The Global Needs Assessment: Instructional Design Considerations for a Global Community

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With the advent of e-Learning and technology, the classroom is no longer comprised of students from the local community, but rather a potentially heterogeneous group of learners from around the world. Diversity is a way of life in the global e-Learning classroom. Therefore, it is essential that the facilitator address global needs, upfront, in the needs assessment, or the entire instructional design could be diluted. This article focuses on designers and facilitators being attuned to learner needs, as a first step in the needs assessment, related to cultural implications in the global context.

GLOBAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The first step in instructional design of any course is the needs assessment—determining the gap between what is and what should be. With the advent of e-Learning and technology, the classroom is no longer comprised of students from the local community, but rather a potentially heterogeneous group of learners from around the world. Diversity is a way of life in the global e-Learning classroom. Therefore, it is essential that the facilitator address global needs, upfront, in the needs assessment, or the entire instructional design could be diluted.

Global challenges, regardless of the course offered, need to be addressed during the needs assessment process, such as:

- dealing with risks and uncertainties—the need for contingency plans, information technology (IT) access and capabilities;

- simple and efficient software platform – efficient and user friendly tools;

- adoption of a theoretical framework – supported by access to information;

- flexibility in program design;

- reconceptualization of program delivery;

- developing collaborative working relationships;

- facilitators attuned to the educational environment and needs of learners; and

- ongoing resources and support (Smith, Grech, & Gillham, 2000).

This article focuses on designers and facilitators being attuned to learner needs, as a first step in the needs assessment, related to cultural implications in the global context. These implications go well beyond potential language barriers that may be present in a globally diverse group of learners, extending to potential misunderstandings regarding word meanings, symbol and icon representation, and other unintentional offenses that must be given

detailed consideration in the development of graphics, wording, and illustrations of materials and interactions.

ISSUE: VALUES AND TRADITIONS

Social Status Problem

What may be considered as polite in one culture may come across as rude and offensive or apathetic in another. Age, economic class, and other social status issues are more important in some cultures than others. Freedom to express oneself may be perfectly normal in one culture, while viewed as impolite or even illegal in another. The facilitator, as an authority figure, will likely be viewed differently among cultures, which may create a variance in interactivity from the learners with this individual.

The facilitator must remember that many countries do not support the Western beliefs of feminism, individualism and secularism. This can impact the results of the needs assessment, as well as the learning process, causing a consequent mismatch between instructional intention and learner outcome. Consideration of the economics and politics of the countries represented in the class is essential when designing online courses. It is important to consider what is expected from the educational endeavor.

- Some developing countries see online learning as a way to increase literacy.

- Some governments see online learning as an access to education for those that have lacked access because of location or gender.

- Some students see online learning as a way to improve their own lives.

- Education can be equated with power, which is not always a welcome attribute to some governments (Henderson & Wild, 1998). Online learning can be a threat to governments that have attempted to control a country's power.

These are just a few of the many cultural values that could enhance or impede a course if the needs assessment is not conducted appropriately.

Solution

Consideration should be made for issues of diversity and value systems during the entire design process. From inception of the needs assessment, design should assure that both facilitator and learners are provided with opportunities to learn, understand, and accept diverse ways of learning and living, so that an environment of trust and respect can be established and no one is offended by those with different values and traditions. Therefore, the method used by the designer in gathering data must address these issues in the assessment and evaluative instruments.

Observance of Holidays and Religious Observances Problem

The instructional schedule may need to be changed due to certain requirements of the learners with regard to religious beliefs. If a facilitator is only accustomed to personal cultural holiday practices, there may be no awareness of different observances, which could create unintentional antagonism.

Solution

The facilitator should investigate potential conflicts at the beginning, and in advance of, the course. Learners should also assume responsibility of notification, and a position policy may need to be developed to address the concern. The facilitator should strive to respectfully acknowledge such observances, within the practical limitations of the institution and course expectations.

ISSUE: PRACTICE AND APPLICATION OF LEARNING

Problem

Learners of some cultures, or sub-cultures, may expect to learn merely through quiet observance, while others may wish to have an active participatory role. Some are more accustomed to a structured agenda, while others

have learned through a freedom of exploration and discovery. Some will expect the instructor to be a facilitator, while others will expect the instructor to take full leadership of the class.

