Developing e-learning for a global audience

Cultural considerations
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Introduction

As multinational companies with global workforces become the norm, we are challenged to create training that can be delivered to the widest audience possible, irrespective of where or when learners access it.

E-learning is a popular solution to the global training problem as centralised, online, computer-based training is available to all staff members who have internet access. We’re going to take a closer look at the challenges of designing training for diverse global audiences, potential strategies for overcoming these problems and how these strategies can be used by instructional designers to help create effective, globally relevant learning solutions.

‘Lost in translation’

Maintaining consistent training in multiple places at different times can be a real challenge. There are many variables which can affect the uniformity of the training which is delivered - for example different instructors can approach training initiatives in different ways. From day to day, their style, level of engagement and performance may differ, even when the information being delivered remains the same.

Can training that works for one audience be just as effective for learners thousands of miles away?

When delivering training, consistency is essential; ensuring all learners receive the same key messages. It is particularly important when learning objectives dictate that learners must understand how to perform activities in a prescribed fashion such as health and safety procedures, or for legislative reasons. Equally, where certification of competency is required (e.g. in the process safety industry) it is essential that the training and assessment of employees is consistent. The solution seems simple: use e-learning to deliver standardised work-based training or assessment. A single online e-learning programme can deliver the same information in the same way to every employee, wherever they are.

For small, homogeneous organisations this may be the answer. However, can a ‘one-size-fits-all’ e-learning solution really meet the needs of a global audience or will something inevitably be ‘lost in translation’? Can training that works for one audience be just as effective for learners thousands of miles away? Should we attempt to integrate a mix of global perspectives into our core program design, or is it better to keep things as neutral as possible?

Understanding our audience is key to answering these questions.
Understanding culture

To better understand our learners, it’s important to determine what we mean by culture and how it can open our eyes to the distinct needs of learners from different contexts. Lyn Henderson, in a 2007 paper on designing culturally appropriate e-learning, offers this definition:

“[Culture] is the manifestation of the patterns of thinking and behaviour that results through a group’s continuing adaptation to its changing social, historical, geographic, political, economic, technological, and ideological environment. Culture incorporates race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, values, traditions, language, lifestyles, and nationality as well as workplace and academic cultures” (p.131).

Henderson highlights the fact that culture isn’t one huge impenetrable concept, but rather that it encompasses many different social, political and geographical ideas. Some of these, such as learning and workplace cultures, are of particular interest to the L&D professional and instructional designer. Understanding the context in which our learners operate must inform our attempts to deliver learning to them and may be of primary importance when designing e-learning for a diverse audience.

Can we categorise cultures?

One of the difficulties of designing training initiatives that meet the needs of a multicultural audience is identifying which cultures are represented within that audience and ensuring that the training provided will be effective for all. Is it possible to categorise different cultures to identify how best to deliver training to them?

Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist, suggests one answer to this problem. Through the analysis of questionnaires completed by IBM employees over a four-year period, Hofstede used survey answers to create a model to map cultural differences amongst societies and provide descriptions of national character.
These 6 ‘cultural dimensions’ are:

1. **Power distance index** – the extent to which those without power accept an unequal power distribution. Malaysia has the highest PDI score, while Austria has the lowest.

2. **Individualism vs collectivism** – the extent of integration of individuals into groups. The US is the most individualistic country, while Guatemala is the most collectivist.

3. **Masculinity vs femininity** – the extent to which individuals are competitive. Japan has the highest masculinity rating, while Sweden has the lowest.

4. **Uncertainty avoidance index** – the extent to which individuals require certainty and structure. Greece has the highest UAI score, and Singapore the lowest.

5. **Long term orientation vs short term orientation** – the extent to which individuals focus on the future outcomes versus present outcomes. China has the highest LTO score and Sierra Leone the lowest.

6. **Indulgence vs restraint** – the extent to which a society allows free gratification of needs and desires. The highest scoring country for indulgence is Venezuela, while the lowest is Pakistan.

Hofstede used these categorisations to suggest differences in how students and teachers would interact in different countries (Hofstede, 1986). This could be used as a guide for training designers to understand how learners from different cultures might interact with different training materials and approaches. Indeed, instructional designers who seek to define cultural and societal characteristics to enable them to simplify their course design frequently use Hofstede’s model.

