

## Interculturally online—considerations for training and learning

By Dr. George F. Simons

The greatest obstacles to effective online training in the soft-skill areas are personal and political, not technological. Of course, the technology is limited, but growing by leaps and bounds almost by the hour. I was speaking with a training manager from one of the world's leading cell phone companies a few days ago and she promised me streaming video on my mobile phone within two years.

Here are some things to think about when considering online approaches to intercultural or diversity training and other "soft-skill" areas:

- 1) While globalization/localization of web content is in full swing, we are only beginning to apply these principles to organizational learning. Unlike websites intended for the public, training sometimes has the advantage of being done inside a familiar organizational culture. With the increase and rapidity of mergers and acquisitions though, and the fast pace of culture change in many organizations this is no longer a given. I have surveyed the major globalization/localization firms and they are not by-and-large involved in the transformation of training. Until now they have been going where the money is, with training still prone to take second place to marketing and sales.
- 2) It is the online training LSPs (Learning Service Providers) who are paving the way here with solid online course design. They are also overcoming the hardware and software challenges that many, including large companies face, by creating browser-accessible online training that resides on their own servers rather than the company's. They have started hiring people with cultural sensitivity to the content and presentation, but generally speaking, there is a long way to go to recognizing the cultural dimensions of and culturally adapting systems and content. Costs tend to favor lowest-common-denominator approaches that, in the end, favor the dominant culture at the expense of variety. Marshall McLuhan's dictum is far from dead here, and now might read, "the virtual medium is the message." It is a major cultural studies challenge to identify the culture(s) of the new media. Much is being done in this area, but, as far as I can tell, most interculturalists are unfamiliar with this field of inquiry
- 3) Recently, I have been working with a team of colleagues to meet the urgent need of faculties of teaching and training professionals to learn how to prepare their content for online presentation, and then, assisting them to fulfill their new role as online and remote coaches for such training. We have discovered that such a transition is a fearsome prospect for many of these incredibly proficient people. They come from a paradigm that says that their value-added comes from proprietary knowledge content, rather than from their interpersonal skills at transfer and application of this knowledge. They are not comfortable in the freewheeling distribution of information common in many cybercultures. It can be no less fearsome for the learners, who need a "culturally sensitive" introduction to eLearning technology itself, even as they embark on its subject matter, which we should of course be culturally sensitive as well.

As far as teachers and trainers are concerned, let's face it, the larger percentage of training even—no, *particularly*—in the soft skill areas such as cross-cultural and diversity training, can easily be better done online with rich examples, video clips, interactive activities, simulations and quizzes that are at available today. It is perhaps the ten or fifteen percent of value that a good teacher and coach can add that is critical to the learning process. However, all too many in this field fail to see the fresh possibility inherent in this. Instead of viewing the transformation to online learning as an invitation for them to spend more of their time doing what they could do best, their fear of the unknown often leads them consciously or unconsciously to becoming (at least verbal and political) Luddites, pooh-poohing or attacking the potential of online training and stalling needed initiatives. Face-to-face and classroom work will not disappear, of course, but will be much less common soon than it is today.

Last year I had the occasion to address this issue with a group of intercultural research and training professionals. The contents of this presentation and were published serially in the November through January issues of the *Managing Diversity Newsletter*. What I did not say in these articles is that, beyond the natural fear of change, this transition in itself is a cultural issue, demanding a look at how teaching and learning are viewed in various cultural contexts.

- 4) Specifically, the online facilitator or coach needs the full panoply of intercultural communication skills. But she or he also needs training in how to apply them online because the environment is so different from face-to-face work. Here are some of the common challenges and suggested lines of approach.

Often the online facilitator or trainer:

- **does not leave the familiar "home" (figuratively and sometimes literally) environment in order to interact with other cultures.** This means a thorough grounding in how intercultural differences play out when working virtually. I have identified some of thirty of these in an article on "Meeting the intercultural challenges of virtual work," that you may download on the georgesimons.com site I would be delighted to hear of other intercultural challenges that you and other readers of this note may have found to affect the online interaction in eLearning.
- **does not have a cultural profile or a background of experiencing personal interaction with the individual or his or her culture.** Virtual working or coaching is not like "going there and meeting and working with someone." While virtual learning environments are becoming richer by the minute, there are lots of missing clues. Names mean nothing. In today's virtual world, Stanislaw Domanski can be Chinese, not Polish, and Nita Marcel, Indonesian, not French. Part of an in-house learning system needs to be effective profiling of the user and the user environment, on one hand, and learner customization of the learning experience, on the other.

Fortunately, from a technical perspective, both of these are easier to create in the eWorld than they are in the traditional classroom. A well-designed eLearning program allows the trainer or coach to have instant fingertip access to the student's progress in a particular course of study.

However, there is a job to be done here in how to sensibly and sensitively gather and classify appropriate information. This is another example of where intercultural expertise needs to be brought to bear on technology-created challenges. It is also an area that could be somewhat difficult to execute in the US, where interviews are limited in the questions they can ask. "Profiling" is a nasty word in some diversity contexts, to say nothing of the fears of "stereotyping." Remember how strongly US Americans insist on being seen and treated always and everywhere individuals! And, in Europe, privacy is GOLD—and one of the chief issues already separating it from the US in the area of eCommerce. Obviously I have just engaged in stereotyping, but, I hope, of a useful sort that provides insight into the challenge in question.

- **faces less and less continuity in the learning experience.** The academic hour and the training day are quickly being replaced with much shorter learning experiences that can be accessed in slower moments or dedicated breaks in the work schedule of the end user. The future development training will often result in work enhancement tools. These are online "helpers" that enable the user to access on the spot the information he or she needs to understand and appropriately respond or behave toward a colleague or customer. For the facilitator or coach, this means first, being able to support this process when questions come up, and secondly to assist the learner to organize this very granular learning experience into larger thinking patterns and skill sets. I suspect that this will rarely succeed unless course management and learning contracts are set up to concern themselves with this new form of learning technology.

- **lacks the ability to send explicit cultural signals to the learner as well.** Remember, it is a two-way interaction. *Both* the student and facilitator or coach lack the richness of each other's cultural self-presentation. Here it is important to draw on and adapt what we know about writing across cultures when we are limited to email, forums and chat. We must apply what we have already learned about telephone interactions when we use voice technology, and what we are taught about good visual presence when using teleconferencing, whether dedicated or as part of an online application. A personal example. For years I hated the telephone as a medium of communication. Now with the advent of high quality hands-free devices, I can move around and talk and gesture to my heart's content, with the result that it seems to enrich the non-verbals via tone and energy and putting more of "me" into my phone conversations turned them into a pleasure rather than a chore.

We need to discover means and skills of *being who we are* culturally in the new media, and know which of these tools and abilities it is appropriate to use in different circumstances. The new media are virtual, not real, which is to say that they are "representational." There will always be a dimension of abstraction and a loss of the richness that is found in face-to-face. Even if the "transporter" were invented tomorrow, and it were possible to say, "Beam me up, Scotty" (I am an aging *first-generation* Trekkie), we will still be making choices about whether real, or virtual presence, or a 33 cent stamp is the appropriate vehicle.

Perhaps we can take advantage of another sort of diversity here. We have much to learn from people who lack vision or hearing or voice in this regard. After all, working remotely in today's virtual environments is about more effectively using the signals we do have and can give, in order to compensate for those we are lacking.

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