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### **Inter‘rational’ Learning**

#### *Dispelling global learning myths*

A learner’s cultural conditioning molds him to think, feel and act in specific ways. It causes the learner to process information differently. Learning needs vary according to learners’ cultural disposition. Yet the assumption is that learners are a homogeneous lot.

Why? The answer lies in the prevalence of four global learning myths.

#### **Myth 1: Cultural adaptation is about signs and symbols**

An experienced trainer giving feedback to East-Asian learners would not highlight mistakes in red because red symbolizes good luck. Similarly, to create an online module on motivation for Japanese learners the trainer should avoid using white, a color of mourning in Japan. Trainers can access various sources that reveal such superficial differences. Of course, to truly understand a learning culture, these ‘tips and tricks’ are insufficient. Nevertheless, they are good starters.

#### ***Culturally confused!***

Culture is intangible, and when dealing with it trainers often over-educate themselves with cultural signs and symbols. What needs consideration are the culture’s values. While misrepresentation of signs and symbols can confuse the learner, misunderstanding his or her cultural values leads to discomfort.

Fortunately for trainers, researcher Fons Trompennar has developed theoretical frameworks to help them address differences in cultural values. To describe learning culture, he produced a set of value dimensions.

#### ***The first dimension***

Trompennar compares an individualist learning culture with that of a communitarianist’s. In the former learners work best when alone and value personal responsibility. In the latter, learners consider themselves as a part of a community and value group achievements.

#### ***The second dimension***

This dimension compares an achievement-oriented learning culture with an ascription-oriented one. In the former, people are judged on their achievements. They respect superiors for their knowledge and performance. Ascription-oriented cultures, on the contrary, give importance to titles and status depending on birth, age, gender and connections.

Trainers can use these frameworks to meet the expectations of culturally diverse learners.

#### **Myth 2: Cultural adaptation is extremely expensive**



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Organizations feel cultural adaptation costs are prohibitive. This is because they assume that separate and distinct courses have to be designed for each culture. While most of the content and instructional strategy can be retained, trainers should vary only what is necessary to meet the learner's cultural expectations.

Similarly, trainers too should change that portion of training content and presentation that might not appeal to a particular audience. Such an approach changes the cost equation. When changes are trivial re-working content seems inexpensive.

### **Myth 3: Cultural adaptation is a future issue**

A survey of the top 15 online economies revealed no efforts at cultural adaptation of learning products. Organizations world over have reached a point of development where cultural adaptation cannot be ignored. This is because:

- They are providing training in more and more countries
- Technology is being increasingly used to deliver learning
- Learning technologies are supporting strategic organizational changes
- Learning is more integrated with daily work

### **Myth 4: Cultural diversity is a hurdle**

Cultural diversity was once viewed as a barrier. That was because the fundamental mechanism of learning depended solely on a small number of knowledge authorities to transmit what they knew to a large number of receivers (learners).

Today, leading thinkers suggest that the best way to learn is from other people; hence the surge in interest in learning communities, knowledge management, informal learning and Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). Organizations now believe that different perspectives offer challenges that help develop new knowledge. This 'diverse' knowledge is considered far superior to one that is gathered through the unidirectional flow of instruction.

### **More to culture**

Cultural adaptation doesn't break the bank. Its diverse nature makes organizations richer in knowledge, and there are proven frameworks to show that it works. But trainers are often unsure about where to start. They need to know the kind of learning they should adapt. Adaptation is either content driven or driven based on its relevance to the organization.

One common strategy used is modularization. Under this, trainers identify and modularize elements that will significantly impact learners in different cultures. Another way to identify content important for adaptation is to list initiatives that relate strategic changes with a learning challenge. Such initiatives address issues that relate to deep cultural values and those that require a learner to evaluate complex knowledge issues.



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When global learning initiatives adapt to learners culturally, they improve participation, completion and more importantly retention rates. Eventually, this leads to improvement in business performance and results.