Cross-Cultural Issues for Asian e-Learners:  
An Analysis Based on Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract: When instruction is to be delivered by any medium, whether in a traditional e-learning mode or through the use of a blended learning model, cross-cultural issues have a major impact. This paper focuses on the cultural characteristics of Asian e-learners and uses Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as the basis for the analysis. Asian learners face some clearly identified challenges. For example, in a typical classroom, where interactivity is the norm, an Asian learner may have a difficult time overcoming his or her traditional role as a respectful listener. In a blended learning environment, Asian learners may need to adapt to the concept of computer-aided instruction or learning online while they face the challenges of learning how to cope in a classroom situation that may be quite different from what they are used to.

Introduction

When designing or implementing any e-learning program, whether traditional or some form of blended learning, consideration of the cultural elements is crucial for educational institutions or professional training organizations. Cultures differ in how they view the learning environment: Interpersonal transactions, classroom structure, learner attitudes, and learning activities (Powell 1997). Learners within different cultures react differently to both positive and negative feedback, competition, authority figures, and gender differences (Thiagarajan, 1988). Some corporations and training institutions are aware of the linguistic problems that could arise in their e-learning products and thus consider translation issues – costs included – of websites and training materials. Often, too much of the focus is on the Information Technology issues. While those are certainly critical in the field of e-learning, the consideration of character sets supported by a particular operating system and expansion of text due to translation problems are not the only issues. Some of these organizations simply don’t give enough consideration to the culture and mores, usage and tone of their content. E-learning across the globe introduces more variables and more potential problems than targeting the content and message to a local audience you know well. “Language and localization may reach your bottom line fast, but ignore culture and you'll sink from the weight of the world. Since you face a large enough challenge asking people to attempt something new, try your hardest not to offend them along the way” (Conner 2000).

Some e-learning program developers try to improve their products through some form of localization (see, for example, Strother 2002). Localization involves taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold. It is alternately defined as the process of creating or adapting a product to a specific locale, i.e., to the language, cultural context, conventions and market requirements of a specific target market. In general, there is a need to localize some content, adapt other content to the audience, and create unique local content along the way. All learning is culturally sensitive and requires more than translation when it is transferred. Since behavior and learning styles are culturally based, online products must also be sensitive to cultural variables such as silence, humor, manners, and values (Forster 2002).
All considerations of cross-cultural issues for e-learning programs must be taken into account from the very beginning of the design phase of the project. McLeod (1987) points out that the proposed curriculum needs to be examined from two perspectives – macro (broad cultural/contextual environment) and micro (study, community) to ensure that conscious decisions have been made about such things as content, teaching and learning styles, and organization of the learning environment.

There are many individual learner variables – such as learning styles, multiple intelligences, right- or left-brain dominance – and while individual variations exist in all cultures, many cultures tend to stress one style of learning over another because of the values incorporated in that culture (see Strother & Alford 2003 for an overview of learner variables and their impact on e-learning program design). The same is true for preferred communication patterns, such as those described by Kaplan (1966). An additional element is the language issue, in view of the fact that sophisticated language skills are required for operating effectively in most online environments.

A significant caveat involves the fact that learner variables, like cultural labels, differ from individual to individual and therefore must be used only for generalization and analytical purposes. However, these generalizations can be helpful for anyone designing or implementing any kind of e-learning program in a different culture. The educational organization or corporate training program needs to understand that a curriculum that was developed within one cultural framework may not import successfully into another. E-learning across the globe introduces more variables and more potential problems than targeting content and message to a local audience that is familiar and whose characteristics are well known.

Researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between cultural elements and factors that affect the field of e-learning. Marcus and Gould (2000) linked Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions to perceptions about the accessibility of the user interface. Tylee (2001) extended their ideas to include how the different cultural dimensions would influence user perceptions about the general accessibility of the online environment. Hofstede himself added the dimension of long-term versus short-term orientation (2003) and a number of other researchers have proposed additional or alternative ways of looking at cultural dimensions; see for example Trompenaars (1993). However, this paper uses Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as the basis for the analysis of the cultural characteristics of Asian learners and the way these learners could typically respond to various e-learning environments.

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede (1980) identified four dimensions of national culture that can serve as a basis for comparing the dominant value systems between national cultures. Hofstede’s four original cultural dimensions are

- **Power-Distance** – the degree to which a society accepts the idea that power and authority can be distributed unequally. The more this inequity is accepted, the higher the country’s Power-Distance ranking.

- **Collectivism versus Individualism** – the relationship between the individual and the collectivity which prevails in a particular culture. In collective societies, people are more likely to integrate their own goals with those of the group. A society that ranks high on individualism feels that the beliefs and actions of individuals should be independent of collective thought and control.

