

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO E-LEARNING DESIGNS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores various cultural barriers to the advancement of e-learning as a global phenomenon. In designing e-learning environments, we should recognize the diversity of culture and learning styles in order to enhance learning for all. Therefore the writer justifies the need to attend to cultural barriers in e-learning if e-learning is to be universally successful. The paper addresses the different types of barriers visa viz cultures. Second, the paper integrates the role of culture in e-learning, and finally, practical benefits of culture in e-learning from a personal experience.

Keywords: Culture, barriers, e-learning, computers and university.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult challenges I have ever witnessed as an e-learning administrator and student is cross-cultural communication. Challenges arise when at least one of the parties trying to exchange idea is claiming not to know, or chooses to intentionally neglect the culture involved in communication (Walls, 1993). Collis and Remmers (1997) discussed that we must be alert to the fact that there are substantial differences in interaction and communication. For practical illustrations, in Nigeria for example, students respect their teachers by calling them sir or ma while that is not so in other cultures where students calls their teachers with first names; we consider this a very rude and manners less attitudes in Africa with particular emphasis to the culture of Nigerian. Also, according to Khan, (2005) who gave the illustration of Bangladesh that the thumbs-up sign is used to challenge or disregard people, but to other cultures, this means you did well and you are encouraged to even perform better. Studies show, that in Korea, funerals are typically bedecked in yellow. Yellow is the color of death and as such is a color to use with caution with Koreans (Olaniran, 2001). A barbecue sandwich and a beer might seem like an inviting lunch to you, but Indonesian and Malaysian people will find it offensive. Meanwhile, Khan also reiterated in his research that you don't call someone (jokingly) a pig or dog in some Asian countries this is considered inappropriate and dangerous.

Quigley (2002) notes an interesting cultural shock issue regarding the use of red colour in China and in the USA: Red is considered a lucky colour in China. It's the traditional shade worn at weddings, the color of "hong baos", the money envelopes given on the Chinese New Year, and the predominant color of the national flag. How unlucky, then, that a US-based company planned to use red flags as warning signals in an e-learning course intended for Chinese students. Fortunately, someone noticed before it was too late. Although I must confess as an instructor that designing e-learning for diverse learners is a strenuous task. I still agree with the old saying that it is quite easier to lead animals successfully than humans without complaints. E-learning designers should try to be sensitive to cross-cultural communication issues or risk loss of credibility (Olaniran, 2001).

Culture has so many definitions from different authors but chose to adopt the one given by Robins et al., (2006) as the set of common beliefs and practices that a person shares with a group. Think about how your culture differs from the cultures of your students, culture determines how you interact with your students and react to things that happen in the classroom. It is important to reflect upon and be aware of your cultural biases and differences. Many at times as online teachers/instructors we often think that people in non-dominant cultures should change and learn the ways of the dominant culture especially the developed versus developing countries which is a very big problem we need to address. Therefore, this paper intends to find out some of these challenging cultural barriers to e-learning and proffer solutions so as to facilitate the global dissemination of knowledge through e-learning.

1.1 Problem statement

It is a fact that some cultures do not permit calling their teachers/instructors by names while others embrace this. Similarly, thumbs-up sign is used to challenge or disregard people, but to other cultures, that means you did well and you are encouraged to even perform better. Therefore, how do we balance culture in e-learning designs that an online instructor does not either impose his/her culture on students and students would not feel offensive if mistakenly, instructors fail to understand or embrace their cultures?

1.2 Objectives

In meeting the above mentioned challenge, the general objective of the paper is to find out some of these challenging cultural barriers to e-learning and proffer solutions so as to facilitate the global dissemination of knowledge through e-learning. Specifically, the paper would also meet the following objective:

- i. Identify the types of cultural barriers that exist
- ii. Develop a model that would enhance e-learning and cultures

In meeting the above stated objectives, the paper is classified into the following sections apart from introduction, cultural proficiency, components of cultural barrier, sources of cultural barrier, w-learning and cultural model and conclusion.

2. CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

Cultural proficiency is a way of allowing individuals and organizations to interact effectively with people who differ from them” (Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey & Terrell, 2006, p. 2)

2.1 Characteristics of cultural proficiency

- Cultural proficiency model “is proactive, provides tools that can be used in any setting”.
- Has a behavioural focus
- It is important to learn how to interact positively with people who differ from yourself.
- Remember that becoming culturally proficient takes time: time to think, reflect, decide and change.
- Begin by reflecting on your school and your own individual understandings and values.
- There is no individual without a culture either visible or embedded.

2.2 Benefits of Cultural Proficiency

- i. Can be used for both organizations and individuals (Robins et al., 2006).
- ii. It is the policies and practices and values and behaviour of organizations and individuals that allow for effective interactions.
- iii. The culture promotes inclusiveness and institutionalizes processes for learning about differences and for responding appropriately to differences.
- iv. Educators need to welcome and create opportunities to better understand who they are as individuals.

