

Chapter XI

Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and “Localizations” in Global E-Learning?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the importance of cultural sensitivity and localization in the delivery of global e-learning. The branding, course ecology, curriculum design, instructional strategies/pedagogical approaches, multimedia builds, information handling, and direct instruction in e-learning need to fit the needs of the diverse learners. Those that offer global e-learning must consider the national, ethnic and racial backgrounds of their learners to offer customized value-added higher education. Cultural sensitivities apply to initial learner outreach and their success in the e-learning; localizations enhance the applied learning and also the transferability of the learning after the global learners graduate. Cultural sensitivities and localizations may make global e-learning more field-independent and effective because of the reliance on each learner's local resources. A “Cultural Sensitivities and Localizations Course Analysis (CSLCA)” Tool for global e-learning has been included in the appendix.

INTRODUCTION

Many engaged in higher education have been reaching across international borders to court some of the brightest minds from around the world. They are using global e-learning to reach out to the “place-bound” (those restricted to

certain geographical locations) or “place free” (those who live transient lives), due in part to the high costs of studying abroad and stricter vetting of individuals by various governments. The launching of global online educational and training endeavors should consider cultural targeting and sensitivity in order to make the learning

more accessible to learners and to increase student retention. E-learning has traditionally had fairly high attrition rates, even as high as 50% in some programs (Moore & Kearsley, as cited by Picciano, 2002, p. 22). Effective instruction involves motivational components that “enhance self-efficacy and perceived challenge” (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000, p. 53).

The nature of global learning lends itself to unique challenges. Studying abroad often means a transition period of preparation, travel, resettlement, and starting the studies. In this new version, “study abroad” means going online. For e-learning, with the use of numerous online forms and easy payment options, students may find themselves enrolled at a distant university from home. People are moving from living in so-called “little boxes” to networked societies (Wellman & Hampton, 1999, p. 648). There may not be a physical change to the global learner’s physical circumstances—no four-walls classrooms in a different milieu. Rather, in the “disembodied” learning of an online classroom, their bodies have not left home or the home country, but their minds have gone roaming. Mediated through the WWW and Internet, e-learning allows any number of such learners to enroll in instructor-led classes.

The disembodied aspects of e-learning also mean that instructors and facilitators will not have the benefit of informal knowledge inputs as when they make a cultural gaffe. They will not have the benefit of body language (and the classical training regarding proxemics, oculosics, kinesthetics, haptics, and others). Hailing from different time zones, they will not necessarily have the ability to resolve questions and concerns in real-time, in face-to-face venues, or to communicate their sincerity or decency as individuals. “Early work on CMC (computer-mediated communications), based on what was known as the filtered-cues position, described the medium as one bereft of *social context cues* (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). These cues define the social nature of the situation and the status of those present and include aspects

of the physical environment, body language, and paralinguistic characteristics. With such cues largely filtered out, CMC has been described as a lean medium that is relatively anonymous” (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, n.p.).

So, too, on the faculty side, there are no telltale face-to-face meetings with a group of new students or the real-time signaling and communications that go on in such lecture halls and hallway conversations. Rather, there are names and possibly a learner profile with a headshot attached. The unfolding of different learner personalities may occur over the course of the learning term, or they may never quite unfold, with the focus merely on the work and less on the individuality or personhood of the learners. The depth of personal revelations depends on the instructor facilitation, the “affordances” of the online learning space, the number of learners, the richness of the intercommunications and interactions, and possibly the particular field of study.

Cultural sensitivities involve efforts to recontextualize the online learning spaces and to surface and address cultural differences and similarities. Localization aims to add richness to the learning by considering the various “locales” of the global e-learning students and capitalizing on those resources. These endeavors to recontextualize the learning to student-local spaces may enhance the field independence of the learning, which will make the global e-learning more portable and transferable.

The objectives of this chapter are to engage the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What is cultural sensitivity in global e-learning? What is localization in global e-learning?
2. Who may affect cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning?
3. What are some relevant cultural influences on global e-learning, and where do these come from?

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