Chapter XI
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and “Localizations” in Global E-Learning?

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the importance of cultural sensitivity and localization in the delivery of global e-learning. The branding, course ecology, curriculum design, instructional strategies/pedagogical approaches, multimedia builds, information handling, and direct instruction in e-learning need to fit the needs of the diverse learners. Those that offer global e-learning must consider the national, ethnic and racial backgrounds of their learners to offer customized value-added higher education. Cultural sensitivities apply to initial learner outreach and their success in the e-learning; localizations enhance the applied learning and also the transferability of the learning after the global learners graduate. Cultural sensitivities and localizations may make global e-learning more field-independent and effective because of the reliance on each learner’s local resources. A “Cultural Sensitivities and Localizations Course Analysis (CSLCA)” Tool for global e-learning has been included in the appendix.

INTRODUCTION
Many engaged in higher education have been reaching across international borders to court some of the brightest minds from around the world. They are using global e-learning to reach out to the “place-bound” (those restricted to certain geographical locations) or “place free” (those who live transient lives), due in part to the high costs of studying abroad and stricter vetting of individuals by various governments. The launching of global online educational and training endeavors should consider cultural targeting and sensitivity in order to make the learning
more accessible to learners and to increase student retention. E-learning has traditionally had fairly high attrition rates, even as high as 50% in some programs (Moore & Kearsley, as cited by Picciano, 2002, p. 22). Effective instruction involves motivational components that “enhance self-efficacy and perceived challenge” (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000, p. 53).

The nature of global learning lends itself to unique challenges. Studying abroad often means a transition period of preparation, travel, resettlement, and starting the studies. In this new version, “study abroad” means going online. For e-learning, with the use of numerous online forms and easy payment options, students may find themselves enrolled at a distant university from home. People are moving from living in so-called “little boxes” to networked societies (Wellman & Hampton, 1999, p. 648). There may not be a physical change to the global learner’s physical circumstances—no four-walls classrooms in a different milieu. Rather, in the “disembodied” learning of an online classroom, their bodies have not left home or the home country, but their minds have gone roaming. Mediated through the WWW and Internet, e-learning allows any number of such learners to enroll in instructor-led classes.

The disembodied aspects of e-learning also mean that instructors and facilitators will not have the benefit of informal knowledge inputs as when they make a cultural gaffe. They will not have the benefit of body language (and the classical training regarding proxemics, oculesics, kinesthetics, haptics, and others). Hailing from different time zones, they will not necessarily have the ability to resolve questions and concerns in real-time, in face-to-face venues, or to communicate their sincerity or decency as individuals. “Early work on CMC (computer-mediated communications), based on what was known as the filtered-cues position, described the medium as one bereft of social context cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). These cues define the social nature of the situation and the status of those present and include aspects of the physical environment, body language, and paralinguistic characteristics. With such cues largely filtered out, CMC has been described as a lean medium that is relatively anonymous” (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, n.p.).

So, too, on the faculty side, there are no telltale face-to-face meetings with a group of new students or the real-time signaling and communications that go on in such lecture halls and hallway conversations. Rather, there are names and possibly a learner profile with a headshot attached. The unfolding of different learner personalities may occur over the course of the learning term, or they may never quite unfold, with the focus merely on the work and less on the individuality or personhood of the learners. The depth of personal revelations depends on the instructor facilitation, the “affordances” of the online learning space, the number of learners, the richness of the intercommunications and interactions, and possibly the particular field of study.

Cultural sensitivities involve efforts to recontextualize the online learning spaces and to surface and address cultural differences and similarities. Localization aims to add richness to the learning by considering the various “locales” of the global e-learning students and capitalizing on those resources. These endeavors to recontextualize the learning to student-local spaces may enhance the field independence of the learning, which will make the global e-learning more portable and transferable.

The objectives of this chapter are to engage the following research questions.

**Research Questions**

1. What is cultural sensitivity in global e-learning? What is localization in global e-learning?
2. Who may affect cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning?
3. What are some relevant cultural influences on global e-learning, and where do these come from?
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4. Why are cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning relevant in terms of educational ethics?
5. What are some relevant research literature findings about cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning?
6. What are some helpful principles and strategies for promoting cultural sensitivity in global e-learning?
7. What are some helpful principles and strategies for promoting localization in global e-learning?

Relevance. In global e-learning, there are already a number of barriers to access (costs, technologies, language literacy, culture, gender, technological literacy, and others). Lack of cultural sensitivity in the design and delivery of e-learning should not hinder access. In a “flat earth” and “knowledge economy,” access to knowledge and skills will often determine economic opportunities and livelihoods, often for generations. “The term ‘learning’ is now used to signal a range of political, social and economic aspirations,” notes Bloomer (2001, p. 429). Given the high-stakes in global higher-education learning, efforts should be made to enhance the access of the “have-nots” to a world of “haves.” Cultural sensitivities may promote student learning, learner retention, learner dignity, fairer assessments in global online courses, and greater understandings across and between cultures. Localization in e-learning may result in more applicable hands-on learning with apprenticeships, job shadows, mentorships, and richer experiential learning through a 360-degree learning wrap. Learning may be more immersive. This approach—cultural sensitivity and localization of learning—may have implications on virtually every aspect of e-learning: branding, course ecology, curriculum design, instructional strategies/pedagogical approaches, multimedia builds, information handling, and direct instruction.

Indeed, the university instructors themselves stand to gain from the exposures they would have to real-world applications of what they teach. They may form international alliances and connections with colleagues. They may expand the global sharing of information and strategies for approaching certain tasks. They may discover new attitudes, tools, technologies, and cross-fertilization of ideas in relation to their respective fields of study and inquiry. They may become more truly cosmopolitan, less provincial.

An ideal core in academia. Academia, while it has functioned in economic realities, has always maintained an idealistic core. In academia are shared endeavors to address humankind’s shared challenges. Through shared research and learning, different entities and individuals forge common professional links—even across cons of cultural and national differences. The varied trainings, diverse language effects on thinking, professional alliances, and strengths of the individual thinkers hailing from around the world make for a rich synergy that cannot be emulated through closed-world uniformity.

Sourcing. The information in this chapter comes from the extant literature, firsthand observations from over two decades in higher education in the U.S., several applied case studies in cultural sensitivities in e-learning, and insights from one university’s initial endeavor to go global. This chapter is structured first with a statement of background. Then, each of the seven research questions is addressed. A final section offers insights into the future regarding cultural sensitivities and localization in e-learning.

BACKGROUND

At the intersection of global e-learning lie invisible cultural influences, which stem from many areas: the various home countries and cultures of the participants, academia, various technolo-
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Cultural sensitivities, Web 2.0 and professional realms. Cultural boundary crossing doesn’t just happen when major physical distances are crossed, but rather when people of differing life influences, values, backgrounds and worldviews intermix.

The impetuses for global e-learning. Global e-learning has come to the fore for a number of reasons. First, distance learning has become a fixture in a majority of higher educational institutions in the U.S., and with the maturation of pedagogical approaches and technologies, delivering to learners abroad has been a logical next step. “It may be that consciousness of a global society, culture, and economy and global interdependence are the cornerstones of globalization (Robertson, 1992), and these—consciousness and interdependency—have saliency in knowledge-based enterprises. Institutional theory identifies organizational “fields,” or institutional types, such as higher education institutions or hospitals, for example, where patterns of institutional behaviors become similar across institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Higher education institutions, because of their cultural, social, and economic roles, are caught up in and affected by globalization” (Levin, 2001, p. 239).

Computing power has become more economical over time. So-called developed and developing countries have joined those connected to the Net and Web through the building of technology infrastructure and the infusion of lower cost and reconditioned computers. Other reasons for the spread of global e-learning relates to economic factors, in a competitive marketplace for higher education (Clegg, Hudson, & Steel, 2003, p. 41) and in a global economic superstructure of “marketplace-based dynamics” (Comor, 2001, p. 401). Some assume a technological determinism in the popularization of e-learning. They fear that technology may be driving the learning. “The key determining characteristics of globalization are taken to be demonstrated by the dynamics of technological innovation and capitalist expansion, coupled with the decline of the nation state as a locus of power” (Clegg et al., 2003, p. 42). While such technologies enable online learning, attributing the popularity of online learning to technological tools seems to be an overstatement. Learners from abroad stand to benefit from “study abroad” even without the travel, relocation, overseas living costs and dormitory or host-family living experiences. Global e-learning offers another option to the former constructions of “study abroad.”

Others see the need for emancipatory educational practices albeit without political meddling. “Moreover, we argue that such critique is politically vital, as the neo-liberal conception of globalization is increasingly driving policy agendas in Higher Education, as national governments compete on the basis of supply side investment in human capital” (Coffield, 1999; Schuller & Burns, 1999; Schuller, 1996, as cited by Clegg et al., 2003, p. 40).

The critical approach suggests the avoidance of a dominant ideology to frame issues: “Critical pedagogy, as an ideal type, does not suggest particular solutions; rather, it rejects the framing of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ in the dominant ideology. Thus in terms of e-learning it would pose the question of whether e-learning can deliver advantages to a particular group of learners in their concrete social circumstances” (Clegg et al., 2003, p. 51). And still others argue the altruism piece, of raising standards of living, through “up-skilling.” The argument is that specific skills and knowledge would not be disseminated otherwise, and the access to world-class talents may not happen otherwise. Such e-learning inputs may improve the various countries’ economic and social development (Bates, 1999, n.p.). The international alliances and partnerships could enrich the problem-solving and work.

Some threads of the academic literature on global e-learning posit this international exchange as part of the growth of a new world order of a
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global civil society, transnational learning communities made possible by connective technologies. “Through emerging forms of transnational associational life, a new political, economic, and cultural order is said to be under construction. The agents of these developments are a ‘medley of boundary-eclipsing actors—social movements, interest groups, indigenous peoples, cultural groups, and global citizens’” (Pasha & Blaney, 1998: p. 418, as cited by Comor, 2001, p. 389).

Shifted self identities. Turkle suggests that global citizens would de-countrify (depayse) themselves through re-seeing, in her book *Life on the Screen*. “One leaves one’s own culture to face something unfamiliar, and upon returning home it has become strange—and can be seen with fresh eyes” (Turkle, 1995, p. 218). Cyberspace is rich with opportunities for depaysement: We can experiment with how it feels to be the opposite sex or sexless, we can change our ethnicity or the color of our skin, we can develop relationships with people we would never meet face-to-face, all of which enable us to experience a different perspective from which to (re)view the self and real life constructs. This potential of cyberspace is at the heart of our teaching online. Our aim is to help students, through their work in cyberspace, experience the challenging shift in perspective that is depaysement; our aim is to encourage them to (re)see the familiar and develop a critical appreciation of the potential of technologies” (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, n.p.). Attaining the awareness of a kind of global citizenship of a shared humanity may yet be another logical outcome.

The pace of modern changes especially makes it difficult for “young people to construct a sense of self” (Bers, 2001, p. 365). Effective online environments create a sense of “mindfulness.” “Some use of the terms self-knowledge, self-awareness, or self-understanding to refer to mindfulness of one’s own personality or individuality. Csikszentmihalyi and Rocherberg-Halton (1981) called it cultivation and described it as ‘the process of investing psychic energy so that one becomes conscious of the goals operating within oneself, among and between other persons, and in the environment’ (p. 13). Gardner (1983) called it personal intelligence and described it as involving two forms of knowledge intimately intermingled: intrapersonal, looking inward or a sense of self-awareness, and interpersonal, looking outward at other individuals and the community” (Bers, 2001, p. 368). Such awareness involves clarity about the rights and roles as community participants (p. 369).