- **Masculinity versus Femininity** – the degree to which a society emphasizes achievement, assertiveness, and competition as opposed to quality of life issues, nurturing, group solidarity, and cooperation. The more assertive or competitive a country is, the higher will be its Masculinity ranking.

- **Uncertainty Avoidance** – the degree to which a society feels threatened by ambiguity or unexpected situations. It tries to avoid uncertainty by rules and a low tolerance for deviation from
those rules or established procedures. The more a society acts on these beliefs, the higher its ranking in uncertainty avoidance.

In his survey, Hofstede (1980, 1991) included 53 nations. Table 1 presents the rankings (from 1 to 53) of seven Asian nations from that study. Hofstede did not include China, since, at the time of his study, most of the western world’s connections to China were through Hong Kong. The rankings of the United States are included for comparison purposes only. Hofstede and Bond (1988; Hofstede, 1991; Wang, 1994) later added a fifth dimension, Confucian dynamism, to see if the rapid economic growth of certain Asian nations (the so-called “five dragons” – Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) could be explained in terms of the acceptance and application of Confucian teachings. The research, which included 22 countries, showed that rapid economic growth did occur in those countries that valued and promoted certain Confucian values. Some values were emphasized while others were practiced less rigorously (Brislin and Yoshida 1994). Countries that rank high in Confucian dynamism stress the importance of understanding and respecting status and unequal relations, the high value of hard work and perseverance, a sense of shame, and a concern for the future.

**TABLE 1: The rankings of seven Asian nations on the basis of Hofstede’s original four cultural dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking (1-53)</th>
<th>Power-Distance</th>
<th>Individualism</th>
<th>Masculinity</th>
<th>Uncertainty Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>49-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22-23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25-26</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39-41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>27-28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>29-30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32-33</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>39-41</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On Power-Distance, Malaysia ranks in first place while Hong Kong and Singapore fall in the top third. South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand rank near the middle of all nations, while Japan and the United States exhibit a weaker Power-Distance belief structure.

Individualism contrasts with collectivism. The United States ranks first place in individualism with Japan ranking the highest among the Asian nations. The other Asian nations fall in or near the bottom third of all 53 nations surveyed by Hofstede. South Korea and Taiwan rank very low on the value they place on individual performance. Thus, the majority of Asian countries can be characterized as collectivist in nature.

In the category of Masculinity, Japan ranks number one among all nations surveyed followed by Austria, Venezuela, and Italy; Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan fall approximately midway on Masculinity ranking while Thailand and South Korea show a remarkable shift toward the values grouped under the heading of Femininity. At the time of this survey, the United States ranked fifteenth out of 53 nations.
For Uncertainty Avoidance, Japan, in seventh place followed by South Korea, places the highest value on Uncertainty Avoidance among the Asian nations. Interestingly, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore have a higher tolerance for uncertainty than does the United States.

**Implications for e-Learning Models**

**Implications for High Power Distance**

High Power Distance societies are characterized by teacher-centered education, in which the teacher transfers knowledge to the students and the students do not expect to speak or ask questions unless called upon to do so. The flow of information is from the teacher to the students. In this type of society, teachers are respected and are not to be challenged or contradicted publicly. Since wisdom and age are associated, the older teacher is respected as a repository and potential source of wisdom. Formal lectures and classroom presentations are appreciated. In addition, it is more difficult for people in these cultures to express opinions in class or defer to other students’ opinions since the power is vested in the instructor. Conner (2000) points out that while the idea of an entirely online classroom hasn’t caught on, in a culture that encourages passivity, students may feel completely unequipped to answer questions in front of their peers and perform other interactive tasks. Online, however, such learners can contribute to forums, chats, and virtual whiteboards rather anonymously and may feel safe doing so.

**Implications for Collectivist Societies**

In societies that value Collectivism over Individualism, there is a strong sense of respect for tradition and for the group. Individuals in such a group will find more satisfaction working for a collective goal rather than working individually for their own achievement. Students are not expected to initiate communication or call attention to themselves in the classroom. Group projects are preferred over individual assignments. It is very important that neither student nor teacher be put in a position where they might “lose face.”

In fact, e-learning can be a real boon for individuals who want to speak out but whose culture strongly opposes this kind of communication. This is especially important in courses where learners of different ranks are put into the same courses. Subordinates would not feel free to speak out in the presence of superiors, and managers would certainly not risk losing face in front of their subordinates. Within e-learning systems, such tools as chat rooms and posts to bulletin boards allow students equal access within a culturally safer environment. Therefore, students can participate without either breaking the culture of power distance or without the concern of losing face.

