

# Going Global?

*The Importance of Language and Cultural Context in the Development of E-Learning*



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## Introduction

As a relatively new discipline, e-learning is broadly understood as education through technology. It may have initially been true that the latter of those two principles attracted the majority of attention as the burgeoning industry focused on technological innovations. However, the ability to develop custom, high quality e-learning content is fast becoming the priority and therefore educational innovations must keep up with those of technological importance. Understanding e-learning beyond technology is an essential component of program development. Cultural, psychological, and linguistic nuances are no longer a superfluous “add-on” of e-learning design, rather a necessity in a rapidly globalizing world.

Business and industry professionals alike have recognized the need to develop strategies for improving learner enrolments, completion rates, and satisfaction with the latest training delivery methods. These objectives are all measures of quality. A key aspect of quality is relevance and, in turn, a vital component of relevance is the cultural context of a target demographic. Varying degrees of context are the reason that implementation and solutions must evolve. This paper will address four key components of context that are pivotal in effective e-learning development: (1) Language Complexities; (2) Cultural and Social Norms; (3) Cultural Use of Technology; and (4) Cultural Learning Models. In combination with these four principles this paper will include several examples and a comprehensive break down of a sample problem and solution.

## Language Complexities

Language structures have an immense influence on education and the impact of teaching principals of any kind; however the importance of language is arguably magnified through an instructional medium such as an e-learning platform where face-to-face contact is rare. There exist a number of grammatical problems that arise in cross-language translation such as the misuse of symbols, characters, or definitions. Perhaps more abstract and difficult to identify are those aspects that blur the line between language and culture. Language is not a static entity; rather its meaning is deeply rooted in cultural context. This is a major hurdle that an e-learning design team must overcome. It is not a simple word-for-word translation but a

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translation of meaning, association and behavior. “A language cannot be entirely stripped of its cultural background without striking its native speakers as strange or disconcerting.”<sup>1</sup>

It is essential for the translator to do some research on the lexical content and syntax of the target language along with the ideologies, value systems and ways of life in a given culture. Take for example the expression, “in the red”. In western culture this phrase indicates financial woe and is based on traditional bookkeeping practices of using red ink to denote debt or losses on financial statements. This was most likely true because red is associated with warning or danger in western culture. Now imagine one was to translate this phrase into Chinese, where the cultural connotation to the color red is luck.<sup>2</sup> The phrase loses all of its intended meaning.

## **Cultural and Social Norms**

A broad understanding of cultural differences and social expectations is necessary in the process of design. Considering these influences allows the learner to develop a quasi-relationship with the content on the basis of relevance and the ability of the subject matter to relate to the individual. This includes an understanding and proper representation of “roles and relationships, cultural expectations of gender, the balance between rules and value, legality concerns, differing concepts of time, effect of enculturation, the influence of the socio-economic status, political instabilities of the learners’ country, and even humor.”<sup>3</sup> This list is not meant to be a panacea to cultural design hurdles; instead it represents a potential jumping off point. The intricacy of a culture is limitless and will require detailed attention depending on the subject-matter being taught and the demographic of people involved.

For example, one can delve into the social protocols of Tonga (a small island country in the Asia Pacific), particularly those relating to courtesies involved with greetings, especially those dealing with people of high rank. Through an exploratory research project into cross-cultural delivery of online instruction, administered by researchers at Brigham Young University, it was discovered that in the presence of the royal family no Tongan’s head is allowed to be above that of the royalty’s. This turned out to be an incredibly influential observation in that the Crown Prince of Tonga was interested in participating in the online distance learning

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<sup>1</sup> [Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-learning and English as a foreign language](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Lost in Translation – interacting with other cultures](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Exploration Research into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally](#)

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initiative. Failure to recognize this unforeseen cultural difference could have easily resulted in dismantling the entire project.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps not as specific as a cultural expectation directed at a single person (as was the case in Tonga) there are broader social norms that can heavily direct e-learning design. One such observation made by author Steve McCarty in his article, *Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-learning and English as a foreign language*, relates simply to gender roles in education. Take, for example, a health outreach project; one in which it is ideal to match male and female students to role play scenarios and create simulations, an approach that is not uncommon in the US. One can imagine the difficulties of implementing a project designed this way in Saudi Arabia where male teachers cannot even enter a classroom with females.<sup>5</sup>

## **Cultural Use of Technology**

The applicability of technology has an incredible amount of variation among different peoples and cultures. First, one must dismiss western assumptions and account for accessibility and dependability of technology infrastructure. While technology development remains an exploding industry, designers may overlook the availability and subsequent affordability of technology. Assuming the audience has the appropriate technology available, a designer must further delve into the cultural use of this technology, exploring the familiarity, intention, and willingness the learner exhibits.

Finnish researcher Teppo Turkki illustrates this point through examining the differences in Internet infrastructure of Finland, South Korea, and Japan. Based on his findings, Koreans tended to see the internet as a platform for games while Fins saw it more as a practical tool.<sup>6</sup> It is also vital to outline the connection between cultural identity and technology. The Japanese tended to use information technology to enter a fantasy world, the anonymity that many Japanese seek in the real world, for example, has its counterpart in the virtual world, where Japanese prefer aliases.<sup>7</sup> There one can live his or her inner feelings much more deeply. Not so in Korea, where people use their real names. And the emotional attachment to IT that Asians

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<sup>4</sup> [Exploration Research into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-learning and English as a foreign language](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-learning and English as a foreign language](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-learning and English as a foreign language](#)

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show more broadly is not seen in Finland. These cultural insights into the use of technology are immensely important in developing effective content.

