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Challenges and Questions Concerning “Culturally-Sensitive Design”

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Author's note: *This paper follows a presentation I submitted for the e/Merge 2008, an on-line only conference hosted and organized by the Center for Educational Technology at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. I would encourage all AECT members, particularly those in the International Division, to try to take part in e/Merge 2009, as it is a wonderful way to connect with new colleagues from around the globe. The conference is very well-organized and provides numerous opportunities for asynchronous and synchronous interaction.*

Since the inception of the field of anthropology, scholars have debated a definition for the word “culture.” Lonner and Adamopoulos (1997) note that “there are 200 or more definitions of ‘culture’ in the literature of the social sciences, not one of which has been embraced by a substantial number of social scientists” (p. 76). Strauss and Quinn (1997) provide an overview of four schools of thought regarding the interpretations of “culture”:

Geertzian interpretivists have stressed the *publicness* of meaning, cognition, and culture. Foucauldian postmodernists have argued for the *constructedness* of culture and of the self. Some contemporary historical materialists highlight the importance of *resistance* to cultural meanings. Finally, many of our colleagues in cognitive and linguistic anthropology focus on the way thought and meaning are *situated* (emphasis theirs, p. 12).

The number of definitions available and the diverging schools of thought means that there is little hope for consensus on the issue, if in fact consensus need be reached. But such an impasse poses a dilemma for those of us who are involved with instructional design, as very often we find ourselves trying to account for culture—whether that be school culture, organizational culture, or even a national culture. My concern is specifically about design created for people living in other countries than the designer’s own. If one cannot define a problem or challenge, how can a solution be created? The first challenge to the notion of “culturally-sensitive design,” then, is with the word choice itself. The concept may simply not be attainable because there is no way to know if a design achieves what cannot be defined.

Some may argue that what we are dealing with is not the nebulous concept of culture, but instead *context*. Rather than broad generalizations about national tendencies, instead the focus is on what Tessmer and Richey (1997) define as,

A multilevel body of factors in which learning and performance are embedded.... Context is not the additive influence of discrete entities but rather the simultaneous interaction of a number of mutually influential factors. These factors’ physical, social, and instructional aspects interplay to influence learning (p. 87).

This multilevel nature of context is discovered through what is known as either a context analysis or environmental analysis (Dean, 1994; Tessmer, 1990; Tessmer & Harris, 1992; Tiene & Futagami, 1987). The context analysis, in contrast to a needs analysis, is an examination of “physical and psychosocial factors that affect learning...a phenomenological approach to instructional design in that it seeks to describe the learning ‘as it is’ in the real world...” (Tessmer & Harris, 1992, p. 15). Such a definition implies that the orientation is less on what needs to be learned and more on how what surrounds the teaching and learning situation affects and sustains (or diminishes) the educational process.

The goal of the analysis is “to describe where an instructional product will be used, how it will be used, and how it will be sustained” (Tessmer, 1990, p. 57). The foundational assumption behind the rationale of a context analysis is that it will improve the ID product (Tessmer & Harris, 1992), the point of which is to improve learning. An analysis that only improves the teaching process may not be at all useful to the student. For instance, a context analysis may indicate a need to arrange the physical space of the classroom in such a way that the teacher has easy access to the board or computer station. That same change could result in some students not being able to sit in such a way that is conducive to collaborative work. The focus, then, is on learning (p. 21). Whether one makes the semantic choice of culture or context, though, the challenge remains the same: specifically, with which issues must we be concerned? Let’s briefly examine some of the challenges facing efforts to contextualize material.

Language(s) of instruction

Although English continues to grow as a universal language (there will soon be more speakers of English as a second language than native speakers), an obvious concern for designers is reducing the cognitive load brought on when a learner is having to decode and recode content into his or her native tongue. However, deciding which language of instruction to use is not as simple as examining the language of the majority group. In certain regions of the world, multiple dialects and entirely distinct languages may well exist within a very small area. Is there enough time and money to translate materials multiple times? If kept in an “official” language, does this put an unwelcome stamp of the government on the material? Perhaps, however, the government is funding the instructional initiative and despite the ideals of the designers, the content will be in the language they dictate.

Idiomatic language

Multiple examples abound of attempts by non-native speakers who, despite their knowledge of formalized structures, may not be aware of subtleties that have a profound impact on meaning. Language constantly evolves, especially in popular use, and accounting for the idiosyncrasies can be extraordinarily difficult. Words that may in one use be completely innocuous, might turn out to be offensive, laughable, or completely inappropriate in the next.

Societal structures

The manner in which power structures are represented among a group of people potentially impacts designers in a number of ways. One such structure concerns the role of men and women. Each of us is keenly aware that certain parts of the world do not allow women certain roles in society. Do designers coming from an egalitarian perspective try to promote examples in the content that show strong female representation, or must the designers submit to the values held by a local group, thereby creating content with examples that maintain the status quo of a paternalistic society? Though we must be careful not to entrench a Western hegemony, what happens when core democratic values are in conflict?

Assessment and evaluation

The school atmosphere created due to preparation for the high-stakes tests administered in a great many nations (and increasingly so in the U.S.), means that those interacting with content may not be terribly receptive to an instructional design where right and wrong is relative and knowledge is socially constructed. Designers who adhere to a strong constructivist bias will run headlong into trouble should their content be framed in a context that expects right and wrong answers, and for the delivery of the instruction to be more teacher-centric than student-centered.