The high-minded rhetoric aside, other thinkers see the discontinuities of the WWW space as too inhibiting to create deep change. The “annihilation of time and space” leads to the making of “instantaneous decisions and the mounting discontinuities of experience and consciousness from one moment to the next.” By its nature, this makes “the construction of transnational, progressive, and monumentalizing perspectives capable of radically reforming lifestyles and conceptual systems improbable in the coming decades” (Comor, 2001, p. 404). Mediated communications, with the resulting parasocial relationships maintained over distance, are seen as too virtual to have deep impact (Comor, 2001, p. 397). In addition, those who would interact online still live with “stubbornly local” material limits—even if their minds can conceptualize other ways of being (Tomlinson, 1996, p. 75, as cited by Comor, 2001, p. 398).

Ironically, the recruitment of international students for fully online learning often occurs through outreaches to other countries by university officials, international conferences arranged by third-party mediators, the placing of representative offices overseas, and the employment of mediating graduates and alumni. Faculty members themselves often have to use whatever open source information they may find, hearsay, and firsthand experiences with overseas students to try to understand their learners’ needs. There’s sometimes insufficient on-ground experience or only experiences limited to other countries or
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only passing acquaintance with the cultures of a particular region.

Some challenges of global e-learning. Global learning itself is fraught with ethical dilemmas, and there are few clear roadmaps. One writer looks at the economies of scale that may come from bringing in global online learners. “Should institutions in richer countries with the means to develop and deliver distance education programs into poorer countries seek to subsidize their programs at the expense of poorer countries? Is education just another commodity or service to be sold abroad? On the other hand, if students in poorer countries want to access courses from richer and perhaps more prestigious institutions from outside their own countries, and hence have the chance of better jobs and more prosperity, why should we prevent them from doing this” (Bates, 1999, n.p.)?

It is rare enough to hear of universities conducting due diligence to find out if another nation’s economy will offer jobs that may support a new graduate’s newly-minted career path, enabled by an expensive Western degree. Or will the new graduate be part of an exodus and “brain drain” to a developed country to work for another nation’s economy? With a mix of scholarships, multinational corporation funding, teaching assistantships and research assistantships, these select individuals have been invited to study abroad in U.S. universities. Now, with global e-learning, such schools are tapping into yet another niche of elite learners and thinkers, those who do not have to leave home to participate.

“As soon as educational programs cross national borders, a number of social and cultural issues arise,” observes one researcher (Bates, 1999, n.p.). Some of these may be predicted with sufficient multicultural knowledge, but many other frictions may arise as surprises.

This intellectual dominance of the West brings up questions of indigenization and homogenization. “Can we integrate disparate groups and cultures without annihilating them in the process?” asks one researcher (Burniske, 1999, p. 131). Surely, students from other countries contribute enormously to the research work achieved in universities. They bring their culture and language as part and parcel, and those elements contribute to various new theories, practices and inventions. However, such “indigenization” may be overwhelmed by the sheer dominance of the extant intellectual global hierarchy: “What has been called the global-local dialectic (Lash & Urry, 1994) will no doubt accelerate and intensify. Locally, this likely will continue to involve various degrees of indigenization in which different cultures incorporate different elements of foreign cultures in various ways. However, given the context of structural power and the wealth, force, and knowledge resources held by some in relation to others, it appears unlikely that many such interactions will take place on anything approaching some kind of equal exchange. Arjun Appadurai writes: “Globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing styles and the like), which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies, only to be repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues of national sovereignty, free enterprise, fundamentalism, etc., in which the state plays an increasingly delicate role: too much openness to global flows and the nation-state is threatened with revolt—the China syndrome; too little, and the state exits the international stage, as Burma, Albania, and North Korea, in various ways, have done” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 307, as cited by Comor, 2001, p. 403).

Which countries will provide the intellectual capital to define truth, and which truths are relevant? How can something elusive like “innovation” be transferred between cultures? How may various entities respect the differing range of university degrees—some from reputable institutions and others from degree mills—and do the fact-checking in terms of checking academic credentialing? With the marketization of
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various online curricula, often taught by “local” in-country instructors, how may quality controls be encouraged? What then is the true essence of an institution of higher education’s offering regarding global e-learning—a mixture of branding, name-instructor cachet, solid learning, and status?

How will new research information be validated or invalidated? How will power relationships be negotiated between institutions of higher education and their far-flung global learners? How will identities be authenticated and validated through the thousands of miles and across oceans? How may learning be made applicable to a range of localized learning environments? How may existing social structures not merely be replicated through global e-learning but extended to be more inclusive, and with more empowered individuals? How may the structural realities of developed countries apply to developing ones, and the learning be applied from the developed world to the developing ones? How can so-called ivory tower learning be localized and applied in useful ways in different socio-economic circumstances of citizens with various situations? How may learning be made applicable without a sense of forced cultural assimilation and global homogenization?

Defining culture. The term “culture” is a complex and widely debated term with a wide range of definitions. Different groups and individuals apply different weights of importance to different aspects of culture.

Culture has been defined as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by (a human) as a member of society” (Tylor, in Herskovits, 1967, p. 3, as cited by Joseph, et al., 2000, p. 15).

Culture exists as an invisible element in people’s day-to-day lives, but it guides their thoughts, social interactions, expectations, and actions. Culture for most people becomes part of the social landscape that they’re habituated to, and it often becomes invisible until it runs up against a different set of expectations. Culture may be learned or unlearned. Fluid and adaptive, culture may change (Nee & Wong, 1985, p. 287, as cited by Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990, p. 125).

Culture may be viewed as being complex and layered. “Like an onion, culture also presents many interwoven layers with characteristics specific to that layer. The outer layer of culture expresses characteristics typically encountered by tourists and travelers and includes music, language, and food. The middle layer of culture consists of norms and values, notions of right and wrong, bases of motivation, and general guidelines for accepted behavior. Finally, the core layer of culture includes naturalized assumptions about the world. Core cultural values or dimensions express those deeper rhythms of people…” (McCool, 2006, p. 337). Schein suggests that cultural differences lie at the heart of most modern contentious issues and the failure to arrive at a common shared mental model that may cut across subcultures (Schein, 1993, pp. 27-28). Indeed, collective problem solving was part of the initial idealistic impetus of Dr. Tim Berners-Lee’s building of the WWW.

Exposure to different cultures may lead to critical learning moments. “As we become more reflective, we begin to realize how much our initial perceptions can be colored by expectations based on our cultural learning and our past experiences. We do not always perceive what is ‘accurately’ out there. What we perceive is often based on our needs, our expectations, our projections, and, most of all, our culturally learned assumptions and categories of thought. It is this process of becoming reflective that makes us realize that the first problem of listening to others is to identify the distortions and biases that filter our own cognitive processes” (Schein, 1993, p. 33).

Interest in culturally responsive teaching developed during the late 1980s and early 1990s as a result of rapidly rising diversity in U.S. classrooms and concern over the lack of success of many ethnic and racial minority students (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). Educators have often tried to insert culture into the education “instead of insert-
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ing education into the culture” (Pewewardy, 1993, as cited by Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 159). More recent publications have looked at the teaching of intercultural competence through online means and have found this to be effective in promoting interest in others’ ways of life, in changing perspectives, in promoting knowledge about one’s own and others’ cultures for intercultural communication, and supporting knowledge about the intercultural communication process (Liaw, 2006, pp. 49-64). Schools historically contributed to the problems of learners intentionally and unintentionally by only operating according to mainstream norms (Ogbu, 1987, p. 319). Given the multiculturalism of the U.S., viewing it as a microcosm for cultural sensitivities in e-learning and localizations may be informative.

Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy suggests that instructors need to mitigate the cultural mismatch between school and home through dynamic “culturally responsive” means (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, pp. 466-467). Her research surfaced salient areas for cultural awareness and intervention:

1. “the conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers,
2. the manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers,
3. the conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 478).

The cultural piece in education. Joseph, et al. (2000, p. 12) suggest that curricular orientations provide a “platform for awareness, analysis, and critique that allows for interpretation of a broad and perplexing field and for the encouragement of dialogue about curricular intentions and consequences.” They cite Eisner’s theory of three curricula that all schools teach: explicit, implicit and null. The explicit curriculum is the stated curriculum; the implicit one is the unofficial or hidden one, which may be intentional or unintentional. The null curriculum refers to “what is systematically excluded, neglected, or not considered” (Eisner, 1985, as cited by Joseph, et al., 2000, pp. 3-4). Familiarity with a curriculum often renders those in that milieu unseeing; it’s often not until they live in culture shock by living in another culture (termed “disequilibrium”) that practitioners may notice the unique characteristics of their own. Or, individuals may be trained to conduct systematic analysis to understand their own culture (2000, p. 17). There are no pure cultures, but all are a mix of varied influences.

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model looks at issues of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation to highlight differences between cultures. Power distance refers to the unequal distribution of power, prestige and wealth in a culture. Individualism looks at the degree of cultural emphasis on the individual vs. the collective. Masculinity examines the cultural focus on traditionally masculine vs. feminine traits. Uncertainty avoidance looks at the value placed on risk and ambiguity. Long-term orientation examines the focus on short-term vs. long-term forward-thinking values in a particular culture (Hai-Jew, 2007a, p. 8).


Potential flashpoints in global e-learning. A range of potential flashpoints may not be fully anticipated in global e-learning. Already, the literature has mentioned challenges with faculty intellectual property rights (Noble, 1998, pp. 815-
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825); the role of instructors; the nature of discourse among and between learners and the instructor; the nature of collaboration and crediting; quality control between partner organizations; and grading (their fairness and negotiability). Political differences between countries may lead to sharp disjuncture between one country’s values in the handling of information and the treatment of online learners. For example, one writer observes the situation of one nation: “Politically, China’s strict control over the use of the Internet is a barrier in developing online education. On one hand, the Government is highly convinced that the Internet is an important tool to modernization. On the other hand, it fears a number of ‘social security’ problems such as leaked State secrets and ‘harmful information’ from the outside world” (Ng, 2001, p. 53). One country’s concern becomes another’s perception of “meddling.” Whole languages and arts of diplomacy have been created to address such flashpoints at the levels of state, and similarly, such diplomacy may be necessary for global e-learning.

Moral development has been an important part of education for years. The global aspect would suggest the needs of cultural customization. An online classroom may be viewed as a “just community” microcosm of the larger global community: “Although Kohlberg is most well known for his psychological model of stages of moral development that progress from highly egocentric value judgments to reasoning about abstract universal moral principles (Kohlberg, 1976), he also contributed to the field of moral education by proposing the ‘just community’ model (Kohlberg, 1985). This approach proposes that the involvement in participatory democracy, social institutions, group decision-making, and self-government is critical to shaping an individual’s moral development. Therefore, educational intervention should focus on both moral thinking and the moral lives of children” (Bers, 2001, p. 372). The disparate and deeply held moral underpinnings of higher education (including political structures and assumptions) will likely be a cultural flashpoint. One academic sounds a cautionary note: “During the diffusion process, these change agents must be aware that they should respect social values and community norms because of the key roles they play in the diffusion process” (Isman, 2005, n.p.)

The potential for cultural clashes is myriad. How historical events and figures are viewed and depicted may be contentious. The definition of an ideal society, religions and religious history, the role of people in society, national and local map boundaries, and any number of issues addressed in academia may spark disagreements. Online learners engage in a surprising amount of values and philosophical debates, sometimes even in courses where these issues may not be expected. Osguthorpe, Osguthorpe, Jacob, and Davies (2003) suggest that moral principles must underlie all instructional design particularly if transformative learning is the goal. The authors call for a “conscience of craft by striving for excellence beyond that which a client may demand” (Osguthorpe et al., 2003, p. 20).

Indeed, even if the concepts of cultural sensitivities in global e-learning are accepted, the unique strategies that may be needed to create culturally sensitive e-learning spaces for global learners will likely be much debated. How the “filtered reality” of reculturated spaces may be created will require investigation and design. Testing for the efficacies of such approaches will require plenty of research attention.

WHAT IS CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING? WHAT IS LOCALIZATION IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING?

While the terms of “cultural sensitivity” and “localization” are straightforward on the face of
it, how these may be applied involve a virtual theoretical infinity of approaches.

