

Chapter 16

The Cultural Adaptation of E-Learning: Using Appropriate Content, Instructional Design, and Media

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Culturally appropriate instructional design requires the integration of instructional design skills with intercultural knowledge. In e-learning, as in classroom-based courses, courses that accommodate the learning styles and cultural preferences of the targeted learners will offer the best—and fastest—learning outcomes. In this chapter, the author illustrates how to modify an existing e-learning course—or design one ‘from scratch’—that aligns the course content, the instructional methodologies (including activities and assessments) and the technology to the needs and environment of learners in other countries. The ‘smart’ instructional designer conducts a cultural analysis and makes validated changes to e-learning courses, before they are sent for translation, localization, or final production

WHAT IS CULTURAL ADAPTATION?

The process of cultural adaptation can include translation and localization, but it can also go beyond those two processes whenever elements

of the course are so different from what the targeted learners might expect that we need to make more profound adaptations. Consider these few examples.

You have an elearning course that shows learners how to use a new software application. In general, software usually works the same way, even if

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it is explained in different languages. The images are often screen shots of the user interfaces. The instructions tell users how to navigate the software to create the product it was intended to create. In other words, this ‘how-to’ instructional type course is very straight-forward. In cultural lingo, we call it ‘low-context’ because it has few, if any, differences across cultures. Thus, in this case, the easiest and most likely adaptation process would be to translate it for use in another country or culture.

However, such simplicity can mislead the uninitiated instructional designer. For example, you might presume that an elearning course on statistics would also be low-context and, to a certain degree, it is. For example, almost any type of math course requires students to do calculations and solve problems so that they can practice and absorb what they are learning. In an elearning course that was being exported from an American University to several others, the course designer, (an American), included a statistics problem that required the learners to use the Multiple Listing Service (MLS, an American system for selling real estate), and calculate the standard deviation of the prices of homes in their area. If the targeted learners are in Argentina, even if they are English speakers, they will not be able to complete the statistics exercise because Argentina does not use a multiple listing service in the real estate industry. In addition, real estate listings are not typically found in a newspaper or online in many countries; thus, access to such information could be difficult or impossible. Subsequently, this course needed modification to fit the environment of the targeted learners.

In that same course, the instructional designer included an exercise in which students were tasked with determining how much variation in the active contents of Flintstone vitamins would make them too dangerous for children. The students taking the course in Malaysia had never heard of the Flintstones. Technically, the students could still solve the problem, if they ascertained that the *name* of the vitamins was inconsequential, but they

could comprehend what was required of them – faster and better – if the instructional designer had used an example that was more globally relevant to them, in *their* cultural context. It is a minor, simple change, but doing so reduces a potential barrier to learning. These types of changes – the MLS and Flintstone vitamins – are elements that require localization, discussed below.

Lastly (in the same course), as a feedback mechanism, the instructional designer used an ‘ok’ gesture in the elearning course to indicate when learners had answered a question correctly. In many countries, the gesture would be perceived as it was intended – good job! However, if the learners were in Turkey or Greece, the gesture could be misinterpreted as being very rude! The instructional designer, therefore, would need to determine if this was the case in Malaysia, as well. To eliminate the risk of having the gesture misunderstood, the gesture was replaced with a conversation ‘bubble’ that said congratulations; then, translators simply translated ‘congratulations’ according to the language of the targeted learners.

In the case of the real estate listings, the vitamins, and the feedback mechanism, the instructional designer inadvertently created barriers to learning. Thus, the course designers needed to localize some of the content, images, and feedback. Localization addresses the surface level cultural differences – colors, symbols, words, attire, scenarios, actors, etc. In addition, localization has a technical aspect, in which the underlying coding, layout, content areas, and navigation are designed so that a course can be easily translated and localized for multiple cultures, a cost-saving process (see the chapter on Localizing eLearning) required to truly make a course ‘globally-ready.’ For instance, a single word in one language, translated, could expand to several words in another language, requiring more space! Similarly, coding for Asian or Arabic characters must accommodate bottom-up or left-to-right writing, instead of how English is read!

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