



# Online! The challenge for interculturalists & diversity specialists

by Dr. George F. Simons

## Part 1: The train is leaving—are you on it?

An astounding but relatively quiet revolution has been taking place in the training field. Surveys and soundings indicate that within the last year and a half online training both pure and in combination with other traditional methodologies has been increasing exponentially. Estimates of the number of companies using online training at this writing run no lower than 85%. Reported users indicate that online training accounts for anywhere from 15% to 65% of their offerings. We are on a high-speed train to what is to many of us an unfamiliar destination.

Once largely centered on technical skills and computer competence, online training is now laying fast track through the soft skill sets--customer service, communication, influence, negotiation, and, yes, diversity management and intercultural communication.

Online training, most often delivered in inter- or intranet web-based interfaces, is merging the instruments of the trainer's toolbox in exciting and easily accessible, increasingly user-friendly ways and delivering them directly to the end user.

- Salient video material is streamed in adding elements of illustration, role-plays, problem solving, best practices and interface with the experts.
- Games, instruments and interactive exercises, once developed for individual challenge or group performance, spice up online offerings for both the individual learner and the online classroom.
- Organizations that developed CD ROM materials are transforming these into online offerings or, where online bandwidth is still a problem, into mixed offerings where the older medium enhances the new.

- Even venerable CBT materials are making a comeback. Originally designed for mainframe machines, content that remains relevant is merged into other online training or at least edited and tapped for its current utility.

Not only is the training and educational process being transformed by this phenomenon, but as almost a byproduct, much online education can provide quick and reliable built-in assessment.

- Individual users can instantly know what they know, don't know and need to know to pursue a specific career course or course of action. They can then customize the course offerings themselves to yield exactly what they need to learn.
- Human resources specialists receive the same instant evaluation of knowledge and skills of each learner so that they can support both the individual's career path and make more accurate staffing choices.
- Strategists and decision makers have real time information about an their human resource and its capabilities, knowledge base and skills. They know precisely how many of their employees are capable of doing what it is that a particular project will require.

In the past, acquiring and maintaining these kinds of information required separate and costly efforts, and involved numerous research undertakings, if one were to develop usable data bases for strategic and market planning. Now such information automatically flows from an integration of education and testing.

The here-and-now quality of web publication and the modularity of its contents allow instant updating. There is no longer the need to suffer

from dated material that comes either from printed sources or even the memory of the professional expert or trainer. It is fair to say, that increasingly "the mind is in the machine." Browser access has made using these programs simple enough to tease even the most cyberresistant.

If this information makes you cringe, look for crop circles in the training room carpet, or suspect that Hal the rogue computer is going to hijack spaceship earth, it is simply not so. This development is not a claxon warning us that machines or "big brother" are taking over, but a clarion call to cooperative scholarship and team creativity that that will make online training truly intelligent, intuitive, ethically responsible and people friendly. This is good news.



Already virtual networks are starting to provide the kind of collegiality many of us yearn for and do not find among colleagues in our everyday work lives, be it in commerce or academe. The fun of great collaboration with these new tools is just beginning.

True, the voices of the best and brightest will not be singing solos as often as in the past, but producing quartets and choruses in which the audience will sing along and harmonize their own variations. Indeed, they will be asking the orchestra to play their song, since one of the characteristics of online training is increasingly its facility for customizing its offering and approaches to the needs of the individual learner.

Unfortunately it is also clear that the educational system is not preparing people for entering the workforce in an up-to-date fashion. Fraught with social as well as financial problems and poorly equipped classrooms and laboratories, schools too often offer learners scarce resources and poorly designed tools and priorities, not only from K through 12, but in high school and university settings. Unless a student is slotted into a high tech field, it is likely that he or she may be even more removed from contemporary tools in many graduate schools and institutes.

There is a big challenge here for us. The intercultural field has been essentially organized to support the traditional classroom. Videos, curricula, instruments, training games, etc., in this field are largely oriented to the face-to-face encounter led by the professional facilitator rather than self-directed learning. A handful of CD-ROMS are appearing on the market at the moment when these are increasingly yielding to online applications. Intercultural websites, by and large are not much more than brochures for the offline services of their perpetrators.

It is common to hear objections and limitations voiced against online training programs by diversity and intercultural professionals. One hears almost as a knee-jerk reaction that electronic methods are superficial, inadequate and dangerous.