Cultural sensitivity. The concept of “cultural sensitivity” defines a type of approach to curriculum development and delivery that focuses on the targeted learners, their cultural milieu, and their learning needs. Here, any number of elements—from branding to interactivity design to instructor telepresence—are modified in order to ensure learner comfort, intellectual challenge, personal growth, course participation, and learning. Cultural sensitivity stands as an antithesis to the cultural neutrality approach.

A simpler de facto approach has involved the use of cultural neutrality. This is the concept of reducing or eradicating any contextual (read: cultural) information and leaving information at its most pristine and objective. This also involves the use of simple English that is translatable into numerous languages using online language translators (and with words which may not be provocative ones). Neutrality may work for simple multimedia messages, but for highly interactive teaching and learning over time, this becomes harder to maintain.

Approaching cultural sensitivity may be conceptualized in several ways. One is to do no cultural work on a course except in how it is taught, which relies heavily on instructor expertise. This assumes an ad hoc approach, and this may be the most common construct in global e-learning today. Another is to build unique cultural modules for different groups and to version out different experiences on the front-end of a course. (The concept of different cultural tracking may be highly contentious and provocative.) Another is to build cultural targeting from a neutral core of information—in a kind of repurposing or shaping of the message. A prebuilt course may be retrofitted for cultural flexibility and sensitivities. A cleaner method may be to originate contents from a cultural core from the beginning. This means in-depth analysis of the learners’ cultures, deep study of the learners, and intensive focus on localizing the contents to the targeted learners. The more monolithic the anticipated audience, the more cultural targeting may be done; however, the more diverse the anticipated learners, the more nuanced the learning will have to be and the more reliance on an objective neutral core. The point is to build curriculum and learning in a less perfunctory and more considered way.

Bates advises the development of “special programs for course developers to increase sensitivity to inter-cultural and design issues for programs being delivered internationally” (Bates, 2003, n.p.). There are additional benefits from building with an international focus early on: “Developing programs for international delivery can also enable institutions to prepare their students for an increasingly global economy and society, if courses are planned from the start with an international focus, especially if they involve contributions from or joint development with institutions in other countries” (Bates, 1999, n.p.).

Localization. The concept of “localization” addresses the issue of relating the learning to respective learners’ local circumstances—their environment, economy, social milieu and cultural context—in order to magnify and strengthen their online learning experience and the applicability of their learning upon graduation. This also involves consider the learners’ localized pasts and the effects of those pasts on their current and future learning. This would require a fair amount of organizational work—to identify local resources, local experts, local research facilities, and the local job market—and to form formal partnerships. Informal partnerships may also be forged. Mini-grants, professional alliances, research and publications interchanges, shared tuition, or other models may be employed to support these alliances. Or learners may be encouraged to make their own connections.

A growing emphasis on the local is affecting WWW-moderated interchanges, and possibly e-
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learning: “One possible avenue of interpretation in this vein might be to claim that transnational capital’s challenge to national sovereignty has, in effect, forced the retreat of cultural identity to more local enclaves. Inadequately equipped to face the onslaught of investors, speculators, and other agents of global capital, nation-states become irrelevant containers for identity-construction. Instead, they become fragmented by a host of social movements seeking to articulate a more localized identity and cultural practice. In these terms, the local is often regarded as a space of resistance to both the modernist abstractions of the nation-state and the placeless globalism of transnational capital” (Rose, 1994; May, 1996, as cited by Oakes, 2000, p. 670).

The mitigations of cultural sensitivity and localization. For e-learning, several best practices ideas allude to the issues of cultural sensitivity and localization, through the frame of student-centered design. Chickering and Gamson’s well-respected seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education includes learning that “respects diverse talents and ways of learning” (Mehlenbacher, Miller, Covington & Larsen, 2000, p. 169). In Lynch’s (2001) summary of some course designed objectives synthesized from the works of various researchers, she includes the following, which may be viewed as a type of localization: “to emphasize application of course concepts to the students’ real-world situations” (Ackerman, 1996; Carly & Palmquist, 1992; Duffy & Jonassen, 1993; Harasim, 1997; Moore & Kearsley, 1996, and Sponder, 1990, as cited by Lynch, 2001, n.p.).

Cultural issues in e-learning have not been invisible. “Cross-cultural differences have a major influence on the way instruction is shaped and the way learning takes place within any classroom” (Strother, 2003, p. 353). However, there have been differing definitions of culture, especially in online courses. There’s been little in the way of meta-analyses about this issue in virtual learning.

WHO MAY AFFECT CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND LOCALIZATION IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING?

Those who have a hand in administering, supporting, or leading global e-learning may all support these dual tracks of cultural sensitivities and localization. Subject matter experts, instructional designers, faculty, teaching assistants, global online learners and others all have a role in supporting quality in global e-learning. Often, a team of individuals may work to deliver global e-learning, in the production of digital educational materials, designing online activities, building the technological infrastructures, providing help supports, and facilitating the direct learning.

Those who work to deliver global e-learning wield a lot of power culturally. The mere action of selecting a curriculum focuses on what is important and what is not. How learning and skills are conveyed also involves power because it privileges some types of learning styles, values and attitudes and not others.

The concepts and practices of “cultural sensitivities” and “localization” potentially affect a range of practices.

• Administrator, faculty and staff cultural sensitivity trainings
• The development of course ecologies (via policies, digital artifacts, branding messages, “look-and-feel,” and other elements)
• Curricular design (assignments, assessments, course e-learning path, readings, digitally-mediated experiences, pacing, and other elements)
• Designed interactivity and “social life” online
• The building of digital learning artifacts, multimedia, and ancillary materials
• Organizational branding and marketing to particular learning audiences
• Instructor and facilitator telepresence (messages, depictions, behaviors, and interactions)
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and “Localizations” in Global E-Learning?

- The scaffolding for informal learning
- Student information handling
- How learners interact with each other

The Cultural Sensitivities and Localizations Course Analysis (CSLCA) Tool in the appendix addresses a range of these issues in more depth at the course level.

WHAT ARE SOME RELEVANT CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON GLOBAL E-LEARNING, AND WHERE DO THESE COME FROM?

Global e-learning involves influences well beyond those of the cultures and multicultures of its various learners and instructors. There are

Figure 1. Cultural sensitivities influences on the juncture of global e-learning
international influences, Web 2.0, higher education/academia, technological culture, and other elements. Various learners will approach global e-learning with a variety of paradigms, described as “sets of ontological and epistemological assumptions” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, as cited by Schultz & Hatch, 1996, p. 529).

Culture exists on both a group level and on individual levels. “As Van Maanen and Barley (1985) observed, ‘while a group is necessary to invent and sustain culture, culture can be carried only by individuals’” (p. 35, as cited by Harris, 1994, p. 309).

Cultural influences come from a variety of directions in global e-learning, as may be indicated in the following figure. Thin-slicing a course, a curriculum, a program, a degree area of study, or an educational institution for its cultural influences may involve excessive complexity given the various effects and influences. However, focusing on a particular aspect for more effective learning would be critical.

One dominant aspect of e-learning has been the power of the WWW and Internet. The early onset of the popularizing of these technologies created a social layer of global elite netizens. With improved connectivity said to “connect the entire world in five steps or less” (White 1970) between peoples, there still are many who are unconnected and therefore digitally deprived (Wellman & Hampton, 1999, pp. 650-651).

With the growing popularization of the Web, questions have arisen about the impact. Are people becoming less sociable face-to-face and only comfortable online? Will the Web bring people together across cultural divides, or will it “reinforce barriers” for a “postmodern tribalism?” “To amplify, are global communications and the Internet integrative and inclusive, promoting English as a universal language and causing differences between peoples and cultures to erode? Or will these new technologies perpetuate and reinforce our separation into tribes, because immigrants effortlessly maintain thick contact with their ethnic and cultural roots” (Aronson, 1996, p. 314)?

On a continuum, the quality of available information ranges from the accurate to the wholly untrue. The efficiency in finding relevant information in the deluge of data of the WWW is a major challenge for learners (Aronson, 1996, p. 311). One writer describes this phenomenon: “To use the language of cyberspeak, modern life is becoming ‘homonized,’ that is to say, increasingly brought under human control by individuals sitting at a keyboard and screen, but at the same time, to use much older language, dehumanized by an unreflective Silicon Valley about to blend with an unphilanthropic Hollywood, which put together makes ‘Sillywood’” (Billington, 2001, p. 579). While intercommunications between individuals form a centerpiece of cyber culture, the collective intelligence may not have necessarily resulted in quality results. An untruth multiplied out digitally into the cyber-universe doesn’t make it true.

Social informatics has been described as the “interdisciplinary study of the design, uses and consequences of information technologies that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts” (“Learning about…” 2000, as cited by Chakrapani & Ekbia, 2004, p. 145). In such a culture, learning comes from learners’ peers.
Tu and Corry (2002) summarize Online Learning Communities as having four basic components.

- Community – occurring with social interaction about common interests
- Learning – nonformal; the attainment of knowledge, skills, and attitudes through social interaction with peers
- Network – defined as a pattern of communications and relationships (Schuler, 1966)
- Technology – either a synchronous or asynchronous platform (Sumner & Dewar, 2002, n.p.)

This culture combines the technology with the human element. The foremost human-centered activities in multimedia include “content production, annotation, organization, archival, retrieval, sharing, analysis, and multimedia communication” (Jaimes, 2006, p. 12).

Language plays a central role in global e-learning and interactivity. “All higher-order functions develop out of language-based, social interaction” (Warschauer, 1997, p. 471). As such, aspects of language use in online spaces raise concerns. Global English may continue to evolve as a powerful medium for international intercommunications. “Increasingly, nonnative speakers will need to use the language daily for presentation of complex ideas, international collaboration and negotiation, and location and critical interpretation of rapidly changing information” (Warschauer, 2000, p. 511). Reading itself occurs in a cultural context. “But reading is more than a psycholinguistic act of decoding letters and words. Rather, it is a social practice that takes place in particular sociocultural contexts,” notes various thinkers (de Castell & Luke, 1986; Gee, 1996). In this sense, the shift in reading from the page to the screen, and the new socioeconomic circumstances in which the shift takes place, has an even greater impact” (p. 521).

Others suggest that these new technologies may lead to linguistic collapse and linguistic homogenization. “Language, the basis of human community, as well as human communication, may be an endangered species. There were roughly six thousand languages seriously spoken on this planet at the beginning of the twentieth century. It may not be long into the twenty-first when there will probably be only about six hundred left. The erosion of linguistic and cultural diversity on the planet is far less recognized, but no less serious, than the loss of biodiversity. The new global audiovisual marketing culture is threatening to move the world with accelerating speed toward the monolingual pidgin English of computer programmers, air traffic controllers, and advertising slogans. The basic unit of human thought, the sentence, is totally eroded in chatrooms where the only punctuation tends to be ‘like’ and ‘you know’” (Billington, 2001, p. 581).

Wherever these social technologies of Web 2.0 may be leading in terms of human interactions, learner familiarity with online learning environments has been correlated with more effective learning: information-seeking (e.g., Bromme & Stahl, 1999, 2002; Gray, 1990, 1995; Stahl, 2001; Wallace, Kupperman, Krajcik, & Soloway, 2000); online tool use (Aleven, Stahl, Schworm, Fischer, & Wallace, 2003, p. 299). This suggests that cultural insights of the learning milieu may be critical to learner performance.

Many new learners to higher education feel a distinct sense of culture shock when experiencing the values and practices assumed in academia. College itself is a ritual, a rite of passage, with high standards for becoming an insider and a complex enculturation process. Some research suggests an assimilationist model, which requires that learners integrate culturally or be rejected. Academic culture involves a rich variety of hierarchical roles, the privileging of some types of information and knowledge, a respect for research, intellectual meritocracies, tenure, and other complex elements. And this ritual is a high-risk high-reward one,
because the education and sheepskin credentials serve as licenses of entry for workplaces. Higher learning offers a golden ticket to global citizenship and a voice in engaging the world’s research and academic issues.