ICT availability

The world is a surprising place. Due to the generosity of philanthropists and future-oriented non-governmental organizations, there are parts of the globe very much in touch with the most modern communications mechanisms. And, in places where one would expect there to be ample ICT, the penetration into education is virtually non-existent. Wireless technologies have penetrated even remote regions. Even with the possibilities of ICT to deliver distance education, one must be prepared to examine the willingness of a populace to use it for this purpose and the overall support infrastructure should the technology fail. All of us who have worked in developing parts of the world are quite eager to close the “digital divide,” but there is a constant balance between exposing learners to technologies and meeting day-to-day practical needs.

A study by Rogers, Graham, and Mayes (2007) showed that people working in cross-cultural design had concerns that largely fell along the challenges noted above. In attempting to address the issues just listed, and others that are not mentioned, an assumption exists that it is even possible to truly contextualize instruction. Not too long ago, I read an email by a student living outside the U.S. who stated that he has often interacted with materials created by

those not from his own country. He felt no need for designers to account for pieces of local context, as he was fairly confident he could transfer the knowledge to his own situation. An added benefit, in his opinion, was learning about other people and places through their own perspective. While this testimony is limited to one person, one may wonder how widespread that opinion might be. Given the time and resources necessary to design instruction that accounts for a myriad of cultural or contextual elements, perhaps the solution is to simply leave it alone. Considering this argument gives rise to other questions related to contextualizing design that are in no way easy to answer.

Time is Money

In the world of instructional design, one does not have the luxury to keep tinkering with content until it is perfect—a product must be developed, as learners are waiting on it.

Depth of changes

Directly related to the issue of time is the question one must always ask when considering contextual elements—how deep must one go? Does a designer spend time making surface level changes, such as to changing idiomatic language or measurement units, or does one go through all the levels of possible context? How much is (ever) enough?

Globally aware learners

As expressed by the listserv respondent, we live in an age when people around the world are already savvy about other places, and can therefore handle any context differences that arise. On the other hand, for those not aware of how other cultures learn, perhaps non-localized content can help raise their awareness.

Editorial decisions

Ultimately, a person or a small group of people must decide which parts of the instruction receive attention with regard to localization. Those who make that decision have their own set of biases and perspectives, so it is possible that only the aspects that are important to them are contextualized, while other parts are left alone.

Supplemental materials

Even if one has enough time to refine a course, accounting for all aspects of context, what then is to be done about the supplemental material? For example, one could take a course designed for learners in France and make it accessible for learners in Senegal, but if the course has textbooks, what then is to be done with the non-localized content contained in them? Supplemental guides could be developed, which puts us squarely back at the "time = money" consideration.

Intellectual property

The various copyright laws and fair use policies are complex. If content already exists that one wants to modify for local use (especially true of supplemental materials), then one can very easily get tangled in a legal web.

Reinventing the wheel

If a course is already developed, why spend time "reinventing" it? Does the lack of localization matter so much that the content must be delayed in its delivery to the learner? This seems to be a waste of resources.

Shifting target

Assume that content has been localized and has met its goals for being context sensitive. But contexts have a tendency to change—situations evolve over time. After a great deal of time has been spent contextualizing content for one time and place, should this work be repeated over and over through time? For example, say a project introduces internet access to a community. A number of instructional materials are designed for the local context, and they are to be delivered electronically. Because delivery is via a network, designers expect that submission of work and feedback on it will be through email or a LMS, and assessment is built accordingly. The target goals for design are achieved, but only insofar as the network is sustainable. There are many stories of ICT falling into disrepair, especially in regions with few human capacity resources. Should this happen, the instruction must be redesigned to be of any use to the local population.

Representation of minority views

A very important topic to all of us, I am sure, concerns how minority views are represented in instructional material. If we are truly localizing content, then are we willing to adapt materials to the local area? We often hear talk of the so-called “hidden curriculum,” and as designers adapting for local context, how much do we intentionally or unintentionally usurp or support the agendas of others.

Area of responsibility

Is the challenge of contextualization truly that of the designer, or that of the learner? Should the learner bear some responsibility to take content and apply it to his or her own context?

Level of expertise needed

What level of expertise must we accept when localizing content? Is it enough for a non-native person with a general awareness of issues to do context-sensitive design, or must the context expert live in a certain region in order to provide proper oversight and authority? When we consider an ex-patriot, one might think that he or she has more context knowledge than a non-native. As indicated before, context changes, so the ex-patriot may not necessarily be up-to-date on important contextual pieces. Communication with someone living in a certain place may be helpful, but determining his or her breadth of knowledge may be difficult.

Given all the factors for which one must account, the challenges reported by designers in the study conducted by Rogers et al. (2007), and considering the other challenges at hand, contextualization, or “culturally-sensitive design” becomes a rather difficult task. This outline of challenges is another call to the community of designers to help answer these questions. Readers with experience in this area are invited to respond with examples that might help provide reasonable solutions.

I had the pleasure this past summer of becoming friends with Jürgen Capitain, a faculty member at Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich (Switzerland). Among his many talents, Jürgen is an avid gardener. As we discussed our travels and interaction with people from all over the world, I noted that “culture” is a difficult concept to define, and how this is problematic from a designer’s perspective. In recalling the connection between the word and its original etymological roots (Latin, “cultura”), he imparted this bit of wisdom, simply stating, “Culture is what you care for.” In the end, perhaps a full accounting for all factors is not needed. Perhaps as designers we can settle on the definition offered by my colleague and in so doing, if we truly take time to *care for* learners and their contexts, we shall have done a very reasonable job of “culturally sensitive design” indeed.

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