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Chapter XV

Beyond Localization: Effective Learning Strategies for Cross-Cultural E-Learning

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Instructional design cannot, and does not, exist outside of considerations of culture.
~ Henderson, 1996, p. 85

Abstract

Instructional systems are products of the cultures in which they are developed. Culture, which we define here as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001), has a pervasive influence on instructional systems, regardless of whether these systems involve self-paced e-learning, synchronous or asynchronous computer-based learning activities, or online communities of learners. The issue of culture's impact on instructional systems becomes most relevant and challenging where such systems are transferred across cultural boundaries or developed for multiple cultures. This is currently happening in many large, globally-dispersed organizations that use e-learning technologies to support the learning of their staff around the world. Theories of learning and of cultural dimensions suggest that the effectiveness of certain types

of learning systems will be affected where they are used in culturally-diverse environments. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the issues that designers of a wide range of e-learning experiences face when designing e-learning for culturally-diverse learner groups. We provide some models to support learning practitioners, focusing in particular on the importance of a conscious, culturally-informed selection of instructional strategies as the most critical part of the design and development process.

Introduction

It is clear to anyone who has taken on the task of designing learning products or services for different national or regional cultures, that such products or services (we will call them "instructional systems[1]") are to some extent shaped by the cultures in which, and for which, they are developed. Culture, which for the purposes of this chapter, is defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9), appears to have a pervasive influence on instructional systems, whether these systems involve classrooms, teachers, computers, videos, hand-held computers, cell-phones, or informal communities of learners.

While the issue of cultural influences on instructional systems has for some time been of interest to academics and a relatively small cohort of globe-trotting trainers from large organizations, it is gradually becoming one of the more important challenges faced by developers of e-learning products. Theories of learning and of cultural difference suggest that the effectiveness of instructional systems may be reduced where such systems are transferred into cultures for which they were not designed, or into culturally-diverse environments. Yet much of the rationale for e-learning, particularly in large organizations, rests on its ability to provide effective learning experiences, cost-effectively, to large, widely-distributed audiences. As an increasing number of large, globally- dispersed organizations use e-learning programs to support the learning of their people around the world, there is a growing need to support the designers of these programs in considering cultural factors.

Our particular interest is in forms of e-learning "…in which information and communications technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources" (Goodyear, 2001, p. 9). This is a view of e-learning in which a learning network is regarded as a means of connecting people, as much as a means of distributing learning resources. Indeed, we believe that cultural diversity is just one of the pressures that will erode the use of less connected e-learning approaches where learners interact solely with content.

Our aim in this chapter is to highlight the issues that designers of instructional systems are likely to face when designing e-learning for a culturally-diverse learning environment, and to go some way in providing the basis for supporting them. In particular, our focus is on the importance of a conscious, culturally-informed selection of learning strategy