WHY ARE CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND LOCALIZATION IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING RELEVANT IN TERMS OF EDUCATIONAL ETHICS?

Ethical dilemmas in education may be viewed through multiple paradigms but with the best interests of the students at the center. Four main ethics have been explored in educational leadership—the ethic of justice, critique, care and the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, pp. 10-25). While there are no expeditious ways to fully explicate these approaches, cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning may enhance the state of learners in the following lenses.

Because cultural sensitivity makes higher education more accessible and applicable to learners’ respective situations, these efforts promote “the equal sovereignty of the people” (Strike, 1991, p. 415) and respects the “social contract” implied in higher education (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, p. 11). Sergiovanni’s concept of “virtuous schools” suggests that educational leadership is a kind of stewardship, and educational institutions should be just and beneficent. Global e-learning should aspire to fairness, equity and justice, with an education that more closely meets the needs of its learners and respects them and supports their dignity and abilities.

The ethic of critique suggests a review of current ethics and poses a reframing of concepts such as “privilege, power, culture, language and even justice” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, p. 13). This construct views all teaching as political, potentially emancipating and focused on consciousness raising; the imperative is to empower learners through awareness of their own social class and the inequities in the social system. This paradigm suggests that education should lead to political action for the self-betterment of the learners and the creation of a society that avoids the so-called “isms” in society (i.e., classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism) (p. 14). Cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning promote learner empowerment (and decision-making) both in the classroom and outside of the online walls into their respective communities. These approaches emphasize the power of learner voices and greater cultural awareness that may have implications on social issues.

The ethic of care focuses on issues of “loyalty, trust, and empowerment” and stems from a feminist critique (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, p. 16). In this construct, nurturance of learners should be valued above achievement. “Caring, concern, and connection” (Martin, 1993, p. 144) are to be supported for the “integration of reason and emotion, self and other” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, p. 16). The concepts of cultural sensitivities and localization emphasize relationships and connections, participative leadership, and the building of e-learner loyalty and trust.

The ethic of the educational profession draws widely from a range of entities: teachers unions, institutions of higher education, a body of law and principles, and organizations built around particular academic and professional fields. There are the social ethics of the community. There are personal and individual professional codes of ethics. In some circumstances, these ethics align, and in others, they may differ widely. Professional ethics are formed through a dynamic and ever-changing process. The approaches of cultural sensitivities and localization in global e-learning may be explored and debated along numerous lines based on the various learning situations of learners. These twin considerations will most certainly manifest differently in different countries and educational situations.

A chapter titled “College Teaching and Student Moral Development” suggests that higher educa-
tion may be both full of values or devoid of moral underpinnings, as in some vocational programs (McNeel, 1994, pp. 27-49). He cites Rest’s Four Component Model of morality: “moral sensitivity (consciousness raising and consciousness sensitizing); moral judgment (moral imagination, ethical analysis, and moral decision making); moral motivation (values analysis, values clarification, and values criticism); and moral character (becoming a responsible agent, developing virtue, and achieving moral identity)” (p. 30). While no clear ethic of the profession is defined, these sources offer some early approaches.

WHAT ARE SOME RELEVANT RESEARCH LITERATURE FINDINGS ABOUT CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND LOCALIZATION IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING?

An important assumption of this approach is that those engaged in higher education have a lot of formal and informal power. Instructors have the power of affecting learners’ lives: their grades, their professional opportunities and alliances, their professional strategies, and their learning. “Students are more vulnerable than our researchers who may be paid and can, in any case, withhold cooperation. And we hear occasionally of instances of abuse of a teacher’s authority: publishing students’ work as our own; using others’ ideas as our own; loading the evidence in favor of our views through selective use of data; propagandizing; breaching the confidentiality of data supplied by students. There is good reason, then, to extend our interest in professional ethics from research to teaching” (Wilson, 1982, p. 269). There are a number of ways to fail that high calling.

The research literature offers case-specific insights on global e-learning endeavors to particular and unique groups of learners. For example, one addresses fundamental Japanese cultural dimensions as high context, collectivistic and polychromic. Based on these general descriptions, the design and delivery of the online curriculum changed. Additional information was given to Japanese learners to meet their needs, too (McCool, 2006, p. 337). “Online learning environments in the US typically assume linear information structures, a reliable and proven approach toward e-learning. Linear information structures are ubiquitous in the US for many reasons but generally address writer-responsible authoring, low context communication styles, individualism and achievement, and monochromic or sequential temporal order. Each of these characteristics addresses the cultural requirements of the majority of e-learners in the US. However, when adapting or internationalizing e-learning environments for other cultures, many US assumptions fail to meet the unique demands of the target audience. Consequently, a streamlined and minimalist linear information structure excludes numerous cultural requirements for many international audiences” (McCool, 2006, p. 335).

“High context cultures tend to handle conflict in a more discrete and subtle manner and are predisposed to require learning for the sake of learning. For example, high context cultures include Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, African-American, and Native American” (Sabin & Ahern, 2002, p. SIC-11).

In another case, The Enduring Legacies Project (funded by The Lumina Foundation for Education) uses cultural sensitivities for project design, faculty training, curriculum development, and Native American teaching case studies research to create an associates curriculum for Native American learners from a number of reservations in Washington State. Teamed with WashingtonOnline (WAOL), a consortium of 34 community colleges providing distance learning, The Evergreen State College has worked closely with the tribal leaders from a number of local tribes to tailor the learning to its students who face a number of barriers: “location (being place-bound), racial prejudice, language (with many who speak
English as a second language), culture, finances, the technology divide, and learner disempowerment” (Hai-Jew, 2007a, p. 2).

This program follows an “Indian theory of education” (Hampton, 1998, p. 19, as cited by Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001, p. 8). It enlists the support of the entire family structure and tribes to encourage learners. It trains participating faculty and staff on the on-ground cultural realities. It encourages relationship-building between all: administrators, staff, instructors, learners, and learners and their families. Firsthand and tacit knowledge are privileged along with academic formalized knowledge. Cultural awareness (including points of cultural flex and pressures) are brought to the fore for both staff and learners, in order to promote the critical thinking and growth of all. This hybrid programs brings in face-to-face meetings as well as online learning. This project enlists tribal-based study leaders as “whipman.” The three main activities they would use to achieve these learning objectives would be: (1) to design and deliver a new associates of arts degree program on a number of reservations, (2) to support the redesign of courses to improve the instructional design and cultural relevance, and (3) to develop case studies about major issues facing Native Americans today. This program is not only implementing curricular changes, but it is adding to the body of knowledge about Native Americans today. This program is not only implementing curricular changes, but it is adding to the body of knowledge about Native Americans often by Native Americans through the Native teaching case studies, which are being housed and distributed from The Evergreen State College’s Reservation Based Community Determined Program Web site.

Global E-learner profiling. So much of global e-learning seems to assume that the “other” and the “self” are one in the same. By contrast, those working in corporations have invested much into understanding the various consumer zones. “The world market is now being computer micromapped into consumer zones according to residual cultural factors (i.e., idioms, local traditions, religious affiliations, political ideologies, folk mores, traditional sexual roles, etc.), dominant cultural factors (i.e., typologies of life-styles based on consumption patterns: television ratings, musical tastes, fashions, motion picture and concert attendance, home video rentals, magazine subscriptions, home computer software selection, shopping mall participation, etc.), and emergent cultural factors (i.e., interactive and participatory video, mobile micromalls equipped with holography and super conductivity, computer interfacing with consumers, robotic services, etc.). Emergent marketing strategies must move further beyond the commodity itself and toward the commodity as image, following marketing contingencies all the way down. And here, precisely, is the task of guerrilla marketing: to go all the way with the images we create and strike where there is indecision. ’Like guerrilla fighters, we must win hearts and minds’” (“guerrilla marketing” in Dirlik, 1994, p. 70, as cited by Oakes, 2000, p. 672). Some insights from learner profiling may enhance global e-learning if it is done with savvy and nuance and not taken to the extremes of stereotyping.

Along the same lines as learner profiling, more attention is being paid to how experts form their expertise in order to identify critical milestones in the learning process. “Trajectories or paths toward expertise are domain specific and must first be documented and then used within instructional contexts to promote knowledge transitions...To foster the development of expertise two goals must be achieved. The first is to determine what experts know and the second is to determine how to help novices acquire similar competencies” (Lajoie, 2003, p. 21).

The ecological fallacy risk. Some would argue that broad assertions of various peoples are necessarily stereotyping. McCool counters: “While there are always exceptions to culture, they mark only those outliers of larger discourse patterns. For example, cultures which are highly individualistic—such as the US—tend to support claims of difference and exception. Thus, dismissing cultural patterns as mere generalization may
result in an individualist ethnocentrism coined an ECOLOGICAL FALLACY. The point, then, is that one may acknowledge patterns without making grandiose claims of an entire population” (McCool, 2006, p. 337).

WHAT ARE SOME HELPFUL PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING?

General strategies that promote a culturally-sensitive approach to the following factors will be examined: educational organization branding, course ecology, curricular design, interactivity, instructor presence and interactions, information handling, and the engagement of other learners and interactivity. Promoting cultural sensitivity in global e-learning may encompass a range of different strategies.

The figure below shows an ideal on a rough continuum of cultural attunements and interventions on learners in a global e-learning classroom.

This section covers some initial approaches to promoting cultural sensitivity in e-learning in global online courses. It is organized into four strategic endeavors:

1. Making Cultural Issues Visible;
2. Promoting High Interactivity for Richer Exchanges;
3. Empowering Global E-learners; and

Figure 2. Continuum of effects of intercultural exchanges in global e-learning classrooms
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and "Localizations" in Global E-Learning?

Making Cultural Issues Visible

“Humanity is gained as the world, in the spaces between people, is acknowledged rather than denied or pushed away” (Briggs, 1996, p. 6, as cited by Warschauer, 1998, p. 80).

“Seeing” and acknowledging cultural differences. Research in recent decades would suggest that the cultural aspect of learning cannot be separated out (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). “This theoretical shift is in reference to the view that teachers, learners, learning, and teaching are always and everywhere embedded in cultural, historical, institutional, and power-structured contexts. Although these contexts bear significantly on the ultimate shape that learning and teaching assume, learners and teachers are not mere automatons caught in a tangle of macro-level forces; instead, their individual agencies are co-constructed (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148) by the interrelationships of their own desires, abilities, and histories and the particular mix of artefacts (sic), cultures, institutions, people, and situations in which they are located and in which they interact (Lantolf, 2000, as cited by Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003, p. 71). Culture then is co-constructed, and those within it have power to make changes.

Two researchers observe broad-based approaches to understanding culture. One is a functionalist approach that tends toward convergence or the bringing together of disparate elements into a coherent understanding of another culture. Another is an interpretivist approach that tends toward divergence, or highlighting differences by “constantly seeking more interpretations and making new associations” (Schultz & Hatch, 1996, pp. 538-539).

These authors propose a metatheoretical model for understanding different cultures through “interplay” defined as “the simultaneous recognition of both contrasts and connections between paradigms” (Schultz & Hatch, 1996, p. 530). Theirs suggests an honest respect for differences between cultural paradigms instead of either writing off any possible similarity or shading over differences. Interplay highlights the contrasts (differences) and connections (similarities) between paradigms. Multiple views may then be “held in tension” (Schultz & Hatch, 1996, p. 535). By definition, the interplay approach does not accept either the incommensurability or the integrationist approaches.