Solution

The facilitator should survey the learners to better understand past experiences and current expectations, and should also take the time to explain the course philosophy and why particular techniques will be used. In this way, learners may feel that they have been given permission to act in a different way than previously expected. Also, the anxiety level of a different style may be reduced at an early stage.

The facilitator can further survey the diversity of learners, evaluating their understanding and level of comfort in interaction, and investigating some of the cultural beliefs regarding leadership when the learners' demographics are revealed. Learning to understand others' diverse ways of living and beliefs can be a sidelight of any course content.

ISSUE: TECHNOLOGY AWARENESS

Problem

The variability of technology access should be planned in the design and development stages. However, if new concerns occur during delivery, instructional materials or expectations may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Many countries do not have the vast telecommunications infrastructure to support advanced technology used in many e-Learning courses. Some countries' analog phone systems do not support digital connections. Many remote areas do not have reliable telephone connections either, or may only have per-minute billing through a dial-up connection, greatly limiting online time for these learners.

Solution

Distance education courses need to be designed with the target country's technology and audience in mind. Bandwidth should always be considered, with files created as small as possible. Though connection speed differences may be of the greatest concern in an online environment, even telephone considerations must be made. Making the materials available *24/7* (at any time) and allowing downloads should assist with information access issues. If per-minute billing is a factor, assignments and course materials should be designed so that students can work on assignments offline to limit the amount of time online.

In developing the online course, IT capabilities in foreign countries or remote areas may necessitate a number of contingency plans being put into place to increase student access to online materials, as well as creating emergency backup plans when learners cannot access the platform as planned.

Testing of the system needs to be done prior to starting the course to ensure that access is functional. Additional instructional materials, including video, CD Rom, and print materials, should be developed to support learners in remote areas.

ISSUE: COMMUNICATIONS

Facilitator Barrier Problem

The facilitator might not be from the culture in which the learning is taking place. This could contribute to class confusion or misinterpretation if not openly acknowledged.

Solution

It is wise to acknowledge the cultural gap and deal with it from the onset. In this way, the learners may have more patience and understanding and become less offended by social mistakes. Obviously, the facilitator should be a good-natured individual, for this reason alone.

Learner Barrier Problem

A key component is that most courses are taught in English, but for the majority of global learners, English is a second or third language. In a traditional class, learners must attempt to comprehend a lecture while taking notes. This divided attention can be the reason for points being missed or concepts being confused.

Solution

The first component that must be considered is that the language of the needs assessment should be written very clearly, with explicit directions provided, to assure valid and reliable responses when planning the instructional design. It may even be necessary to translate the needs assessment into the learners' native language(s).

Cross-cultural versions of the lesson may be considered, with additional time to complete the instruction, to assure that all learners can digest the information. A course moderator for each culture that is represented may even be necessary in courses with extremely large audience numbers. Learners may be encouraged to communicate with others in the class in their first language, especially if moderators are used.

Online communication most likely should not be synchronous, as this leaves little time for understanding between responses, in addition to the obvious potential time zone differences.

The facilitator must remember to introduce generic principles that are not gender or race specific, or even locally descriptive. Slang terms should be avoided, which requires a certain awareness to even remind oneself of their existence. Sentences should also be written as concisely as possible, to avoid misinterpretation. Also, even though other cultures may speak the same language, they do not necessarily speak it in the same way. Small differences, such as spelling or grammar, should not be perceived as incorrect.

Time Zone Problem

It is difficult to offer classes at a time when all can attend, even within the same time zone. In a class offered to learners throughout the world, there are certainly issues of communication and accessibility related to various time zones.

Solution

Through the needs assessment, it is essential to determine the time zones of all learners in the e-Learning environment. Reliance on face-to-face communication or personal phone calls can be kept to a minimum by conducting parts of the needs assessment asynchronously, through e-mail or questionnaires. The facilitator can also use the time zone information to form groups for collaborative teamwork.

SUMMARY

When planning a course of a globally diverse nature, the designer must take into consideration a variety of cultural, technical, and geographically physical backgrounds. The design must respond to the lowest common denominator of technology for the target audience. Participants' computer access may vary in quality and time, but an attempt at effective communication should not be as variable. Participants must be encouraged to maintain an open mind, entertaining all areas of diversity, in a patient and respectful manner, for all to engage in a productive learning community.

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