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Poles Apart

A two-dimensional perspective on e-learning

Key Learnings

- An analytical approach is the best way to improve e-learning use and effectiveness.
- This approach involves understanding the cultural and disciplinary contexts of e-learning.

Ever wondered why an Indian never questions his instructor while an American addressees his instructor by his first name? Why do Saudi Arabians prefer male instructors while the Japanese bow their heads each time they say certain phrases? Trainers at multinational firms are familiar with such scenes.

Dealing with the increasing number of foreign trainees is challenging indeed. However, trainers can ease the situation if they accept that educational practices have different cultural and disciplinary contexts. These contexts dictate ways to use pedagogy and technology to improve the use and effectiveness of e-learning.

To Better Understanding

It is the absence of a set of defined principles that makes e-learning a relatively new field. It has not yet crystallized into an established discipline. Dictionary meanings are either roundabout or inadequate.

Some trainers are ignorant of the different learning styles, both virtual and real, and adopt the one-size-fits-all approach. This complicates the situation further. Moreover, this approach has recorded little success in classes having more foreign participants. How can trainers tackle the problem? The analytical approach has pointed to understanding the different contexts of e-learning and related areas.

The Tenets of the Approach

An analytical approach provides a multidimensional evaluation of a concept. In the case of e-learning, the approach involves understanding its cultural, temporal and disciplinary contexts. It also involves understanding how a country's linguistic environment affects the e-learning mode.

This approach directs educators to move beyond fixed definitions and surface meanings to understand default contexts. These default contexts vary based on:

- Cultural differences
- The disciplinary dimensions of the study
- Cultural diversity



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Cultural context plays a key role in determining the transformative power of a learning experience. If learning is about transforming behavior, then the closer it is to customary learning styles, the more effective it is.

The cultural context argues against the "one-size-fits-all" approach. For instance, the Internet infrastructures in Finland and Japan are almost identical, yet there is a big difference in the way the Fins and Japanese use the Internet.

Key to Success

In developing countries, computer and communication skills have a huge bearing on economic success. Cultural differences, especially in the department of language, limit the use and effectiveness of e-learning. In addition to being mostly non-native English users, their learning styles too pose a challenge to a predominantly Western e-learning paradigm. Language barrier aside, the cultural context affects the performance of the instructors.

Barrier Trouble

Computers are widely accepted as effective learning tools. Nevertheless, societal factors and the institutional culture that surrounds instructors and their skills levels have affected the use of computers. Making matters worse are advancements in mobile technology. Extensive use of mobile phones affects web use and growth of computer skills.

While individuals differ in their learning styles, cultural and linguistic differences bring in a further divide. For instance, in North America, advancement in computer technology ushered a shift in pedagogy. Students have moved out of instructor led classes and now rely more on self-learning. However, in Asia, most educational cultures are teacher-centric. Most students and trainees are uncomfortable making the transition from classrooms to e-learning programs because the instructor's involvement is limited to facilitation.

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The Asian educational culture has deep rooted hierarchical tendencies where factors such as social status, gender and age play largely determine the learning styles. An Asian student avoids questioning the instructor even if he or she cannot understand or disagrees with the instructor. This is how he shows respect. In Western culture, students use an "I-You" stance to indicate mutual respect. In a predominantly Asian set-up, most students are dependent learners, so instructors can be successful with computers only if e-learning is blended with instructors guidelines and monitoring.

Most Asians are uncomfortable with e-learning only because it reduces social interaction and increases machine interaction. Because these students thrive in groups, studying in isolation has little appeal. e-Learning can be effective provided there are sufficient interactive and communicative activities that promote social interaction.

These are just a few cultural differences that undermine the potential of e-learning.

Summing Up



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An analytical approach explains the cultural and disciplinary contexts of e-learning to make it more user-friendly. Knowledge of these contexts will help instructors and trainers adapt to their online learners better.