Those who would seek to understand differing cultures and their clashes may need to become comfortable with a shimmering tapestry of understandings. They may need to make peace with a “chaos theory” approach. “Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard assumed that human experience is fragmented and discontinuous. Thus, they searched out discontinuity and difference rather than order and similarity. Because there is no pattern of sense to be found, general theories, which Lyotard and others labeled grand narratives, are sentimental illusions. Lyotard (1984) described the attack on the grand narrative as an argument against the modernist drive toward determinacy and consensus, whereas modernist notions of order and patterning neglect discontinuity, passion, and rupture. Similarly, in his work on deconstruction, Derrida’s (1978) key concepts are difference and deconstruction, where voice is given to the silences and absences of organizational life, such as suppressed disorder in the orchestration of order or suppressed idiosyncrasy in the construction of meaning” (Derrida, 1978, 1980, as cited by Schultz & Hatch, 1996, p. 540).

The multiple layering of cultural knowledge and assumptions makes this issue more complex. “Schein explicitly described the pattern of basic assumptions as ‘the deeper levels’ of culture (1991, p. 252) and further emphasized the distinction between cultural surface and essence in his hierarchical three-level model of assumptions, values, and artifacts. Here, the cultural surface is explained by the cultural paradigm and cannot be decoded before the underlying essence is revealed. Schein (1992, p. 27) put it this way:
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and “Localizations” in Global E-Learning?

‘the culture will manifest itself at the levels of observable artifacts and shared espoused values, norms, and rules of behavior…(but) to understand a group’s culture, one must attempt to get at its shared basic assumptions’” (Schultz & Hatch, 1996, p. 542). While culture itself is dynamic and evolving, the study of it may require the “freezing” of it (in discreet phases) in order to analyze and compare different ones (Schultz & Hatch, 1996, pp. 542-543).

**Culture and curriculum.** Culture does not play an equal role in all curricula. Culture may be tangential to some subjects. It may provide a substructure to the learning for others. It may infuse the learning in yet other courses, and it may be more encompassing and broad than the subject matter being studied. It may itself be the focus of academic inquiry.

For global learners, they will not likely experience a coherent exposure to a culture but may experience it piecemeal as they move from course to course. More collaborative interactions with their peers from other countries and regions and cultures will likely enhance the opportunity for such multi- and inter-cultural understandings. If they are part of a learning cohort, they may acclimate to that particular group’s sense of culture. Program or academic advisors may offer a consistent voice or view. Culture-infused curriculums may offer a coherent full-wrap experience.

Some learning has been described as the enunciation of learners into a community of practice. “Cognitive apprenticeship methods, according to John Seely Brown (1995), ‘try to enunciate students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction in a way similar to that evident—and evidently successful—in craft apprenticeship.’ The concept of cognitive apprenticeship is important in online learning environments because, as Geertz (1983) has shown, communities of practitioners are connected by complex socially constructed ‘webs of significance,’ including beliefs and concepts and reaching beyond their apparent tasks. Understanding these webs of beliefs is essential to understanding their professional practices and their motivations. Therefore, if learners are to truly understand and work with other professional perspectives on international technical communication, they need to be able to work in a collaborative environment that allows them to some extent to become ‘an apprentice’ of the other professional groups and to understand the ‘webs of beliefs’ that are important to understanding the activities of these groups. Essentially, learners need to be able to enter the culture of the professional practices they are learning” (Starke-Meyerring, 1999, pp. 16-17).

Using online networks, experts and novices come together into a shared space for collaborative learning and mutual growth. Addressing the cultural assumptions of a curriculum or a program would strengthen the learning.

Schein suggests the importance of self-awareness and then the power of dialogue for raising cultural issues. “When we operate as culture carriers and are conscious of our cultural membership, we are emotionally attached to our culturally learned categories of thought; we value them and protect them as an aspect of our group identity. One of the ways that groups, communities, organizations, or other units that develop subcultures define themselves and set their psychological boundaries is by developing a language…Using that language expresses membership and belonging, and that, in turn, provides status and identity” (Schein, 1993, p. 35).

Effective online communities may be designed. Song offers a model of online collaborative learning environments that shows that a properly-designed online environment consisting of group composition, task design, distribution of authority and evaluation practices, may enhance learner motivation (Song, 2004, p. 45).

How to foster expertise is a critical aspect of learning. “Three different approaches to fostering expertise are described here: (1) conducting basic research to explicitly define transitions in expertise; (b) developing dynamic forms of
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and "Localizations" in Global E-Learning?

assessments that lead to learning opportunities; and (c) providing explicit exemplars or models of expertise to novices. Studies of expertise inform us that becoming an expert is a transitional process. Learning in all domains is a lifelong process that can be monitored, assessed, and scaffolded. Models of expertise can assist us in determining what to monitor, how to assess, and where to scaffold learners so that they eventually become independently proficient in their chosen fields” (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, p. 22).

Promoting High Interactivity for Richer Exchanges

*High interactivity.* Designing higher interactivity in online courses should offer stronger opportunities to exchange information, ask questions and receive responses, interact, and bond and learn in an online classroom. An effective environment requires both active students and instructors (Muirhead, 2000, as cited by Crisp, Thiele, Scholten, Barker, & Baron, 2003, p. 3). Open channels of communications may offer options to release tension and to address misunderstandings. This may offer opportunities to interact in the field using “insider language” specific to the area of study and practice.

Online communications may take a number of forms: one-to-one, dyadic partnerships, small groups, large groups with subgroups below; synchronous or asynchronous or blended; textual, auditory, or audio-visual; one-to-one, many-to-one, or one-to-many (micro-cast or broadcast); recorded or nonrecorded, and with other complex setups.

Getting to a stage of being able to share in-depth ideas about a field may require a time to acclimate and to create a shared sense of foundational understanding. Learners may need to be enculturated into the learning. “To communicate anything, from a simple desire to a complex message, those involved must share similar references and associations or must, at the very least, have some preexisting familiarity with what is being conveyed. If, however, people do not share a language, cultural references, and so forth, information may be conveyed but little (if any) of it will be understood (Hall, 1959). As we are socialized, our conceptual systems become both entrenched and more complex. As we learn to mediate and interpret information in our particular cultures and relevant subcultures, we also learn to sort out what information is ‘good’ and what information is ‘bad,’ what is ‘rational’ and ‘irrational,’ ‘realistic’ and ‘unrealistic.’ As such, all information is mediated into what we know using learned, intersubjective, and implicitly power-laden conceptual systems” (Comor, 2001, p. 394).

The concept of symbolic interactionism also supports the formative, participatory view of meaning-making and knowledge creation. “Knowledge and meaning are created between rather than within people, whether those people are present in a strictly physical sense or symbolically present, for example in the sense of some anticipated or ‘generalised’ other (Mead, 1934). Knowledge-making is thus a participatory process in which social interaction precedes meaning-making and action. ‘The whole is prior to the part, not the part to the whole; and the part is explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts’” (Mead, 1934, p. 7, as cited by Bloomer, 2001, p. 440). The critical thinking processes of learners are built up through regular instructor postings and sometimes even daily interactions (Bullen, 1998, as cited by Crisp et al., 2003, p. 3).

In addition to the timeliness element of interactions, the “immediacy” of communications is critical to support learning. “Immediacy refers to communication behaviors that reduce social and psychological distance between people (Mehrabian, 1971; Myers Zhong, & Guan, 1998); it includes both nonverbal and verbal behaviors. In a classroom, nonverbal immediacy behaviors are those associated with physical conduct such as eye contact, smiling, movement (or lack thereof)
around the classroom, and body position (Anderson, 1979; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987). Verbal immediacy focuses on speaking behaviors such as including personal examples, using humor, providing and inviting feedback, and addressing and being addressed by students by name (Gorham, 1988). Both nonverbal and verbal immediacy behaviors are associated with student motivation and learning (Christophel, 1990; Menzel & Carrell, 1999; Myers et al., 1998)” (Arbaugh, 2001, p. 43).

More dialogue may enhance the learning. The development of shared mental models may take more periods of dialogue especially when cross-cultural issues are involved (Schein, 1993, p. 29). Dialogue needs to be accessible to all for effective problem-solving (p. 29), and this must be done in a situation where members feel as equal as possible (p. 31). The participants need to engage with active listening, with all communications channels activated for the highest effectiveness (p. 30).

Schein views the need to protect “face” as a stumbling block to effective communications. “In sensitivity training, the learning emphasis falls heavily on learning how to give and receive feedback, a process that is countercultural because of our need to maintain face. Therefore, it elicits high levels of emotionality and anxiety. The process promises to give us new insights, to reveal our blind sides to us, and to provide opportunity to see ourselves as others see us. For many, this is not only novel, but potentially devastating—even though it may be ultimately necessary for self-improvement. To receive feedback is to put our illusions about ourselves on the line; to give feedback is to risk offending and unleashing hostility in the receiver” (Schein, 1993, p. 30).

Not interactivity = learning. Interactivity by itself shouldn’t be conflated with effective learning (Picciano, 2002, p. 23). Rather, other design elements and a confluence of factors will cumulatively build toward effective learning.

Telepresence. Interaction requires the sense of presence of the various individuals in a global classroom. Students who feel connected to others in a community and who have a digital identity or “telepresence” there have been more likely to interact and participate. In ideal online interactions, participants may experience the “illusion of nonmediation” or fail to acknowledge the technologies that are mediating the exchanges (Lombard & Ditton, as cited by Picciano, 2002, p. 24).

Various types of telepresence have been discovered in the research. “Tammelin especially establishes a relationship between telepresence and social presence as one (telepresence), leading to the other (social presence). Biocca classifies presence into three types: spatial presence, self-reflective presence and social presence. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer with respect to online learning environments provided a community of inquiry model with three presence components: cognitive, social, and teaching…Their model supports the design of online courses as active learning environments or communities dependent on instructors and students sharing ideas, information, and opinions. What is critical here is that presence in an online course is fundamentally a social phenomenon and manifests itself through interactions among students and instructors” (Picciano, 2002, p. 24).

For instructors to be present in a way that promotes trust, they need to post through and personalized biographies. They need to respond with a sense of timeliness and immediacy. Their postings need to be personalized, not simulating the natural language of a ‘bot (robot). They need to maintain respect in every interaction, and they need to give respondents a sense that the feedback loop is complete. They need to use their own original voices. They need to demonstrate knowledge and professional experience. Their interactions should feel like a shared human encounter. They should not try to be perfect but to share mistakes as well; at the same time, they
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have to maintain the sense of authority. Online intercommunications need to have a high mutual coherence for sensemaking.

The receptiveness of an instructor to online learners may encourage their participation. “In a review of that research, Brophy and Good (1986) summarize the findings of dozens of studies about behaviors such as allowing wait time, asking questions of varying difficulty and complexity, selecting respondents, and reacting to correct and incorrect responses” (Aleven et al., 2003, p. 287).

Mediating social conflict. Social conflict among global e-learners is assumed as a necessary part of the interactions and the learning. Disagreements are seen as necessary for social change: “A certain view of the nature of social conflict, the conditions for social reconstruction or change, and the telos of goal of human progress follow from Mead’s conception of the self. According to Mead, social conflict is not combat among those stimulated by primitive impulses but is, rather, oppositional action between socially structured individual capacities that call forth social attitudes and meanings” (Simpson, 1996, p. 119).

One of the central arguments for cultural sensitivities and localizations in global e-learning involves the sense of safety in online courses. Such an ecology may be created with a combination of policies (including civility guidelines), practices, instructor modeling, designed interactivity, and culture-enriched dialogues. Building a safe online space for contentious interactions will be critical to promote learning. After all, there are not only the costs of higher learning on the line but that of social risks and risks to self-identity in the face of potential failure.

Online instructors may need to develop various cross-cultural mediation skills. They need to help learners create a sense of self-awareness of their own cultural influences and how those affect their thinking and actions. “Generating a true appreciation of the challenges of cross-cultural communication can be difficult, however. Some students are so deeply steeped in their own cultural traditions that the elements of other cultures are viewed as amusing, disgusting, or even pathological deviations from the norm” (Myers, Buoye, McDermott, Strickler, & Ryman, 2000, p. 95). This is all the more challenging given the fact that such learning is often tangential to the main curriculum, which are not often designed with cultural awareness in mind.