Sour grapes! Yes, face-to-face training hours will decline. Yes, there will be fewer of us in the classroom than there are now and there will be fewer and fewer real classrooms. On the other hand, there will be no lack of work for those who know where it is to be found. We will be switched onto new tracks, some of which are already quite identifiable, and I might add, urgently in need of diversity and intercultural expertise. The current situation is asking us to:

1. Embody and transform our expertise into the expertise of the content and process of the new online media. Our best and most imaginative efforts will require even better performance and higher collaboration in producing superb quality offerings both from a pedagogical and content perspectives. We have the potential of creating brilliant new tools that far surpass the methodologies of the past.
2. Do what we do best in coaching and facilitating human interfaces online as well as face-to-face. When face-to-face does occur, it will no longer be for the transfer of content but for paying attention to the higher levels of human interaction, viz., the creation of direction, mission, vision, facilitating team building and conflict resolution. We will be forced to be peak performers when called on to perform "live."
3. Address the pressing question of how to define and create competence in diver-

sity and intercultural dimensions of management, communication, teamwork, etc., This must be done in such a way that it can be taught and measured and understood. Organizations will rely on such competence to achieve their objectives.

4. Use our expertise to enrich and evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness not only of material that proceeds from our own field, but that which is offered in other areas. Solid cultural criticism of the online world scarcely exists now.
5. Finally, we are called to wonder, curiosity and fruitful speculation about tech-

nology, people and how they will ride into the future together, to create visions and alternative visions.

If a railroad metaphor seems our-of-date for discussing computers and culture, think again. I have written this article sitting in the Eurostar, a computerized wonder. About 1/3 of the article took shape while passing through the industry and cottages of southern England, 1/3 in the darkness of the Chunnel and the last 1/3 passing through the rich cropland of northern France. The battery on my palmtop tells me I have 8 hours left, but the train is pulling into Lille, my destination. Technology does not stop at one station very long these days. Will you board?

## Part 2: The great eclipse: the hidden and not-so-hidden messages of technology

**Y**es, the medium is still the message. The words of the Canadian thinker Marshall McLuhan seem to echo each time a new medium begins its ascendancy. It is perhaps in these earlier stages that the message of the medium is least discernable, probably because it is most likely to be just a faster, different or better way of doing something that we are already used to doing. Like the solar eclipse, it seems as if a new technology darkens the field for a few moments sending the birds into panic and then clarity returns when we begin to understand it and use it.

So it would seem. But perhaps the part of us that sees portents and omens in the eclipse is on to something. Our first computers were typewriters with bells and whistles, or faster, more accurate calculators for business as usual. Little did we imagine them making the entire world into our public library or our playground, blurring the distinctions of an old economy and creating a new one of their own. It took them a while to deliver their own message, to make their own mark on the culture, and usually in ways few of us saw or expected.

When it comes to training on line, the medium is also sending not just content but messages that come from the peculiarity of its own structure. Identifying and decoding this message from a cultural and intercultural perspective is the aim of this article.

Like any tool, the computer sends an encrypted message about its creators, its users and the things they think important and the tasks they set themselves to, consciously or unconsciously. To bring this fact home, I often ask people, "What if women (or some other cultural group, profession, etc.) were the creators and prime users of computers? How might they be different or used differently." Try asking this question of yourself or others--the answers can be quite surprising.

Cyberculture is a distinct culture or set of cultures. Generated in the new electronic me-

dium, it tends to create a language, look and feel peculiar to the medium. In earlier years computers displayed mainly linear text and equations and belonged to a linear, extremely low context environment. We criticized them and their flat mechanical voices as certainly dehumanizing without recognizing what they were becoming.

Today when simple email can send text pictures and voice messages, the potential for the technology to support and extend a diversity of cultures is enormous. Yet, what we tend to see as organizations and enterprises populate the web is, more often than not, a lowest common denominator approach to cultural expression.

Recently reviewing the "look and feel" of several websites and online course offerings, it became apparent to me that the search was on for a culturally neutral, non-offensive, bland, "no trouble" look. Cultural variety might appear in a training program on diversity or sexual harassment or multicultural management, but it was nowhere to be found in the background of most corporate training programs and websites. In some sense they were the visual equivalent of the Darth Vader voice of earlier voice synthesizers.

These programs and websites were incessantly cool, unattractive and unengaging to people who, whether consciously aware of it or not, are cultural beings in search of familiar signposts. Somewhere between the demands of diversity, political correctness and the message of the machine there was a palpable emptiness.

