Chapter 1

Incorporating Cultural Components into the Design of an Affective Support Tool for the Malaysian Online Distance Learners

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case presents an option to constructively respond to the perplexing phenomena of high attrition and dropout among Malaysian online distance learners despite the efficiency and various communicative and enabling components offered by the new learning and delivery technologies. It is written from the perspective of an instructional designer. The distinctive feature of the case is the needs-based design and the developmental approach that takes into consideration a cultural perspective and the affective component of the individual learner. The case is an exemplar; it centers on the design and development of an affective learning support tool for Malaysian adult online learners. It will (1) highlight teacher reverence as a cultural element pertaining to these learners and (2) illustrate a culturally sensitive approach capitalizing on the learner-instructor relationship taken to scaffold the learners' self direction and motivational self regulation. Findings from the formative evaluation of the tool will also be described to aid further reflection and discussion.

For the purpose of this case, culture is defined according to the UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (2001) as the "set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs". Online learners and online distance learners are used interchangeably to denote learners who study online with no or minimal face to face interaction. The chapter will be organized in the following manner. A description of the cultural issues surrounding Malaysian online distance learning will be highlighted to provide a comprehensive picture of the problem in hand. The initiative to alleviate the problem will then be described in detail followed by a discussion of initial evaluation findings.

BACKGROUND

The Asian region has the largest number of adult learners enrolled in open and distance universities, as compared to other parts of the world (Shive & Jegede, 2001). The typical Asian distance learner's reason and need for taking a distance learning course mirror the very same criteria that Western and European students use for enrolment in distance learning programs (Churton, 2003). Typically, the students are adults who pursue their studies while working, in order to obtain a better job position or to advance in the workplace (Ding, 2002; Gan, 2001; Shive & Jegede, 2001). However, the educational experiences of the Asian learners, including the Malaysian learners, differ from that of their Western world counterparts due to the exam-oriented educational system and focus on grades (Jegede, 2001). Moreover, a significant difference between Asian students and students in western societies is their reverence to teachers and the teaching-learning process (Churton, 2003). Typically, students in Asia tend not to openly challenge instructors or place themselves in a situation where they may embarrass themselves or others (Churton, 2003).

The Malaysian university chosen as the site for this case study is a university with 12 branch campuses, 3 satellite campuses and 6 city campuses. It was the second public institution in Malaysia to offer distance learning programs. The six city campuses were established for the purpose of providing continuing education, mostly at the undergraduate level to city dwellers and those who work in the cities.

Malaysia is a multiracial country with the Malays, Indians and Chinese making up the bulk of the population. The Malays and the various ethnic tribes who live mainly in East Malaysia are regarded as Bumiputeras (indigenous people). There exists a rich mix in the country where people of different races, religions and ethnicities constitute the "cultural melting pot" of a harmonious Malaysian society. The main difference between the university described in this case and the other Malaysian universities is the taking in of only Bumiputeras (indigenous people) as its students. The majority of the students are thus, Malays who are Muslims.

The university's distance learning programs started in 1990. For the first eight years of its running, the university's distance education program depended on the first-generation correspondence model that employed print-based materials and monthly seminars. The university's Internet-supported distance learning program was later conceived out of several needs and rationales. The university's initiative to train more Bumiputeras, emergence as a mega university, and its aim in producing Information Technology-conversant (IT-conversant) graduates and knowledge workers, are cited as part of the rationale underlying the project. The most important reason, however, is the plan for a pedagogical shift to self-directed learning and to eradicate the "subsidy mentality" (a term used to signify the tendency to wait for

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