Chapter 4

Incorporating "World View" into the LMS or CMS is Best

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Linguistic relativism" leads people of different cultures to define, explain, and even see reality in images framed by their diverse languages. The most readily available and commonly used online educational materials are often scaffolded in unyielding structures shrouded in American standards and expectations. These Americano-centric course management and learning management systems render subject matter design and delivery, as well as assignment formulation, scheduling, and grading, difficult for educators who understand the importance of imbuing their materials with atypical alternative views of reality expressed in the worldviews of languages and cultures beyond the borders of the United States.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Coastline Community College, based in Fountain Valley, CA has learning and study centers located throughout multi-lingual Orange County. For more than three decades, Coastline has been offering educational programs via television; more recently, the College has placed itself in the forefront of the online learning movement. Coastline serves more than 20,000 students each semester, with well

over half of them enrolled exclusively in distance learning programs in art, science, literature, language, technology, and business. Students range in age from high school homeschoolers to senior citizens; they may be incarcerated or in the United States military; they may sign up for courses part-time or full-time, although the vast majority of them are part-timers with jobs and families. In light of the College's interest in remaining responsive to ever-fluctuating economic shifts and altering student demands, a unique Course Management/Learning Management System (CMS/LMS) was conceived within the institution. This CMS/LMS, *Seaport*, has benefited from faculty, administrative, and student input, but, like most CMSs and LMSs, it retains certain Americano-centric inflexibilities that keep it from being as malleable, frustrating the educator who would use it as an interface to international thought or expression. That is, like other CMSs and LMSs designed in the United States within American information technology (IT) firms, the Coastline system has been conceived in the American English dialect, its preferred format for quizzes and assignments is objective, and its scheduling is regulated in accordance with strict dates. Marcus and Gould (2000), among others, have noted that CMS/LMS design created outside the United States can offer insights into alternative worldviews; just as artists and philosophers, writers and educators from other countries may prefer to think in languages other than English, to argue in a vermicular fashion, and to leave assigned tasks open-ended and amendable, so do CMSs and LMSs originating from elsewhere often allow unrestricted and subjective evaluations, loose scheduling, and default dialects other than the American. At Coastline, French language and culture courses offered online exemplify an effort to incorporate Marcus and Gould-style observations in courses that would internationalize the insular.

"Linguistic relativism" depends upon the notion that, for instance, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages" (Whorf, 1956); that is, observers of reality who speak different languages will define and describe that reality in divergent ways. Moreover, reality itself is expressed, viewed, and valued in a manner convergent with linguistic expression. In the United States, educational materials delivered online are almost always embedded in what might be termed an Americano-centric interface. For example, online-delivered materials deploy buttons labeled in American English, top-down models designed by outside decision-makers who are often not the users, and shapes and colors that harmonize with an American point of view (Marcus and Gould, 2000). Paulsen (2003) notes that American CMS/LMS designs all seem to be similar to one another in these respects even as they appear to have been created "top-down", for institutional ease rather than for educator or student interactivity. As an instructional technology professional, Paulsen points out that distance education is booming in areas outside the United States, and there is an increasing demand for the "bottom-up", where teachers and learners may meet in a zone of cyberspace that is not necessarily similar to the American model.

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