Not all training is meant for everyone, so culture specific orientations in look and feel are not impossible in many course formats. Even more significant, the growing flexibility of web tools enables us to customize not only the content of a program for specific users, but can allow the end user more and more control over the look and feel. Just as several languages can be provided at the click of a

mouse, similarly, one look and feel can replace another.

There is hardly any technical reason why online training should not increase in cultural richness and open itself to many interpretations and privatized versions without compromising its essential learning objectives. Culturally rich development is another opportunity, not only for the collaboration of interculturalist and developers but for tapping into the fullness of the cultural expression in the art, sound and values that surround us in our multicultural organizations and ultimately reside in the end users of training programs and intranets.

Technology not only sends a message reminiscent of the values and intentions of its creators by its outputs at the hardware and system level. It also speaks loudly through its applications. Software tools like hardware are also reflect their creators and the tasks they have set for themselves.

Take the boilerplate of our desktops and application frameworks. They are fraught with the symbols of their creators as well as their underlying assumptions about the nature of the work or play that they are designed to accomplish. On one level, this is as it should be. They are designed to operate in given environments to achieve certain tasks. At another they are more powerful than they at first seem.

The twin juggernauts of English and US business culture may at times be deliberately imperialistic and proselytizing, but even if they never were, they would function so because of their sheer volume and weight in the world both real and virtual. Must we be on our way to a world culture in such a flurry of slash and burn? Just as environmentalists decry the depletion of species and rainforests, I often plead, "Let the cyberforest grow." If the standard of success is a monocultural corporate look, those who want to succeed will inevitably assimilate at cost to their diversity.

This is not inevitable, but probable, unless the messages in the medium are consciously understood and dealt with. Templates for a word

processing program, say for business letters, can certainly be customized to the cultures in which the software is used. All the money shown in clip art does not have to be green. The majority of characters in the pictures do not have to be of a certain age. Visual conventions are necessary but can be varied. Some we will just accept, e.g., the little yellow file folder found in virtually every Windows and Mac application today--most people have never used one in real life, and those of us who have rarely use them any more.

Many people are able to customize their computer desktops to a greater or lesser degree. Fewer are aware that they have this choice, and it is uncertain how many would be interested in making the effort to do so if they new. Perhaps interculturalists might explore the possibility and pass on their discoveries to the rest of us. This may seem like a simple, lame brain task, but it would begin to say that someone is interested in the intercultural richness of the workplace. If we can learn Klingon, a fantasy language, online, why can't we make ourselves at home in our own languages and styles? P.S. There is a market here!

After all, where is today's workplace? A corporate building may be festooned with posters on the wall promoting multicultural thinking. There may be diversity notices on the corkboard by the coffee machine. Once thought of as the workplace itself, more and more workers (when they still go there) see these corridors as and corners as only passageways to their real office in cyberspace, where they spend the greatest part of their working hours.

We are emerging from the inevitable temporary eclipse of clarity brought about by a new technology. Our commonplace view of reality has been interrupted. Are we not right to believe that the sun may now better show us as human beings who are stamped with the messages of culture and able to share them with each other? As long as we interact with each other, cultural transformation is inevitable and accelerated by technology. Should not more of us have a say in how this transformation will occur and in what new light is may be seen?

## Part 3: Cyber *fung shui*: intercultural aspects of online course design

To my necromancer's horror, my house has one long unbroken hallway off which all the rooms open. I used to joke about it as a "bowling alley," but a friend's introduction of *fung shui* into the conversation raised it to a tragedy of cosmic proportions and caused me to take steps to change the flow of energy down that corridor of closed doorways.

### Forging a new collaboration

Often the energy direction of intercultural and diversity work reminds me of a long, narrow gangway rushing along as if the few adjoining rooms mattered not at all. One way of redirecting some of that energy is to ask online course developers and culture and diversity specialists to open wider the door to collaboration on course design? Why?

#### 1) It's preventive.

The *faux pas* of global advertising are now circulated as internet humor, e.g., the Nova auto whose name intimated in Spanish that it didn't run; the deodorant "Mist Stick" that suggested to Germans that they might be putting manure in their armpits. Humorous, instructive, tragic—they continue to happen.