We must acknowledge differences and expect to learn from other cultures and expect that these cultures will learn from us. We need to try to adapt and adjust to differences between cultures.

The followings are the sources of cultural differences:

1. **Demographic characteristic:** culture, ethnicity, language, age, gender, social class, religion
2. **Personal characteristics:** age, gender, communication style, economic background, personality
3. **Abilities and skills:** social and technical
4. **The barriers**
 - The presumption of entitlement: All that you have you deserve by virtue of your merit alone
 - Systems of oppression: Examples include: racism, sexism, ageism.
 - Perpetuates domination and victimization: Unawareness of the need to adapt, believing that others need to change but you do not

2.3 Components of Cultural barriers

1. **The continuum:** This deals with identifying barriers in culture and knowing what to do. The followings are various classifications:
 - Cultural destructiveness: which talks about noticing the differences and storming it out?
 - Cultural incapacity: seeing the difference in culture and behave it doesn't exist.
 - Cultural blindness: See the difference, act like you didn't see it.
 - Cultural pre-competence: See the difference, respond inadequately
 - Cultural competence: See the difference, understand the difference and what the difference makes
 - Cultural proficiency: See the difference and respond effectively in a variety of environments (Robins et al., 2006)
2. **The essential Elements:** These deals with managing the barriers to effectively bring out the best in teaching. This is achieved by observing the following:
 - Assess the culture and name the differences
 - Value diversity by claiming the differences
 - Manage the dynamics of difference
 - Adapt to diversity and train about differences
 - Institutionalize cultural knowledge and allow change for the differences
3. **The Guiding Principles:** This is to further assist instructors/teachers in meeting the needs of students in cultural predominant areas:
 - Culture is a prevalent force.
 - There is diversity between cultures and within cultures.
 - Respect the unique needs of every culture.

3. E-LEARNING AND CULTURAL MODEL

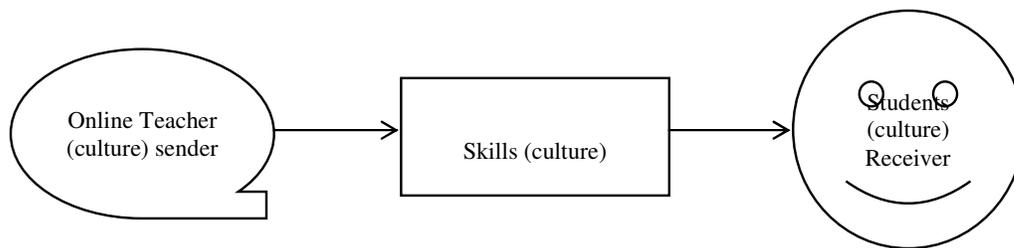


Figure 1: Proposed model to embrace culture in e-learning design

Figure 1 shows a proposed model to embrace culture of individual in e-learning studies.

The online teacher: is expected to have his/her own culture as indicated in figure 1 which is embraced and practiced. The teachers should therefore be willing to learn the culture of their students without trying to lure their culture on their students.

Skills: It is also obvious that the skills the teacher is passing across was inherited from somewhere through studies which has its own culture and without acknowledging this culture you may not be skillful in the field you have chosen.

Students (Receiver): In the same note, the students who are the receiver are from different geographical region with distinctive traits, norms and the likes. For an effective acquisition of knowledge, they must be willing to lay down their girds to learn the cultures of others which may be their teacher or fellow students.

Culture presents significant challenges to e-learning in the age of developments. However, the challenges can be controlled by paying attention to cultural needs of the individuals as seen in figure 1. Also, there is the need for adapting technology use to the cherished cultural values and societal ethics. This is a requirement for organizational vendors and e-learning providers. For example, Olaniran (2007a) argues that the need for individuals in a collective culture to maintain close contact with families and loved ones is a common thread that can be explored in getting potential users to adopt a new technology. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the need for personal contact with someone (teachers and students) during learning was stressed by users in e-learning environment (e.g., Henning, 2003; Vaughan & MacVicar, 2004).

At the same time, the need to contact instructors for approval and validation to determine whether students are on the right track is also important to student-instructor interaction in e-learning setting (Lanham & Zhou, 2003). For example, the impacts of feedback and questions on learning have been noted which would go a long way determining the mile stones attained in research and development visa viz the challenges. Just as organization goals for e-learning are important in terms of cost and content, so are users' needs, which should accommodate users' cultural perspectives and learning preferences. Vaughan and MacVicar (2004) conclude that e-learning is doomed for failure when learners' cultural needs are not carefully considered.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The paper has stressed the needs for cultural harmonization in e-learning design as demonstrated in figure 1. The research also found out that individual stake holders involved in teaching, the teacher (giver), the message and the students (receiver) are all engrossed in various cultures. It is therefore suggested that for the objectives of e-learning to be met, we all have to lay down our girds by showing little interest in the cultures, norms and ethical behaviour of others.

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