Cross-cultural contacts between learners should build their own sense of sophistication in engaging in a many-cultured world. “As cross-cultural contact continues to increase and the boundaries among cultures become less and less clear, the skills needed to negotiate a culturally complicated world will continue to grow in importance” (Sleek, 1998, as cited by Myers et al., 2000, p. 95).

Encouraging appropriate help-seeking behaviors. A sense of safety affects whether learners reach out for necessary help or whether they become “invisible” in their needs. Help seeking, as a self-regulated behavior, requires learner awareness of their learning and needs; it requires strategic behavior in seeking out the specific helps that would be most effective and the source from whom they should seek the help. In integrated learning environments (ILEs), the ability to seek appropriate help is especially critical (Aleven et al., 2003, p. 278). In collaborative learning environments, social factors may affect help-seeking behaviors (p. 279).

Ironically, those who most need help tend to be the least likely to get it or to use the scaffolding resources to enhance their learning. “In sum, the studies discussed above indicate that learners with lower prior knowledge—those who need help the most—are the least likely to use help appropriately when help is under students’ control. This situation presents a challenge for the designers of ILEs, especially, as we have seen, there are good reasons for placing help under student control” (Aleven et al., 2003, p. 298).
Learners may still feel alienated even if they are present, suggest some researchers. The various presences need to coalesce into a sense of inclusive community. “However, as this concept is studied, the definition is expanding and being refined to include telepresence, cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence, and other forms of presence. The term ‘community’ is related to presence and refers to a group of individuals who belong to a social unit such as students in a class. In an online course, terms such as communities of inquiry, communities of learners, and knowledge-building communities have evolved” (Picciano, 2002, p. 22).

Empowering Global Learners

One major goal of higher education has been to empower learners with the appropriate knowledge and skills to go out into the world and contribute. A number of strategies may strengthen global students.

*Individuals, identities and their dignity.* Creating mental spaces where identities may be explored, created and solidified has been a critical part of computer-mediated communications. Research has gone into the creation of “identity construction environments” known as ICEs, technological tools to help young people explore parts of their own identities (Bers, 2001, p. 367). Here, there may be the creation of “virtual autotopographies” or “spaces for exploring identity” (p. 392).

Some researchers see the self as naturally fractured: “The self without an identity, the schizophrenic self, is authentic because it is, precisely, not an imposed, unified self that is a creation and creature of power. The schizophrenic self is oppositional and counter-systemic because power cannot find and express itself among a cacophony of internal unorganized babbling voices” (Simpson, 1996, p. 120). Others describe stable core identities with a variety of fleeting temporal identities.

Online spaces tend to show flat affect. Sometimes, online faculty will simply let a range of learners run through their course using automations and the facilitation of teaching or research assistants. A culturally sensitive approach would suggest the need for the solicitation of humanizing information from the learners. Student backgrounds and knowledge would be important to understand for tailoring and customizing the learning. This may involve the use of posted learner profiles. Also, this would mean treating learners with a deep sense of regard and individual human dignity, especially in terms of time and energy investment. The “whole student” movement suggests the importance of building the whole person along with the learning.

“Learner centric” instructional design for distance learning focuses on student needs in an online space. A “whole student” phenomenon has emerged in terms of distance education, in which an online instructor does not merely see a text name or avatar but a whole being (Osguthorpe et al., 2003, n.p.). A holistic interactive learning model must consider learners’ individual knowledge bases, affective elements and cognitive strategies (both linear and nonlinear). The affective aspect of learners is important. A much longer time horizon is needed for the reaching of affective goals such as feelings of self-esteem and an internalized commitment to integrity and moral development.

Damage may occur to a person’s sense of identity without deeper considerations. “In fact, lack of acknowledgment is devastating to most human beings” (Schein, 1993, p. 28). This phenomenon may be seen with the frustrations that occur when online students are called by the wrong name, or if their concerns are ignored or dismissed.

Building learning schemas. Deep learning often requires the creation of schemas or the cognitive structures of knowledge for the respective academic fields. Schemas are critical mind maps for information acquisition and processing, sense-making, and learning (Harris, 1994, p. 309).
A cultural component affects the development of schemas. “Schemas are typically conceptualized as subjective theories derived from one’s experiences about how the world operates (Markus & Zajonc 1985) that guide perception, memory, and inference” (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, as cited by Harris, 1994, p. 310). Information that conflicts with existing schemas may be ignored, recast to integrate with current schemas, change the schema or result in a new schema subcategory (Lord & Foti, 1986, as cited Harris, 1994, p. 311).

Aspects of online system design may influence help seeking. The class tone, the scaffolding, the publicizing of help resources, and other elements may promote richer help awareness and targeted help seeking. The amount of prior knowledge of the domain affects learner help-seeking behaviors and the quality of how they used the help. Those with less domain knowledge sought help more often but did not show improved learning results from that help; in contrast, those with more prior domain knowledge made fewer errors but were more likely than those with lower prior knowledge to seek help after making mistakes. One downside to those with more prior knowledge is that they often overestimated their understanding of the learning material. “As a result of such overconfidence, they may process the text less deeply” (Glenberg & Epstein, 1987; Kintsch, 1998, as cited by Aleven et al., 2003, p. 297).

This research would suggest the need for surfacing prior domain knowledge and tailoring the online learning experience to the various learners’ needs. Their awareness of such tendencies regarding help seeking may enhance learner behaviors to be more constructive and less maladaptive.

Surfacing the past and priming learners. There is growing evidence that learning processes and outcomes are strongly influenced by the epistemological beliefs of learners and their teachers. Epistemological beliefs are beliefs about the nature of knowledge. Depending upon the theory, epistemological beliefs include beliefs about the structure and stability of knowledge, about sources and justification of knowledge (e.g., Hofer, 2001), about learning and abilities (e.g., Schommer, 1990), or about the relation of knowledge and beliefs (e.g., Alexander & Dochy, 1995; Souterland, Sinatra, & Matthews, 2001). It is generally assumed that epistemological beliefs change during educational processes from more naïve views (e.g., knowledge is absolute, knowledge is an accumulation of facts) to more sophisticated beliefs (e.g., knowledge is relative and contextual, knowledge is a complex network). Further, it is widely believed that a more sophisticated belief system has positive effects on learning processes (for a critique of this view, see Elby & Hammer, 2001, as cited by Aleven et al., 2003, pp. 304-305).

The teaching of culture not only prepares learners for future cultural experiences in study and work and adds complexity to their sense of the subject matter, but there’s an entertainment value (Chavez, 2002, pp. 129-130).

Power sharing in online courses. The sharing of power with learners often means greater “say” over learner assignments. The mere structure of online courses has suggested a devolution of power from a centralized instructor core to more of a shared learning environment (Strother, 2003, p. 354). That said, the control allotted by learning management system (LMS) and other e-learning technologies may also allow instructors a deep level of control that may be used in authoritarian instructor-centered ways.

Access mitigations. Global e-learning instructors should pay attention to the resource environment for the various learners. The cost of distance learning itself may be prohibitive with tuition, texts, fees, and learning resources. A major challenge may be making sure that the resources required are accessible, with possible local substitutions that may make the learning costs less burdensome. Third-party open-source freeware may be used for student assignments.

Technology mitigations. Online learning technologies may be used to enhance the learning. The identification of a portfolio as “a meaning-
ful way to integrate language and culture in a structure that provides opportunities for students to learn about foreign culture while using other skills—reading, listening, writing and speaking” (Lee, 1997, p. 355).

“Portfolios provide students with a practical and meaningful way to gain both language and cultural knowledge, and offer many advantages to students. First, they evoke learners’ interest by allowing students to focus on cultural components that interest students most. Second, the portfolio method leads them to investigate a foreign culture individually and in greater depth than they would be able to do in a normal teacher-centered classroom context. Third, selecting, planning, organizing, and producing a portfolio involves higher order cognition as well as the four basic language skills (Moore 1994, as cited by Lee, 1997, p. 358). The persistence of portfolios and the richness of the reflective learning that may be enabled with portfolios here enrich cultural conceptualizations.

Technologies should not be seen as a panacea for learning. Rather, it’s their use and deployment that matter. “While studies have supported the use of technology as a method of increasing performance and student satisfaction in a course, the current project did not support this body of literature. No statistically significant relationship was found between the use of virtual learning tools and grade outcome...This lack of significance may be in part due to lack of variance in the measure and in part an insufficient operationalization (sic) of the use of that particular method” (Dietz, 2002, pp. 85-86).

**Designing a High-Trust Learning Ecology**

Learning involves risk-taking. Trust is a “social glue” construct that encourages learners to take risks. It is an essential part of human relations and cooperation; it has been labeled a “key enabler” and a “foundation of support for high performance (Shaw, 1997, p. 7, as cited by Hai-Jew, 2007b, pp. 1-25).

**The importance of mutual trust.** The literature on global e-learning involves cautionary tales. Third-party academic matchmaking agencies have mixed reputations in terms of their efficacies (and motivations) in bringing together entities from higher education for partnerships. Others warn of years of work without payment. Quality standards between institutional partners have been an area of concern (Bates, 2003, n.p.). Various institutions of higher education have used covenants and contracts, franchise models, mediating agencies, and retainers in order to build a structural sense of trust with their various international partners.

One researcher addresses the advantages of a franchise arrangement, in mitigating financial exposure, in ensuring a supply of fee-paying students, and in shielding the institution against criticisms of differing entry requirements with in-country learners. “When students are registered and accredited through another institution, this provides a firewall regarding admissions, prior qualifications, and English language requirements for the institution developing the programs” (Bates, 1999, n.p.) Most importantly, a franchise institution “can provide cultural adaptation at both the development and delivery stage of the program. Furthermore, students who are not fluent in English can participate in their own language, through the discussion forums and the submission of assignments,” writes Bates (1999, n.p.).

Trust as a cultural value may be higher in some cultural contexts. “In many Asian countries, where instructor-led training is linked to cultural issues of trust and relationship building, it is a challenge to use e-learning (often an impersonal mode of training) without modification” (Strother, 2003, p. 353). That trust still has to be built albeit through the mediated technologies.

Trust in online learning spaces, while often present as a majority assumption, is important to nurture and protect. Elements that may erode trust may include “lack of communication with
the instructor, poorly worded instructions, unclear classroom expectations, anything that confuses or shows lack of respect for the student will cause disrespect in the student,’ wrote one instructor (C. Lower, Online instructor interview, April 2005, p. 5). ‘Malfunctions and slow response to troubles,’ wrote J.K. Erickson (Online instructor interview, April 2005, p. 3). Changes made on the ‘spur of the moment’ might cause learner discomfort (B. Culwell, Online instructor interview, April 2005, p. 2). Poor participation by learners early in the quarter might contribute to mistrust as well, according to one respondent” (Hai-Jew, 2007b, p. 17).

It is important not to overwhelm learners with “technological sophistication or advanced online pedagogies” (Arbaugh, 2001, p. 49). Online instructors need to lead and pace to avoid learner frustrations and burnout.

Handling of student information. Instructors handle student information that may be sensitive and private. The “indestructibility” of digital information and the low cost to their archival have brought up questions of best how to handle such data. In addition, government subpoenas for particular information have made those who provide such access hesitant to collect and store such data because anything collected may be used or misused beyond the original purpose. Some countries maintain personal dossiers and records of their citizens for life. The privacy rights lauded in the West and codified into laws like the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) are unheard of in other countries.

Another angle regarding student information relates to original ideas and inventions. While undergraduate students may often not surface new thinking, many in graduate studies may, particularly if there are research components in the online learning. Ethically, instructors should not use the intellectual output of students to benefit themselves or their own ambitions. Rather, such work should be supported to its full fruition in the learning environment, in publications, and someday in patents and R&D. Tracking the provenance of information may be a lot easier given the indestructibility of information online, but it would be critical to define the terms of information handling and support.

