



Intercultural aspects of online training using games

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Abstract

As in traditional classroom settings, online teaching and learning can be made user friendly only by paying attention to cultural, organisational and personal learning values and patterns. This session will explore the cultural implications for developing appropriate online learning materials and, in particular, learning games in online training. It will examine how culture affects the way in which we conceive and design a learning module, along

with its use of language and graphics. It will address how we develop, test, fine tune, measure and evaluate online training that incorporates aspects of gaming. Finally it will discuss how we coach, maintain, publish and distribute such programs. The session included several brief interactive experiences that underlined the principal points discussed. They are noted in brackets.

Presentation

Introduction: Parameters of the discussion.

We are discussing the intercultural aspects of online training design using gaming. This has to do with the impact of culture on design and design on culture, irrespective of whether the subject matter of the training event itself is intercultural or about culture. Marshall McLuhan's perception that the "medium is the message" or at least carries a cultural message is valid for E-Learning as well as other media. In this case the message is carried by the structure of the learning application used to design and deliver the subject matter in hand.

Introductions & focus [interactive experience].

Each participant was given a playing card on entering the room for the session. They were instructed to focus on aspects of their own experience with online training by finding partners of the same suite and discussing:

- **Hearts** – My hopes and fears about online training
- **Diamonds** – What I am creating or would like to see online
Spades – My experience & expertise with online training
Clubs – How my culture views games for learning

Why is online important?

Current assessments and projections show that use of online training by corporations has

increased from a mere 57 million US dollar business in 1997 to USD 2 billion currently and is likely to reach USD 11 billion in the year 2003. The implications of this for teachers and trainers are enormous in terms of how they must view, design and deliver their work. It can be seen either as a threat or an opportunity. It cannot be ignored.

Value from the corporate perspective

Online training or e-learning, as it is becoming more commonly called, provides significant advantages for its corporate users. For organisations operating in a globalised economy, "Instructor-led programs are expensive, time-consuming, inconvenient, and ill-suited for geographically dispersed workforces." Furthermore, "Programs using books or other reading materials are impersonal, are difficult and expensive to keep updated, and don't allow tracking of learning effectiveness." (www.digitalthink.com, 05.2000) Attractive features of e-learning include:

- A self-managed learning curve. The learner is assisted to develop and maintain his or her learning objectives, curriculum and learning pace.
- The interactive nature of e-learning provides the learner with improved content retention and assimilation, and enhances the enjoyment of learning.

- JIT (just-in-time) potential – learning can now be continuous and occur when and in the form that the learner needs in order to apply it. (Urdan, Trace A. & Cornelia C. Weggen, 2000, Corporate e-Learning, www.hambrecht.com)

Games enhance the e-learning context by changing perspectives on the information, making it emotional or dramatic, getting learners to respond to, interact with, and question the information and often by using peer pressure to make them act as a team.

Basic concepts

[Interactive Quiz with participants was used to define the following]:

- **B2B** – Business to business. E-commerce that takes place between businesses. The largest share of e-learning commerce is occurring currently at this level.
- **B2C** – Business to consumer. E-commerce that takes place between businesses and the end user. University online education is of this nature, and a considerable amount of it is also being deployed now by commercial enterprises.
- **C2C** – Consumer to consumer. E-commerce taking place between two consumers. How much and where this is occurring is hard to track.
- **ISP** – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides Internet access to end-users.
- **ASP** – Application Service Provider. A company that provides a software application for e-learning. Normally this is a shell application into which the educator places the content to be learned by the end users. It may be provided to the customers server or managed from the ASP's server.
- **LSP** – Learning Service Provider. A company that provides more or less turnkey solutions to educational requirements of organisations. Besides providing the application, the LSP provides instructional design and implements the integrated learning solution (see below), usually on its own server network.
- **Integrated Learning Solution** – A learning package that includes not just the learning event(s) but such features as administration, pre-testing, evaluation, record keeping, etc., to meet the needs of personnel departments to track the capabilities of employees and to provide strategically useful information about the competencies of the personnel within an enterprise.
- **Globalisation, Internationalisation, and Localisation** – Globalisation is a process in which a product or service is offered to a worldwide multicultural market, or segments of it. Globalisation of an online product, e.g., a website, training program, involves the steps of internationalisation in which the shell or framework of the online offering is constructed or reconstructed in such a way that culture language and area specific content can be successfully inserted in it without the need to recreate the project from the beginning. Localisation involves putting material that has been translated and culturally adapted to the local market or users into the internationalised framework.
- **Work enhancement** – this is learning that occurs just in time to meet the learner's needs to apply the knowledge. An online translating dictionary integrated into a word processor is a very simple form of this, but many more task functions now exist and are being created.

