

## Chapter 20

# Culturally Different Learning Styles in Online Learning Environments: A Case of Nigerian University Students

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The importance of individual culture depends on the characteristics of national culture and the individual's background; within individual culture, different learning styles also exist. This paper addresses the topic of how learning style interacts with receptivity to online methods in different cultures, in this case in Nigeria. It examines and analyzes online learning environments in terms of differences in the learning styles of Nigeria university students according to their cultural backgrounds, specifically tribes, gender, and program of studies and how that can affect their online learning. The differences in tribes and learning styles affect the way the students respond to online learning. Despite the need for improvement, the future of online learning environments seems bright. The online instructor should try to offer learning activities that will appeal to the widest variety of learning styles possible. The ethnicity and cultural diversity of students needs to be considered in online systems design.*

### **BACKGROUND**

This study took place at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Nigeria, a country on the West Coast of Africa, with an estimated population of 140 million, is the most populous nation in sub-Saharan Africa. It occupies a landmass of about 923,768

square kilometers, and is generally known to have over 274 ethnic groups in the Federation. Nigeria is one of the emerging democracies in Africa, having had democratic political administrative governance since 1999. Nigeria is bordered by the Republics of Benin, Niger and Cameroon to the West, North and East respectively. The Atlantic Ocean occupies the southern border of the Nigerian territorial land mass.

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The University of Lagos is located within the municipal boundaries of Lagos. The University was founded in 1962 and is made up of two campuses, the main campus at Akoka, Yaba and the College of Medicine in Idi-Araba, Surulere. Both sites are within the Mainland of Lagos. The main campus is largely surrounded by a scenic view of the Lagos lagoon and is located on 802 acres of land in Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria. The students' population is approximately 39,000. The University has three e-Learning systems which include - Moodle, Blackboard, and MAKAU e-Learning Management Systems. The University purchased the licenses for the learning management systems and they are being managed by the University Centre for Information Technology & Systems (CITS).

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Despite the obvious advantages of online learning at the University of Lagos, there are certain challenges that cannot be overlooked. Among these challenges are the theoretical basis upon which online designs are based and the misuse of technology and culturally different learning styles in online learning environments; however, this study's focus is on culturally different learning styles in online learning environments. To be more effective, online learning environments must carefully address appropriate support mechanisms for learners. The role of instructional support in online learning is very important. In order to design powerful learning environments, it is important to understand the characteristics of the learners, the designers' understanding of the learners' interpretations of instructional supports, and how environments can be created to facilitate different learning domains.

These issues were not addressed in the design of our current online systems. Online learning requires certain tasks from learners such as organizing and controlling the learning process.

Considerations for individual's differences and abilities need to be taken into consideration in technology-based products and implementation efforts. Therefore, it is very important to examine the learning styles of students (Mumford, 1997) as the findings of this study would provide significant and valuable information for students, lecturers, program planners, learning providers and for the theory of learning styles itself. In addition, the instructional design and teaching concerns must be considered.

## **Instructional Design and Teaching Concerns**

The online instructor must be prepared to meet the needs of a large variety of students who have collectively been grouped together as "non-traditional students." Such students are often well over the age of twenty-five, are often married and/or have dependent children. They may work full or part-time or, and conversely may be unemployed and seeking to re-enter the work force via education. Additionally, many such students may be academically or technologically unprepared and therefore may likely face any combination of the previously listed factors as well as others not listed. For such students, returning to school already presents a formidable challenge. This may only be compounded by the uniqueness of the online learning environment such as lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and other class members. For example, "learners often encounter the stimulus materials when they are sitting alone at a computer, away from easy coaching or support from an instructor" (Wilson, 2004, pp. 77-84). Other challenges may also surface. For example, a specific challenge may be when a non-traditional learner runs into a stumbling block, and has to find a way to overcome the obstacle. For instance, practitioners, in developing country like Nigeria, need to consider the appropriateness of their online environments in terms of political

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