

Chapter XI

Addressing the Cultural Dimensions of E-Learning: Where to Begin?

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Abstract

In an exploratory study, the researcher examined the effects of cultural dimensions on e-learning outcomes for employees in functionally equivalent jobs in Western and Eastern cultures. Participants from the United States (U.S.) and India completed a Level 1 e-learning course designed in the U.S. In addition, randomly selected completers then reported their interactions with the e-learning course in a survey. Learners from the two cultures achieved equitable learning outcomes, suggesting that characteristics of Level 1 e-learning courses mitigate the effects of culture. In addition, while cultural dimensions did appear to affect learners' preferences for and perceptions of e-learning, both Eastern and Western participants were willing to try new approaches to learning that did not align with their cultural profiles. Based on these results and practical usage, the revised (v.2) cultural adaptation process (CAP) model is presented as a guideline for adapting e-learning courses for other cultures.

Introduction

The term *globalization* gained currency in the 1970s as Western corporations rapidly expanded into other parts of the world (Jarvis, 2002), accelerating cultural exchanges (Walker & Dimmock, 2002). Industrial anthropologists have identified *cultural dimensions*—categories of characteristics across which cultures can be compared and contrasted, such as how members of a culture communicate, perceive time or view themselves in relation to the environment. As e-learning options proliferate and globalization continues, an expanding audience of learners is more likely to encounter courses created by another culture. Most e-learning courses are designed in Western cultures; however, the largest and fastest-growing consumer groups live in Eastern cultures, such as China, Japan and India (Van Dam & Rogers, 2002). “Over the next 20 years, the global market for online learning is estimated to exceed \$215 billion, with rapid growth expected from cross-border delivery of higher education (an institution in one country delivers courses to students in other countries)” (Hezel & Mitchell, 2005, para. 1). Educators thus will be challenged to provide e-learning opportunities that result in equitable learning outcomes for new groups of learners from other cultures.

Learning outcomes were defined by Henderson (1996) as any results that reflect the acquisition of skills and knowledge, the effectiveness of instructional techniques and students’ perceptions or attitudes. Educational practitioners have begun to apply the concepts of cultural dimensions to instructional design, presuming that selecting or adapting courses to suit the cultural profiles of learners will generate equitable learning outcomes. However, empirical research has neither conclusively supported nor disproved them. The purpose of this study was to understand better the effects of cultural dimensions on e-learning in the globalized environment.

The problem is: “Are e-learning courses designed in a Western culture equally effective when used in an Eastern culture?” The research questions used to address this problem were as follows:

1. When taking an e-learning course designed in a Western culture, do participants from Eastern and Western cultures experience *equitable learning outcomes*?
2. Do they have different *preferences for or perceptions of* e-learning?
3. If there *are* strong similarities or significant differences in learning outcomes between the two cultures, in participants’ use of features or in their preferences or perceptions, are these similarities or differences *related* to the cultural dimensions described in the literature?

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