Culture as a factor in e-learning

In the entire e-learning process, paying attention to culture is a key factor to success. It provides an intelligible interface that is user friendly and free of inappropriate stressors. Not only does it help us avoid offending or misleading diverse users, but it also helps organisations to add value from the diversity that end-users bring to it. Culture and cultural diversity in this context are not only meant in racial, ethnic and regional terms, but in the full gamut of cultural diversity as illustrated in the figure below.

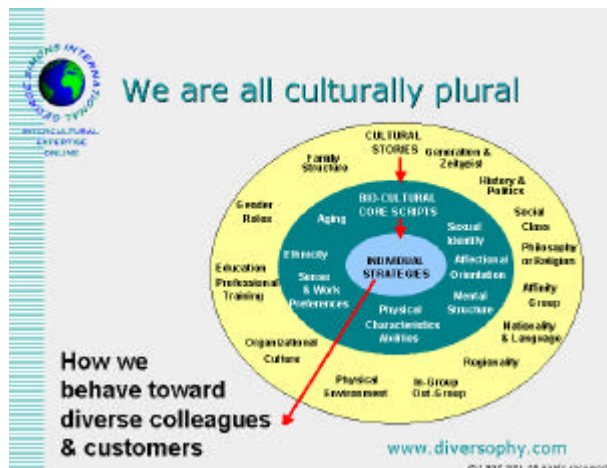


Figure 1: How multiple cultural identities affect behavior

Culture and e-learning design

Cultural preferences are critical as to whether, how, when, and how long people will play games or otherwise be involved in a training or learning experience. Not paying attention to cultural factors in the e-learning experience is very much like the indiscriminate depletion of rain forests. We are likely to lose valuable cultural variants. Yet, this is not apparent to many people in the e-learning industry. A telephone survey by the author of the major ASPs showed that virtually all of them saw culture as “not our business” and expected that the content provider would take responsibility for it. Yet basic software configurations, iconography, structure, etc., tend to reinforce a dominant culture. Furthermore, the LSP’s interviewed saw it not as a strategic concern but up to the instructional designers on their staff. In fact, all training expresses, reinforces as well as changes culture, which we define as the rules about how we think and behave as being members of a specific group.

2.2 Shell games as cultural artifacts

While as professional gamers, we are likely to make a distinction between games and simulations. The distinctions generally stress that games involve drills, motor skills, the learning and recall of facts and the challenges of problem solving, while simulations tend to involve the creation of a parallel reality so as to be more applicable to complex tasks and engage the players in interpersonal exchanges, people dynamics, and highlight the affective domain. In fact often the distinctions are blurred and overlapping and so we will use the term games to involve both in this discussion, except to note that the present state of devel-

opment of e-learning is more likely to avail itself of the gaming side of the polarity if it involves play at all. Games are more easily integrated into online learning. Simulations tend to be stand-alone events.

Online “frame” or “shell” games allow us to integrate our content into a gaming framework online or in computerised learning. Some examples of “shells” are: Game Mill™, Gameshow Pro2™, Gameshow Pal™, Quizfactory 2™, Zingo™ and Computer Game Share™. These have not been thoroughly examined to detail their cultural perspectives, but at face value they do seem to be largely US American in their style of presentation.

Universal dynamics of gaming have particular cultural expressions

There are certain universal dynamics that make games effective. These were described recently by Mihali Csikszentmihalyi (1991, Flow, New York, HarperCollins,). Enhancing them in a culturally coherent way normally enhances the effectiveness of both real and virtual games. These dynamics are:

- 1) **AGWN** = racing toward the finishing line, increasing the odds, payoff as we approach the deadline, competing (against oneself). In applying this dynamic one must look to cultural values around competition and how it is used.
- 2) **ALAEA** = the element of chance, the roll of the dice, the spin of the roulette wheel, the luck of the draw. Certain forms of chance, gambling, etc., can be unacceptable to certain cultures.
- 3) **VERTIGO** = mental disorientation, losing control, being out of the control of the normal thinking processes, the roller coaster. Propriety and dignity are often issues to be considered when applying this dynamic across cultures.
- 4) **MIMOS** = imitation, role-playing, empowers us to take on the characteristics of someone else in fantasy. Using a puppet to speak, etc. Culture may encourage or restrict imitation and role-playing.[An interactive experience occurred here, in which participants formed small groups and brainstormed how they might create these elements in online games]