Traditional e-learning or blended learning environments can tap into the preference for collectivism by including a variety of collaborative team projects, either online or within the classroom portion of a blended learning situation. When including these opportunities for collective activities and projects, it is essential to eliminate competition as one of the assessments since this would contradict the tradition of cooperation and the aversion to individual recognition.

One additional element that occurs in a number of cultures, often coinciding with collectivism, is the focus on the value of relationships. It is common within many Asian cultures to have a certain amount of socializing within workplace environments to allow relationship building (Cushner and Brislin, 1996). Thus, within a learning environment, especially with adult learners, a group may be more comfortable if they have opportunities to build relationships, trust each other, and socialize. The face-to-face part of a blended learning program is an excellent way to address this cultural preference, thereby enhancing the e-learning process for the entire group.
Implications related to Masculinity - Femininity

Men in masculine cultures, which have rigid gender roles, would be less tolerant of women leading training sessions or of women in positions of authority. Traditional e-learning delivery modes are, by their very nature, more gender independent. This may make e-learning a more comfortable environment where gender issues exist. Tylee (2001) surmises that highly masculine cultures will influence learners’ perceptions about accessing online information based on the amount of competition associated with the online environment and the importance of online learning for achieving traditional work tasks. Conversely, it is possible to surmise that e-learners in predominantly feminine cultures will be influenced by the degree of cooperation and support that is available in the e-learning environment.

Implications related to Uncertainty Avoidance

Societies that rank high in Uncertainty Avoidance have learning environments characterized by structure. Both the students and the teacher prefer structured learning situations with definite objectives, detailed assignments, and adherence to a well-defined schedule. In a highly structured learning environment, lecturing is the most common teaching mode. To minimize uncertainty and to maintain group harmony (the absence of uncertainty), there are no student-initiated interruptions in the classroom and no disagreements with the teacher. Learning the subject as precisely as possible is more important than learning how to learn.

Again, e-learning systems can work well within these cultures because once the students get over the issues of adapting to a new and unfamiliar system (avoiding the uncertainty of change), individual risks can be minimized. Learners can ask questions and learn by trial-and-error without losing face or calling attention to themselves. Since a lot of feedback is usually provided in e-learning programs, learners can feel safe interacting and getting responses because they do not have to initiate interruptions or ask questions in a live and potentially embarrassing situation. On the other hand, blended learning provides onsite instructors who can help people overcome their fear of accessing and using online training. Learners can talk to someone about their questions, needs, and apprehensions. They can use the “let’s work together” aspect rather than leaving each alone to figure everything out, thus reducing feelings of risk and uncertainty. Therefore, the instructor can be instrumental in helping students avoid uncertainty, a function that may be particularly important to many Asian e-learners.

Conclusion

It is no secret that culture implicitly affects the way in which training and learning is undertaken. In many Asian countries, where instructor-led training is linked to cultural issues of trust and relationship building, it is a challenge to use e-learning—which is often an impersonal mode of training—without some form of modification. This problem can be offset, to a degree, by introducing a blended learning approach to the training program.

Some educational programs have successfully incorporated cultural elements into their curriculum design. For example, Banham and Wong’s (2001) case study demonstrated how two cultural contexts (Asian and Australian) collaborated to create a curriculum that met the socio-cultural and determinants of both cultural contexts to deliver a program that withstood academic rigor and scrutiny.

As the Asia-Pacific e-learning market matures in the 2004-2005 time frame, there will be a much better appreciation of the benefits of e-learning technology. By then, we can expect to see localization and customization of content, the establishment of e-learning standards by Asia-Pacific governments, and a significant improvement of regional infrastructure to support e-learning. (Payne 2002)

Not all studies confirm the distinct cultural differences among learners from different world regions. For example, several studies of cross-cultural learning involving international Asian students at Australian
universities (Niles 1995; Ramburuth 1997, 2000; and Volet and Renshaw 1996) confirmed that, after one semester of study, the approaches to learning of Asian students were not vastly different from those of their local Australian counterparts. Volet and Renshaw concluded that both groups of students’ approach to study was influenced by their perceptions of course requirements rather than any “typical” personal or cultural characteristic. Studies such as these suggest that researchers should proceed with caution when making generalizations about the learning approaches of students from other cultures. While there is a growing body of literature on e-learning models and issues (see, for example, Khan 2001), there is a continuing need for examining cultural differences, as well as the multitude of other learner variables, as they affect the development and implementation of all e-learning materials.

References