#### 2) It's more effective.

Culturally comfortable courses that build on what is better known and more familiar are

likely to be more effective, welcome and used. We are likely to resist a program gets in our face culturally for that reason, and miss its important message.

#### 3) It adds value.

Finally, there is a wealth of possibilities that arise from the knowledge of cultures and their many ways of approaching a task, problem or challenge. It is the interculturalist and diversity specialist who can make sure that these possibilities are examined before a narrow cultural approach dominates a program design.

### Culture and the cycle of online course development

The cycle of online course development, whatever the content, requires at every step the use of intercultural resources—intercultural professionals and literature, cultural informants and real end users. A solid learning design requires culture-general perspective and valid culture-specific information. Finally it must include a culturally sound feedback process at each step in the cycle of course development. Figure one below illustrates the six steps in the development process.

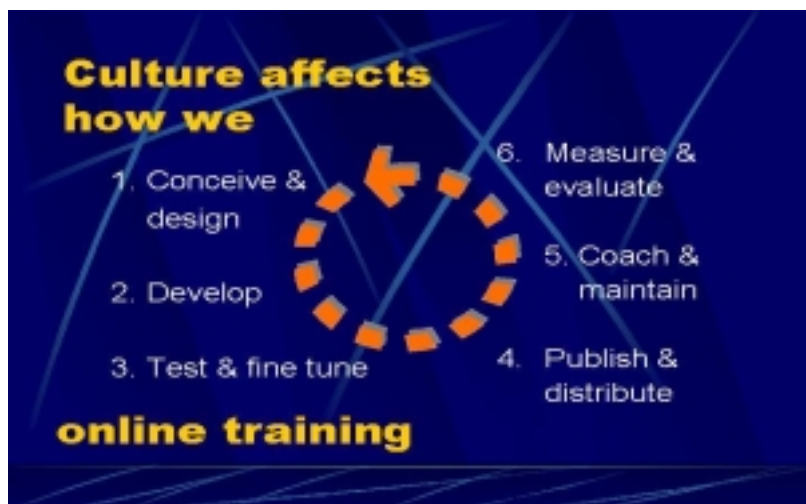


Figure 1. Six steps in online training development

Let's look at how culture affects each step.

### 1. Conceiving & designing an online program

A program designed from one cultural viewpoint may have different objectives when seen by participants from another culture. E.g., a career program might not correctly show "how we 'get ahead' around here." Objectives must be designed or at least reviewed from a cultural perspective.

Do the values and behaviors of the learning model fit or conflict with the end user culture? If they conflict, how will this be dealt with? For example, if we teach assertive communication in non-Western countries, most cultures have proverbs and other forms of wisdom that could help us impart new or less familiar behaviors in familiar terms. We need people on the design team who know the culture well enough to use these to advantage.

Should we design for a single or multiple language formats? This is relatively easy to do in web-based training as long as we keep in mind that changing language is rarely just translation. Web interfaces allow us to give the end user his or her choices about the language, presentation style and learning style.

Designers need to remember that English is up to 25% more compact than many languages. This means more text space in design. In my own organization we used an electronic shell game (a game format into which one can put a variety of content) for an English version of our *DIVERSOPHY*<sup>®</sup> training game. When we decided to create a German version of the same game, the shell no longer worked—the text was longer than the data fields provided by the shell program.

Collaboration of interculturalists and designers can prevent ridicule, insult, and rejection of training programs due to ignorance or insensitivity. In online programs we cannot explain ourselves if an error occurs. This means attention to:

- Non-translatable words and alien concepts.

- Connotations of words, sounds in the new language and their resonance with the cultural, religious and ethical values of the end user culture
- False Friends—those words in the new language that sound like the old one but have quite different meanings.

In almost all widely distributed training today, we inevitably reach ESL or other second language speakers. In a training room we can slow down, repeat and work through language difficulties. Online, the program has to be strategically graded for language proficiency.

### 2. The Development stage

When it's time to put together the team who will write the program, staffing for diversity may result in slower start, but should produce more creativity and sensitivity in the long run. Some team members will require more face-to-face time more often.

Besides technical and artistic expertise, an online program development team, to be culturally competent, should include:

- A subject matter expert
- A local content expert (knows how the content is dealt with and understood locally)
- A local context expert (knows the habits of the local culture in which the program will be used)
- An interculturalist with cultural general skills (knows how cultural dynamics work and can spot potential hazards and opportunities)

In building the program this team will need to conduct field interviews about the design, translate and culturally adapt the materials, as well as prepare a culturally sensitive glossary.