Despite the popularity of Hofstede’s work within the instructional design community, it is open to criticism on several points. Many question the number and nature of the original survey participants and argue that the results may be biased due to the potential existence of an organisational culture within IBM. Hofstede’s framework also fails to account for the fact that multiple cultures can exist and intersect within one country. In the long run it seems countries and their varied cultures are simply too complex to be easily categorised into national characteristics.
So where does this leave us in our quest to find common ground for a global audience of learners? Sociocultural theorists argue that culture is shifting and individual and as such, is beyond categorisation. It is the role of a trainer to understand a person’s particular culture and use that to create teaching programmes that align with the individual’s experience. However, realistically, this is not simple to implement!

In a school classroom, teachers will account for cultural differences of around 30 pupils and as such, can tailor their approach to meet the needs of each individual child. Online course designers frequently design training for tens of thousands of students globally, making an individualised programme that could be used in classrooms, not practicable on such a large scale.

So, if we are to reject a one size fits all, genericised approach on the understanding that cultural groups often defy categorisation and we cannot possibly create a course which caters to thousands of student’s individual needs, how can we possibly deliver training that is culturally sensitive and appropriate for all learners?

It’s rare that an instructional designer will have the opportunity to interact with their students in work-based e-learning, which makes adapting successful small-scale strategies challenging. However, in some instances an organisation or instructional designer will find this to be the most appropriate way to deliver training that is culturally sensitive and appropriate. The first design strategy we’ll look at uses techniques that are similar to those used in smaller, social groups.

**Potential solutions**

**Strategy 1: Blended approaches**

In a blended programme for multicultural audiences, e-learning can be supplemented by regional classroom-based training or social group settings.

This allows for local teams to be on hand to support the training initiative and account for geographical (e.g. health and safety in different climates), legislative (e.g. differing bribery legislation) or other cultural differences (e.g. regional variation in language, etiquette, prior learning experiences). In these instances, the trainers or facilitators are usually cultural insiders who can localise and contextualise the training for the target audience.

Often, organisations identify instructor and social interaction as key to making their training culturally appropriate, but require all instruction to be conducted online. In this case the creation of online social spaces and the encouragement of two-way communication between learners and instructors can be an effective solution.
For example, the use of discussion boards and instructor intervention through email, feedback and communications can embody the same teaching style as the instructor uses in face-to-face training. By posing questions relating to the learners’ cultural experiences, the online course can be similar to the face-to-face experience as the interaction enables the instructor to modify their teaching practice when appropriate, to account for different cultural ways of learning.

Each strategy has pros and cons; here are a few relating to blended strategies:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tr>
<td>Trainers and facilitators can provide cultural context</td>
<td>Face-to-face sessions can be costly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction with audience can shape future training</td>
<td>Problems of inconsistency in training reoccurs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training delivered by cultural insiders will be culturally appropriate</td>
<td>Online facilitators may struggle to deal with queries in a timely fashion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learners feel that the training is targeted to them</td>
<td>Interaction with trainers may not be possible</td>
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While a blended approach offers one solution for delivering culturally appropriate training, many e-learning courses are ‘standalone’ and are intended to be taken by individuals without social support or trainer input. For instance, learners may be provided with log-in details that are tied to their employee record and required to complete mandatory training courses with a computer-marked end-of-course assessment.

Without recourse to local trainers or social learning groups, instructional designers face a two-fold challenge. The first of these, discussed previously, is to identify cultural differences in their audience. The second challenge is to account for these differences in training programmes without disadvantaging any group of learners. The following strategies can be used when designing e-learning not supported by trainer-learner interaction.

**Strategy 2: Internationalisation**

Some organisations present instructional designers with strict rules on how to create a course that is considered ‘culturally neutral’. For example, no signs, symbols, images, colours that hold particular meanings or are considered offensive by any identified group of learners may be included. Colloquialisms and recognisable cultural contexts are similarly to be avoided. These organisations are choosing to internationalise their courses by attempting to eliminate culture and provide one generic product that can be used cross-culturally in all work areas.

The creation of a ‘one size fits all’ product is an attractive prospect for organisations with a limited training budget and a global audience. It is a cost effective strategy that guarantees all learners see identical content and assessments.
However, while such a program may avoid overt offense or cultural confusion, it does not address the problem of providing a training experience that is appropriate for different learning cultures; and it frequently defaults to the learning culture that the designer is most familiar with.

