

Chapter XI

Culturally–Sensitive E–Learning Practices for Career and Technical Education

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, people are seeking distance education delivery options in order to get the vocational training needed from experts who may reside continents away. Therefore, vocational educators need to address and accommodate cultural realities. Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions provides a framework for examining culturally-sensitive vocational training implications. Culturally-impacted issues and solutions are explained relative to the relationship of vocational training to the workplace, and to online teaching and learning. Specific strategies are suggested to address language barriers, student-teacher relations, choosing resources, learning activities, technical issues, and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

As globalization impacts economies, it necessarily impacts people’s careers – and the preparation for those careers. Concurrently, people are seeking distance education delivery options in order to get the training needed from experts who may reside continents away. Particularly as Western educational philosophies do not reflect the preponderance of educational approaches worldwide, it

behooves U. S. vocational and technical educators to address cultural nuances, particularly in online learning environments.

BACKGROUND

Culture may be defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” and “the set

of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization” (Webster’s Dictionary). In career and technical education, cultural issues apply to the learner, the instructor, the intended workplace, and the profession itself.

Cutler (2005) refers to the cultural “onion” as he explores the impact of culture on teaching and learning. He asserts that core cultural assumptions consist of basic truths below awareness, while norms and values refer to behavior standards. Cutler also asserts that culture may be objective or subjective relative to visible behavior, organizational structures, and communication styles. For instance, a hierarchical organizational structure is a fact, but it might not actually be the most efficient model for a workplace although it might reflect the social norms for a particular culture. Cutler further contends that teaching tends to operate at the surface level, not confronting core assumptions, so that aspects of culture might be misaligned. When learner, teacher, workplace and profession represent different cultures, misunderstanding can easily occur.

Hofstede’s 1980 (updated in 2001) model of cultural dimensions and Biggs’ 3P model of teaching and learning provide useful frameworks for examining culturally-sensitive vocational training implications (noted in italics):

- **Power distance.** What is the degree of equality between people? How equitable is the power distribution as defined from low-status people? In low-power societies, status is less important. Power distance impacts teacher-student relations.
- **Individualism vs. collectivism.** People in individualistic societies tend to belong to several groups, each of which is loosely-knit, while collectivist societies tend to have a few, well-defined groups who are highly loyal. In-group refers to a collective in which members are highly interdependent and have a sense of common fate; groups to which they

do not belong are out-groups. Learners and teachers have preconceived attitudes about individual vs. cooperative efforts.

- **Masculinity.** To what degree are genders differentiated? Are traditional gendered roles supported in terms of achievement, control and power? How are women valued relative to men? In training, males might be more competitive or need more praise.
- **Uncertainty avoidance.** How tolerant is society of uncertainty and ambiguity? Are different options acceptable or are strict rules the norm? How structured should learning activities be? Does assessment ask for one right answer or does it encourage new answers? Do learning activities focus on accuracy or on different perspectives?
- **Long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation.** Which has more value: virtue or truth? How should controversial educational issues be handled? To what extent should social norms be supported – or examined and confronted?

More specifically, different cultures tend to reinforce different learning styles. For example, collective societies tend to reinforce field dependent and non-linear learning. Instructors need to start a unit by giving the big picture, and they provide such learners with more guidance along the way (Chen & Macredie, 2002).

The impact of culture in vocational teaching and learning may be analyzed using Biggs’ 1978 3P model of teaching and learning. The term “presage” deals with experiences before learning takes place (i.e., learning characteristics, prior knowledge and experience), process occurs during learning (i.e., learning conditions, activities), and products focuses on the outcomes of learning (e.g., assessments, application, context). Thus, learner experiences are interdependent with situational elements such as teaching factors (style, institutional procedures, assessment) and the learning environment (e.g., learning activities,

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