## **Cultural Learning Models**

Rooted in the expectations and perceived outcomes of e-learning initiatives is the influence of educational models and learning techniques specific to varying cultural contexts. These principles are generally demonstrated through the creation of course material and the process of instruction. “Ideal classroom environment, activities engaged in, assessment types, categorization and structuring of knowledge” all illustrate evolving auspices to developing custom, culturally-relevant teaching material.<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing educational systems of the First Nation or aboriginal peoples of Canada demonstrate this principle perfectly. Respect for elders as well as high levels of spirituality are primary factors involved in native education; so much so that every formal meeting with a band or tribal council begins with a prayer, said by one of the elders at the meeting. Educational content is framed very much in the context of spirituality, something that Western academics are simply not attuned to.<sup>9</sup>

## **Sample Problem**

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations of the Australian Government is currently developing an extensive outreach initiative under the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Economic Participation. This agreement is aimed at improving employment and business opportunities for indigenous people in both the public and private sector. A team of project managers, designers and programmers have been tasked with developing a program aimed at providing indigenous small scale producers with leadership, financial, and business training to strengthen market linkages and increase local employment rates. The training material provided by the Australian Government has proved successful in other low-income areas; however, success rates are markedly lower in high-density indigenous areas. Evaluation and revision reports indicate disinterest, low attendance and limited comprehension among indigenous participants.

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<sup>8</sup> [Exploration Research into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Exploration Research into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally](#)

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## **Solution**

This particular example allows us to analyze as well as affirm the importance of each previously discussed component of cultural context. Through this examination, albeit brief, it becomes increasingly clear how vital cultural competence can be and how quickly a project can deteriorate if not given specific cultural attention. The solutions are designed to show the cultural insights that the program team should account for when redesigning the content to reverse the trend and gain positive feedback. While the scenario is artificially created, organizations and legislation are real, as is the information and cultural insights used in the solutions. All are derived from a series of professional and academic case studies.

Let us first explore broader cultural themes and social norms throughout the Australian indigenous demographic. It is vital to look at these cultural factors as the lens through which the audience is viewing the content. If not adjusted correctly and culturally applicable the audience will not fully absorb the information presented. Research shows that the target demographic, in this case indigenous groups plagued by unemployment, often experience a sense of social exclusion in the form of high rates of arrests and police harassment as well as low levels of social capital and civic engagement. From this, a sense of fatalism is cultivated by sustained unemployment.<sup>10</sup> This insight is vital in an approach to combat unemployment and build interest and participation in the community. Understanding the value of respect and how aboriginal notions of respect differ from Western views is also critical. Appropriate ways to dress, talk, and use body language must be integrated into program design when visiting traditional communities.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this cultural observation allows designers to comprehensively address unemployment and business practices accounting for the importance of social inclusion.

Secondly, a vital component to the success of this project is a very unique language component specific to Aboriginal peoples. That is, there is no written tradition in Australian indigenous culture, the concept of language in this context of literacy and numeracy is hardly defined. Thus, the 'written language' is an entirely artificial concept.<sup>12</sup> Overlooking this detail could not only complicate training but render content virtually useless. From this

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<sup>10</sup> [Indigenous Social Inclusion/Exclusion](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Bridging Cultures: Psychologists Working with Aboriginal Clients](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Exploration Research into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally](#)

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understanding, developers can implement training that is largely visual with a heavy emphasis on spoken dialogue and oral explanation.

The third component specific to this problem is recognition of the culturally constructed learning preferences of Aboriginal peoples. Psychology research of indigenous populations in Australia denotes a strong desire for learning by imitation and observation, and relating on a practical rather than an abstract level.<sup>13</sup> This information indicates that training examples should focus more on a situational or physical context. Explanation of content has a markedly higher chance of success if instructors appeal to the everyday life and emotions of the audience rather than hypothetical or metaphorical examples.

The final category of revision is indigenous use of technology. There is a significant digital divide between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations. Indigenous people are only half as likely as non-indigenous people to use the internet at home. Previous research has demonstrated that there are two key factors in determining ICT use in Australia; income and education level.<sup>14</sup> It comes as no surprise that there is clearly a positive relationship between income and ICT use as well as education and ICT use. This allows one to draw comparisons between the relative low use of IT in indigenous communities and the resulting disparity in income and education. The ability of designers and content managers to recognize: first, indigenous access to computers; and second, the correlation between lack of access and employment opportunities, is vital in engaging the community.

## Conclusion

In summation, these cultural, social, and language considerations should be an integral part of the choices, design and implementation of any project team. Through this simple example one can infer the effects and possibilities of cultural inclusion into a varying degree of e-learning projects. "While differentiating a fuller range of learning opportunities an approach should go beyond surface meanings and fixed or absolutistic definitions to approach the complete picture of disciplinary, cultural, temporal, and other contexts in which specialized fields and concepts are embedded. In education there is a cultural context in all scenes of instruction making each unique."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [Bridging Cultures: Psychologists Working with Aboriginal Clients](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Australia's Digital Divide](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Cultural, disciplinary and temporal contexts of e-learning and English as a foreign language](#)