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to take care of themselves and of their immediate families only, while collectivism is characterized by a tight social framework in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups" (p. 45).
4. **Masculinity (as opposed to femininity):** "The extent to which the dominant values in society are 'masculine'—that is, assertiveness, the acquisition of money and things, and not caring for others, the quality of life, or people" (p. 46).

From his research, Hofstede (1983) used these four dimensions to reveal interesting cross-cultural differences. For example, based on the data reported in his research, Figure 1 shows a comparison between the U.S. and Korea. According to Hofstede's research, Korean culture is collectivistic and has tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. In contrast, American culture is individualistic, tends to emphasize earnings, recognition, and advancement, and downplays relations with managers, cooperation, and employment security.

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