Holistic support for learning. Global e-learning students may need access to the databases at libraries and the support of professional librarians. Some will need educational and career advising. Some will need tutoring supports. Some will want help desk supports regarding various e-learning technologies. They may want to build virtual social lives with their peers from around the world; they may want to “network” and make professional connections abroad. A “whole student” build would consider these various needs and provide structures to access these online. This endeavor to create a social space will be pitted against the discontinuities of technological culture and its isolating effects.

Virtual social needs. For many of the traditional-aged global e-learners, their college years offer opportunities for connecting to their peers. Those who would design a working online learning ecology needed to build opportunities for nonacademic communications. They could plan open situations for serendipity and spontaneity, and opportunities for the online learners to meet, interact, and spark new ideas and insights. However, this should be balanced against the risks of frivolity and distractions from the actual learning. Some suggest the building of areas without instructor presence for such social needs.

A “social director” may conduct various events for global online learners. Events may include social hours, short-task group work, and digital gallery shows of student academic or professional works. This venue may feature outside guests. Synchronous and asynchronous types of interactivity may be engaged.
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WHAT ARE SOME HELPFUL PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING LOCALIZATION IN GLOBAL E-LEARNING?

Localization refers to endeavors to tie global e-learning to the respective unique time-place circumstances of global learners. These ties involve the use of local resources. They involve designing learning to be applicable to those spaces. This concept of localization involves some underlying premises.

First is the importance of a learner’s past “habitus” (“a system of dispositions” based on past experience and learning, in a term defined by Bourdieu, 1977) in affecting the learner’s expectations and skills (Brown, 1987; Jenkins, 1992) and how the learner has interacted with that habitus based on his/her personality (Harker & May, 1993; Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 76-87, as cited by Bloomer, 2001, p. 437). A major piece of the habitus may be influenced by the affordances of that learners growing up years and social context.

A second major piece to localization refers to the geographical context of the global learners. Time and place involve critical pieces of culture and influences on both group and individual levels.

“Human beings thus do not process information into what is known in necessarily ‘rational’ or instrumental ways. Instead, our mediating conceptual systems are shaped by lifestyles, work experiences, customs, language, mythologies—by cultures. In the contemporary era of globalization involving instantaneous transnational communications, however, Lipschutz believes that such personal and local biases are being increasingly ‘influenced by knowledge and practices originating elsewhere’ (Lipschutz with Mayer, 1996, p. 72). A continuous struggle between the global and the local is under way and this, he says, is due in part to the relevance and resilience of local cultures” (Comor, 2001, p. 395).

To one writer, this endeavor of connecting to the local may be dubbed relocalization. He writes, “Globalization is unfolding in a two-stage manner. In the first stage, global media and businesses extend their reach into new domains throughout the world. In a second stage, these same businesses and media are relocalized in order to best meet the economic and social imperatives of functioning in different regions of the world…” (Warschauer, 2000, p. 512).

Considering the students’ various environments supports the concept of “whole student” learning design, in order to support the meeting of their many needs over the years of the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate education and beyond.

Three main endeavors in localization are as follows:

1. Connection to learner’s own locale and environment: relating the learning to nearby or in-country expertise, the unique local economy, the unique job market, and other elements. The purpose of this connectivity is to emphasize the applicability of the learning. This should strengthen learners’ senses of the value of their learning and show the applications to the larger environment, well beyond virtual spaces.

2. The strategic use of local resources: connecting to local libraries, labs, institutions of higher education, fieldtrip destinations, and learning communities for face-to-face interactions. This endeavor aims to magnify the learning value of the online learning. Local resources may enrich the learning and provide apprenticeship spaces in which to apply the new learning. This endeavor may be restrained by the lack of formal connections, but it’s possible that short-term contractual arrangements may be created to allow the use of specific local resources. Global e-learning students themselves may
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make some of the connections for their own learning.

3. Sustainable learning and professional life after graduation: connecting global learners to other co-learners for face-to-face interactions and social needs. A critical piece to higher education is to sustain the learning over time and to support a thriving professional life for graduates. Localization may support the connections that allow both to happen. It may encourage more informal learning as well.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The broad concepts of cultural sensitivity and localization in global e-learning promote the adaptivity and customization for global learners. These provide ways to mitigate the field independence of online learning for fuller learner experiences and memory retention. Indeed, a range of issues need to be considered: branding, course ecology, curriculum design, instructional strategies/pedagogical approaches, multimedia builds, information handling, and direct instruction in e-learning.

Standards for mitigations. Proper mitigations should show clear learning value, and these should be visible to the learners themselves. The design of online learning should place learners in a situated practice where cultural differences are explored and encouraged. Such issues should be overt, with critical framing around the topic. The cultural pieces may build incrementally over a student’s educational career and beyond. The localization aspect should relate the online learning directly to learners’ lived lives on-ground and their concerns. It should support their use of local resources. Localization should encourage the quality of learning and work after graduation.

Constant vigilance. Effective applications of cultural sensitivity and localization mean that staff members need to be constantly vigilant to the implications of real-world events. They need to maintain open channels of communications with their learners and a respect for their base of knowledge and needs. This will require no less than a cosmopolitan approach. Learner needs must be assessed and responded to, without lapsing into stereotyping or broad overgeneralizations. There must be candor about the underlying values and approaches taken. Those supporting global e-learning should be encouraged to tap a broad range of resources to understand other peoples and cultures, including less-common channels like the literature from a country (Burniske, 1999, p. 133). The design of e-learning should avoid negative learning and false correlations, and this may be done through instructor and learner awareness and uses of language to challenge such concepts.

Course cultural temperatures. Cultural temperatures in courses may stem from purposive design and conscious attitudes. Such temperatures may also evolve based on unconscious attitudes and unthinking actions. It would be safe to assert that all courses have some cultural temperature, likely viewable as positive and negative for different groups of learners and individuals. Instructors need to be aware of the cultural temperatures of their own courses and the influences of the cultural context (“doctrines, values, and practices”) on their courses (Warschauer, 1998, p. 78).

Automated learning. How cultural sensitivities and localization may apply to automated learning (without instructor presence), automated tutoring, and online ecological design will require much scrutiny and research. “The ideal learning environment lies between the two poles of actual and potential development” (Alm-Lequex, 2001, p. 2).

Long-term professional supports for global e-learners. Online instructors need to strive to see global e-learners as individuals potentially deserving of graduate learning opportunities, international jobs, and other benefits that often come with abilities. Too often, online instructors forgo the “talent spotting” that happens in
real-time real-space. Global e-learning needs to consider more long-term professional relationships as one option.

Course designs and redesigns. Administrators, faculty and staff may choose to pay more attention to both greater cultural sensitivity and localization endeavors in curriculum development and online instruction. Instead of merely retrofitting courses for global learners, fresh course builds may be enacted. Faculty and staff members may train on how to better reach and learn from and about their global students. Such training may engage a range of issues such as managing learner expectations; setting clear deadlines, guidelines and expectations; applying and developing empathy; designing effective interactivity; communicating effectively; designing effective instructor telepresence; creating online classroom “safety;” integrating international dimensions of the academic field; developing self-awareness of cultural attitudes; building multicultural knowledge; working to fairly assess student work across cross-cultural lines, and facilitating boundary crossings, when approaching global learners. A rich range of multicultural global competencies may be developed.

Creation of digital contents. The development of digital content should involve cultural sensitivities and localizations. Information—textual, graphical, aural and multimedia—is not value neutral. Meanings are context-dependent oftentimes, and messages may have many meanings (polysemic). Privileging some points of view over others may show arrogance, cultural imperialism or provincialism. What makes global communications even more difficult relates to the fact that culture is often assumed and invisible to the individual. While some of this exists on a surface level, it also exists in the human subconscious. Cultural, historical, geographical and mass communications literacies may enhance the creation of effective digital learning objects in global online learning.

The research in this field is rich with possibility, with focuses on the various learner groups and their unique needs. There may be general models for analyzing the embedded culture of a global e-learning course. There may be cultural “accessibility” assessments of learning experiences. There need to be clearer strategies to reach out to global e-learners to better capitalize on their local learning resources. Ideally, researchers from across countries and cultures will collaborate more to raise cultural sensitivities, and greater partnerships may promote localizations across time, miles, institutions and nations.

At heart, both cultural sensitivities and localization in global e-learning are about accommodating international learners in their various contexts and situations.

AUTHOR NOTE

A “cultural sensitivities and localizations course analysis (CSLCA)” tool is available in Appendix A. This tool covers the following arenas of a global e-learning course.

1. Course Ecology
2. Curricular Content
3. Planned and Unplanned Interactivity
4. Instructional Strategies

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APPENDIX A: CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES AND LOCALIZATIONS COURSE ANALYSIS (CSSLCA) TOOL FOR GLOBAL E-LEARNING COURSES

The cultural sensitivities and localizations approaches were applied to the four following areas of an online course: course ecology, curricular content, planned and unplanned interactivity, and instructional strategies. A course ecology refers to the online and off-line spaces that comprise an e-learning experience. Curricular content refers to the (digital and other) materials used for the learning. Planned and unplanned interactivity refers to the both asynchronous and synchronous interactions: designed small group work, dialogues, team assignments, collaborations, and other interpersonal communications and work. Instructional strategies refer to the pedagogical designs underlying a course or online learning experience.

1. Course Ecology
2. Curricular Content
3. Planned and Unplanned Interactivity
4. Instructional Strategies

This draft tool may be applied during a course build, during the teaching of an online course, and probably most effectively to an archived course with all the interactions (both in the archived learning management system (LMS) and the outside-course interactions like e-mails, faxes, phone conversations, and letters). A few of the questions may not apply in the different stages, but most will apply with minor changes in the verb tense.

Figure 3. A “cultural sensitivities and localizations course analysis” tool application timeline
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The “Cultural Sensitivities and Localizations Course Analysis (CSLCA)” Tool (for Global E-Learning)

Cultural Sensitivities

1. **Cultural Sensitivities: Course Ecology**
   - Is the courseware flexible enough for delivering the learning in a variety of ways? Instructor-led? Automated?
   - Are there ways to scaffold or structure the learning? Can the learning be linear, branched or a la carte?
   - Is automated or live tutoring (or both) available to support learners?
   - Are the tools in the learning management system (LMS) named accurately for easy use? Is there a clear logical structure? Does the LMS support the understanding of a clear e-learning path?
   - Are the supporting materials (tangibles, information, human resources, locations) required for learning widely and easily accessible during the term of the learning?
   - Are simulations repeatable? Are there explanations for simulations?
   - Are the human depictions in the simulations nonoffensive and nonstereotypical?
   - In live interactions (iTV, Net-mediated), do all learners have equal access in terms of the technologies?
   - Do the video recordings show a variety of individuals in the learning and professional environments (without omission or stereotyping)?
   - Is the online course accessible? Are there accommodations for those who may have disabilities? Are all audio and video files transcripted? Are the mitigations for accessibility at the same learning quality as those offered for others?
   - Is the sound quality in the digital contents clear and high-quality? Are the pronunciations accurate but also varied in terms of different accents?
   - Does the instructor telepresence show professional credibility, care for learners, humanity and respect for others?
   - Do digital objects and announcements anticipate learner needs?
   - Is the course tone and atmosphere welcoming? Are learner questions and interactions encouraged?
   - Does the posted information lead to a variety of digital resources for full support for learners?
   - Does the power structure in the course reflect even power distributions among learners?
   - Do the learners have power to make changes to the learning environment and their learning quality and experiences? Are they able to customize their learning?
   - Is the learning space transparent, open and accountable to the learners, in terms of administrative oversight and administrative presence?
   - Outside of online spaces, are there other aspects to the course, such as designed assignments, research, fieldtrips, observations, apprenticeships, and other types of rich learning? Is online learning enriched and value-added?
   - How strict or lenient is the course policy structure? How closely do these policies reflect the ethos of the larger organization? How closely do these policies reflect the values of the respective learners’ home countries’ learning organizations?
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• How much follow-through occurs regarding policy stances? Are these policies applied in a fair and egalitarian way?
• How is the online course branded in terms of text, graphics, logos, interactivity, and designed online space? How is the branding perceived by learners?
• How is information handled by the instructor? Administration? Peer learners? What informational policy is used? Are intellectual property rights adhered to? How long is information kept? Under what grounds will learner information be shared with law enforcement or government agencies?
• How much power do learners have to affect this space? How much power do they have to customize their own space within the online learning LMS?
• How much flux or change occurs in this online ecology? How persistent is the online space?
• Are learners given sufficient time early in the learning term to acclimate to the LMS? The online course materials? The instructor’s teaching approaches? The other learners?
• Does this learning ecology reflect underlying values and worldviews? Does it reject particular values and worldviews?
• Are certain political stances “privileged” and other stances not? Are certain “voices” privileged or validated over other voices? Are there certain voices that are not heard in this course? Or do all views have at least initial equal access before they are debated?
• How neutral or “cultured” is this online space?
• Are the technologies used in an online classroom—the third-party plug-ins, the specialized software programs, the interactivity-supports—equally available to all the learners in the course? If prices are prohibitive, are there any mitigations for costs?
• How much are the support functions of a campus made available to the global e-learners?