Nonetheless, internationalisation may be the optimal strategy for designers of generic products that are sold globally.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost effective – one version suffices</td>
<td>Difficult to achieve – instructors have their own culture and biases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoids potentially offensive material and is appropriate for stringent employer guidelines</td>
<td>Can become bland and difficult to engage with</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training becomes simple and direct</td>
<td>Doesn't account for different learning cultures</td>
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<tr>
<td>All learners share identical training materials</td>
<td>Excludes non-dominant cultures</td>
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**Strategy 3: Localisation**

In contrast to internationalisation, localisation is an attempt to tailor products for specific cultures. Rather than removing all cultural markers from an e-learning course, organisations who choose localisation consider that different audiences will benefit from varied, targeted products. The localisation of a course ranges from the simple – e.g. a translated version for learners with a different primary language than the core course – to the complex – e.g. a profiled version with different layout and tailored content.

Simple strategies for localisation can be achieved with low levels of input from cultural insiders, as only small graphic, content or language changes will be made. Complex strategies, however, require a deeper understanding of the different cultures represented within the organisation. As a result, these more complex strategies for localisation often rely on cultural frameworks, sometimes relying on stereotypical and occasionally nonsensical design ideas without rationalisation. Where possible, instructional designers must be guided by an organisation’s cultural insiders rather than external research.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offers a flexible and scalable solution</td>
<td>Simplest form is cost effective but similar to internationalisation</td>
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<td>Highly targeted learning</td>
<td>Can become very costly if fully implemented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enables inclusion of colloquialisms and cultural references</td>
<td>Doesn’t expose learners to other cultures</td>
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Strategy 4: Cultural integration

Finally, instructional designers may use cultural integration strategies to create effective e-learning for a global and multicultural audience. In contrast to internationalisation and localisation, cultural integration seeks to create a single, culture-rich course that recognises and accounts for cultural diversity among learners. This strategy for the creation of e-learning that meets the needs of a global community relies on communication with cultural insiders and the target audience.

Methods to ensure that relative cultures are incorporated into course design include:

- **cultural variation** (the notion that programs should adapt to learners’ differing needs)
- **cultural research** (attempting to understand the learners through a review of their learning strategies and contexts)
- **cultural demographics** (taking into account the backgrounds of learners and their experiences and expectations)
- **cultural pluralism** (the integration of culture into design through the input of the target audience).

The use of tools such as questionnaires can be used to positively identify key cultures and examine a range or user preferences to be accounted for in the e-learning program.

Creating culturally integrated training is challenging, as there can be a tendency towards tokenistic and stereotypical inclusivity, particularly if pre-existing cultural frameworks are used. This strategy for the creation of e-learning that meets the needs of a global community relies, once again, on effective communication with cultural insiders and the target audience and avoiding the assumptions associated with cultural frameworks.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One size fits all through cultural inclusion, not cultural exclusion</td>
<td>‘Too many cooks’ – final product may be confused</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposes learners to multiple cultures – important for global organisations</td>
<td>Impractical to implement with short, simple courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>User-led design</td>
<td>The broader the audience, the more complex the final course</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploratory, multi layered course</td>
<td>May be difficult to avoid surface multiculturalism e.g. tokenism</td>
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Conclusions

Creating effective training that offers all learners equal opportunities is a key goal for L&D professionals. This is particularly challenging when designing training for global audiences. In social training spheres that encourage interaction between students and teachers, an open dialogue allows cultural insiders to contribute to shaping the training design to ensure that it does not privilege one group above another. However, in corporate e-learning there is generally no opportunity for interaction or collaboration in this way, and the training design therefore relies on the expertise and understanding of the instructional designer.

There is no simple solution for designers of work-based training courses; no quick guidance that will unlock the secrets of designing ‘one size fits all’ training that is effective for all learners.

Each of the strategies explored in this paper can be effective in designing online training that is culturally appropriate. It is up to instructional designers to work closely with stakeholders to determine the optimum strategy for a particular organisation – they must prioritise discussing the course design with cultural insiders prior to development. This collaboration is the first and most important step on the way to designing and developing effective e-learning for a global audience.
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References and suggested reading