Cultural adaptation involves presenting the basic principle, theory or concept of a training program in such a way that those of another culture can understand and employ it. Incidentally, simultaneous engineering of several culturally different approaches to the same program can enrich all of them and result in economies of scale.

The key to this work at present seems to be successful modularization. Designers and developers need to "chunk" the presentation into small units that allows them to replace and modify segments as needed. Though it makes achieving overall flow more challenging, modularization also fits the new learning environment--for many people their everyday workplace. Many will not have learning centers or be able to dedicate long periods of time to study. Their learning will often be interrupted by the demands of their jobs.

Some cultural groups will per se require more and shorter learning segments. US workers tend to have shorter attention span for didactic material. ESL readers need slower shorter approaches, even if the work is self-timed.

Administrative manuals or annotated leader and coaching guides, if not specifically rewritten for target populations, should be locally adapted to support the course's specific objectives and how to achieve them. They should identify which activities have been modified, replaced or explained differently, particularly if the administrator or coach is not from the culture where the program is being implemented.

Finally and most importantly, the objective of each learning activity should be clearly explained. Administrators and end users need to know:

- Why it is included? What is its priority? What relevant background information is needed?
- What is the activity's intent, purpose and expected outcomes?
- With what steps and tools will it achieve its goal?

### 3. Testing & fine-tuning the program

Once a beta version of the program is ready, examine both content and dynamics for cultural compatibility, using a variety of test subjects from the same culture.

- Ask cultural questions explicitly. Don't assume that cultural issues will automatically arise from a survey or focus group if they are not queried. Culture tends to be transparent and unconscious and needs prodding to surface.

- Query feedback you find surprising or don't understand. Frequently we ignore occasional strange or "off-the-wall" results if the remaining results reinforce our expectations. Unexpected responses can be important keys to cultural issues.
- Beware making people act as individuals where they are used to acting as a group. They may learn new skills in training but abandon them in practice. One Western company created an expensive online classroom for a subsidiary in Southeast Asia only to find that the target group did the program online to please headquarters, but then replicated each session face-to-face to satisfy their cultural learning orientation.

Despite the online nature of the program, the testing phase should involve reading all texts aloud, not simply those that need to be spoken aloud by a narrator or video clip in the program.

Finally, find out if people connect what they are being taught with their own experience, or are just adding a layer of information or practice that could easily disappear if not culturally integrated into their learning base.

### 4. The publishing & distribution phase

At this stage the important questions to ask and answer locally are:

- Who is motivated to use the program and why? Does program must fit motivational patterns of the culture it is designed for?
- What are the advertising norms & preferences? Whether internal or external, these must correspond to motivational patterns.
- What adoption patterns procedures exist locally? How has the introduction of localized programs in this area worked in the past?
- Whose support or endorsement is needed? In places where the blessing of an authority figure or expert is needed, this may be all-important.

### 5. Coaching participants & maintaining the online program

Both group work and face-to-face communication tend to be more important in high context cultures. We need to explore how we can use the online medium to bring people together rather than separate them.

Also in higher context cultures, personal, real or almost real online coaches are desirable. Making them actual people images rather than, e.g., comic characters is preferable. In coaching find the correct balance between individual attention and group support.

Non-users need coaching to accept the shift to online training as well. Social pressure may discourage online training in work hours if ones colleagues see it as sloughing off. In some jobs distinctions between online training and performance enhancement tools are already beginning to blur. The local culture needs to be prepared for this paradigm shift.

### 6. Measuring learner performance and evaluating the program

Cultures may differ in evaluation criteria. Ask:

- How are feedback, quizzes and tests received? Is anonymous testing more threatening than personal assessment?
- What needs to be measured? Are the tools and standards of measurement valid, appropriate and seen as fair in this culture?
- How and to whom are results and feedback given? What fits in this social and organizational setting? Machines are good at giving numbers back. We are now making them better at giving personalized feedback.
- How are success, failure and recognition dealt with both in online and person-to-person evaluation of performance? Are rewards culturally appropriate to individuals or the group in a given culture? Are the coach and manager involved, and if so, how?

With imagination and attention, we may be able to create a better cultural *fung shui* for online training. In fact it need not be too different from moving furniture, opening doors and spaces, and adding a few mirrors to capture and redirect poorly targeted energies.

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