Ethics and value systems in online gaming

From a cultural perspective, the values and the ethics of simulation may differ. Different groups may see the boundary between simulation & life differently, or the boundary between useful cheating & unethical manipulation. They may react differently to rewards and punishments the use of money in games? Sometimes the use of game materials are inappropriate, e.g., some religiously oriented people may object to the use of dice or playing cards or other items as they are seen as a part of gambling, which is forbidden.

How culture affects the design stages of the e-learning development cycle

The following are the normal steps in the development of online training along with the intercultural considerations that should be attended to:

Stage 1. Conception and design

In conceiving and designing the learning event, culture may affect whether a single or multiple language format is used and the choice to be made from what platforms or applications are available as vehicles for the learning experience and, how they are used. Graphics, imagery & sound must be chosen to enhance the experience and not cause offense or distraction. For example, dogs may delight the British but be offensive to Islamic participants.

Use of language

Language level should also be decided upon at the design stage. Cross-cultural effectiveness may rely on the ability of people who speak a mother tongue to restrict and choose their vocabulary to meet the capabilities of second language speakers. Nowhere is this more critical than in English, where worldwide the people who speak ESL already far outnumber those who speak English as a mother tongue. It is also important not to underestimate the role of differences in spoken language and accents as both a comfort and a comprehension factor. Where people are expected to read texts or instructions, additional time is normally required for second language speakers. The rules of plain language are available from the government of Canada in both English and French at www.web.net/~plain/PlainTrain/

[As an interactive experience we illustrated the problem of language using the exercise by Marianne Brand, called "Intercultural Maths," (Simons, George, et. al., Eds. 2000, Global Competence: 50 Training Exercises for Suc-

ceeding in Global Business, Amherst, MA, HRD Press)]

The Italian maxim, *traduttore traditore* (the translator is a traitor) is always worth keeping in mind as a reminder that the literal translation of words and concepts are incomplete without cultural adaptation. Take hunting, for example, as a marketing image. It is an upper-class sport in Britain, but not so in Italy. Thus the image of the hunter in a British visual does not give the same luxury flavor to the product in the Italian market as it does in the UK or North America.

Boundaries

Essentially when designing online games, apply online what you have learned about culture offline, and especially when creating an integrated solution, build in live online facilitation, coaching, debriefing, and trouble-shooting that is culturally sensitive. It is, of course, necessary to stretch cultural boundaries for learning to take place, but this must be done with respect to the individual's values and growth capabilities. In the design stage staffing for diversity will bring value added. Intercultural virtual teamwork rules

Stage 2. Developing the program

Simultaneous engineering of culturally different approaches to the same content or game requires multicultural management, skills but may pay off in the form of more cultural insight.

Stage 3. Testing & fine-tuning

Test both the content & the dynamics of online content and games for cultural compatibility, using a variety of test subjects from the target culture, asking cultural questions and querying the responses you find surprising or don't understand. Reading all texts to be used in the event aloud increases the likelihood of finding errors in the text and awkward or misleading instructions.

Stage 6. Measurement and evaluation

Cultures may differ in what learning results or behaviors need to be measured and in what tools & standards of measurement are to be employed. They may also differ greatly in how and to whom information about results and how and when to give feedback as well as in how success, failure, & recognition are dealt with.

Stage 5. Coaching and maintenance

The norms of coaching need to be examined from a cultural perspective. Issues may arise around the authority of the coach or the respect due him or her. Having more of a face-to-face or “richer” interface is likely to be more important in high context cultures that have a group orientation than it is in content focussed low context cultures.

Stage 6 Publishing and distributing the learning product

Even the publishing and distribution activities have important cultural dimensions that can help or hinder the e-learning event. Within a specific culture, it is important to determine who is motivated to use the product and for what reasons, as well as whose support, endorsement, besides that of the end-user, is needed for it to be accepted. This means a close examination of advertising norms and preferences and an in-depth look at what adoption procedures exist locally.

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