2. Cultural Sensitivities: Curricular Content
• Does the syllabus offer insights on underlying worldviews, cultures or approaches to the particular subject or academic field?
• How is the course e-learning path or trajectory organized? Is the pacing flexible or strictly deadline-driven/time bound? Is there sufficient room to conceptualize time differently?
• Are course objectives clearly defined? Are they objectively measurable?
• Are the grading strategies objective or subjective?
• In terms of feedback, do learners get sufficient information to improve their work?
• Are there real-world student examples of the various types of assignments from a variety of different learners, to give learners a sense of what is expected?
• Do the assignments have clear application to the various global learners’ lives?
• Are the group projects and collaborations set up to enhance learner success?
• Are learners of various types, locales, ages, and cultures intermingled in the interactive assignments?
• Are there a variety of assessment strategies used? Do these accommodate various types of learners?
• Are these assessments clearly explained to learners? Is there sufficient debriefing about the interactivity? Group dynamics? Dyadic work? Individual work?
• If learners have questions about the various assignments and assessments, are these handled in a fair and clear way?
• Are the assignments prepackaged by a publishing house or press, or are the assignments more original to the instructor(s)?
• Is the Internet used to extend the value of the learning? What sites are used as validated and usable sites? What criteria are used in the selection of such sites?
• If guests are brought into the course, what range of viewpoints do they add? What constituencies do they represent?
• How much of the online course is prepackaged, and how much of it is in play once the learning term starts? How much variance is there in terms of ranges of viewpoints?
• Does the instructor only draw from local resources, or does he/she draw from a global base of speakers and information?
• How much power do learners have in choosing topics for research projects?
• How much learning do students bring to the online class? How much do students learn from each other?
• In scenarios and role plays, how open-ended (stochastic) or close-ended/predicted are the scenarios? How many possible options are considered? Which viewpoints are supported, and which viewpoints are not? Do the scenarios and role plays apply to the various realities of the different learners? Do the scenarios and role plays strike learners as authentic or believable or applicable?
• Are the digital learning objects (lectures, video clips, flashcards, slideshows, animated screencasts, simulations and others) well designed? Are these “boxed” premade objects or created locally? What is the quality of the digital learning objects? Does the learning of these objects apply to the various learner’s respective situations?
• Is the learning exclusionary or inclusive of a variety of cultures?
• Is there cultural channeling of learners into different paths? If so, is this done fairly?
• If real-time synchronous events are scheduled, do all learners have fair access to participate in that event?

3. **Cultural Sensitivities: Planned and Unplanned Interactivity**

• Are learners given time to introduce themselves and to get to know each other?
• How much interaction does the instructor have with learners as individuals off-line (via e-mail, fax, telephone, and others), as groups or teams, and as a whole class?
• What is the quality of instructor communications? Does the instructor add substantive comments? Does the instructor show respect in how he/she treats others?
• How much “immediacy” is in the instructor commentary? Are the comments prepackaged and rote, or are they substantive and original?
• What sorts of planned interactivity has been designed into the e-learning?
• How much interactivity is required of peers among themselves? How much oversight does the instructor bring to the interactivity?
• What sorts of unplanned interactivity has been created in terms of the course “affordances”? Are there learner lounges or “cafes” where learners may interact with each other in a non-academic way?
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and "Localizations" in Global E-Learning?

- What sorts of outside-LMS interactions are encouraged? Do learners ever meet face-to-face?
- What sorts of asynchronous interactions are encouraged?
- What sorts of synchronous interactions are encouraged?
- Are there clearly defined times when the instructor is available for “office hours” or other types of support?
- How are student privacy rights protected? How are student intellectual property rights protected in the classroom?
- How are student talents, apprenticeships and professional development endeavors encouraged and supported?
- How many opportunities do learners have to explore and express their own backgrounds and cultural values with others in the online class?

4. Cultural Sensitivities: Instructional Strategies
   - What identifiable pedagogical strategies are employed in the online course? What types of learning styles are engaged, and which are not? Are more difficult hurdles raised based on cultural grounds than others?
   - How much variety is there in pedagogical strategies, in order to accommodate different learning styles?
   - How are conflicts resolved? Are disagreements handled fairly? Are individuals’ reputations and “faces” protected and saved? Does the instructor also rightly handle facts in the conflict?
   - How much power do learners have in making decisions about their own learning? How much scaffolding (via information, directions and tools) is provided to support their decision-making?
   - How rich and supportive are the official feedback messages from the instructor, teaching assistants, and other online teaching facilitators?
   - What sorts of “takeaways” do learners have from their learning that will apply to their professional development and growth?

Localizations

1. Localizations: Course Ecology
   - What local sites on the Internet are used as learning resources?
   - Are foreign language sources used on the site?
   - What local supporting materials (tangibles, information, human resources, locations) are used for the learning?
   - What mitigations are available for localization issues?
   - What global influences does the instructor show in his/her telepresence plan?
   - How much power do learners have to localize their learning to make it applicable to their own situations?
   - Are fresh digital learning materials created by learners posted and shared in the online course?
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and “Localizations” in Global E-Learning?

• What outside resources beyond the LMS are accessed by the learning? Do learners have abilities to make use of the local resources in their respective communities?
• Does the instructor show awareness of possible local resources that may be used?
• Are there practical policies and mitigations regarding the use of local resources?
• Are the simulations and role plays used relevant to the respective local situations of learners, or do they come across as false or inapplicable?
• Are the localized materials created by learners treated according to the international Berne convention to respect the learners’ intellectual property rights?
• Do the various localization aspects of the learners add to the richness of the learning for the entire group of learners? Do these localization contributions by learners add to the richness of future renditions of the course?

2. Localizations: Curricular Content

• What globalization/localization awareness is expressed in the course syllabus?
• Is there flexibility in the course schedule and e-learning trajectory to accommodate the various localization challenges of learners?
• Do the course objectives show global or international awareness along with localization awareness?
• Does the grading strategy show any valuation of the global diversity of the learners?
• Do the assignments allow learner flexibility in using local topics or resources? Does the learning apply to a variety of local situations?
• Do group projects and collaborations take advantage of the different local situations of the learners and yet allow for the coalescing of these diverse elements into coherent learning and cohesive learning outcomes and projects?
• Are the assessment strategies well considered in terms of the use of local resources and local applicability of the learning?
• Is the content packaged by a publishing or content-creation company with provincial views or global view? Or are the contents packaged originally by the instructor? And if so, do these contents reflect provincial or global views?
• What sorts of Internet resources and sources are privileged in the curricular build? Is the instructor open to a richer variety of sites from various locales? Are foreign language sites acceptable to the instructor (with proper translations)?
• In terms of instructor feedback, is he/she rigid about only accepting learning fitting a particular cultural framework, or is he/she flexible about a wider range of learning possibilities? What standards does he/she apply for quality learning, and are these fair and applicable standards?
• Are there guest lecturers who are “local” to the various learners? Or are the guest lecturers only from one country?
• Are learners allowed to base their research projects on their own locales for localized applicable findings?
• Do the scenarios and role plays used have resonance in localized situations? Or are the examples only applicable to the instructor’s local reality? Are diverse ranges of realities explored?
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and "Localizations" in Global E-Learning?

• Do the on-campus resources cited only offer services that apply to the institution’s local situations, or do they apply to more customized and localized supports for the various learners? What is the reach of the campus in terms of international supports?
• Are learning objects local-aware and applicable to various locales? Or are they very tied in to limited or provincial (instructor-bound) situations?
• If student sample works are included, do these show a rich variety of global and localization insights? Or are these works pretty monolithic in terms of cultural influences and locale?

3. Localizations: Planned and Unplanned Interactivity

• Is the planned synchronous interactivity available in the time zone of the various global learners? If there are different ways to ensure that all global learners can interact, are the qualities of the interactions fairly equal or the same?
• Are the technologies for the planned and unplanned interactivity available to all?
• Do all get a chance to speak, and are all ideas given fair and logical consideration?
• Do learners from around the world have time to acclimate to the course and to ask plenty of questions? Are there resources to help mitigate their adjustment to the learning management system and various tools, curriculum, instructor and fellow learners?
• As part of the learner introductions or profiles, are learners’ backgrounds, learning ambitions, countries, cultures and other aspects supported? Are their ties to their respective communities supported?
• Does the instructor communicate respect to the various learners and acknowledge their local conditions and make adjustments to the learning to accommodate and support those localizations?
• Does the instructor avoid generalizations or stereotypes when engaging with learners? Does the instructor avoid offensive joking and other types of interactivity/communications?
• Does the instructor set up a culture of mutual respect and civility between learners and intervene if such a culture is contravened?
• Does the instructor design or allow outside-LMS uses of localized resources and interactivity (interviews of local experts, visits to relevant local sites, access to local librarians, and others)?
• Is the instructor available at different times to accommodate the different time zones?
• Does the instructor allow sufficient “quiet time” and “silences” to accommodate different communications styles of the learners, or is everything paced in an exclusivist way?
• Is the pacing conducive to learning for those who may be using a second, third or fourth language as the main language of learning? Does the instructor show awareness that particular grammatical, syntactical and pronunciation challenges may exist but not reflect learner intelligence or capability in the subject field?
• Does the instructor convey trust, integrity, follow-through, and care in interactions with learners from various parts of the world? Or does he/she only convey this to niche demographics? Are there wide variances between perceptions of the instructors based across cultural or national lines? (And if so, why?)

4. Localizations: Instructional Strategies

• Are the instructional strategies used in an online course just appropriate to first-language speakers?
Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and “Localizations” in Global E-Learning?

- Do the instructional strategies show global and local awarenesses?
- Do the instructional strategies show accommodation for various learning styles?
- Are the moods and tones of the course conducive to those hailing from various cultures? Or are some types of learning more privileged than others?
- Does the instructor mediate conflicts and negotiate resolutions between learners who may have cultural or other difficulties with each other? Is this achieved fairly?
- Are learners empowered in the instruction to apply the learning to their own local communities and situations?
- If an instructor is made aware of localization opportunities and challenges, does he or she respond constructively to those?
- Does the learning help highlight local resources and learning moments that apply to various learners’ local situations?
- Does the instructor provide sufficient feedback during instruction to support localized/individualized/customized learning per learner?
- Does the instructor apply attention and resources to help learners localize the learning to their own communities and situations?
- Does the instructor work to connect global e-learners to global opportunities, apprenticeships, graduate school, and job opportunities (where applicable)?
- Does the instructor write letters of recommendation?
- Does the instructor work to create partnerships with local resources for the respective learners?
- Does the instructor offer pedagogical oversight (as much as possible) for localized learning (that has been prior-arranged and mutually approved)?

SUGGESTED READING LIST


Why “Cultural Sensitivities” and "Localizations" in Global E-Learning?
