

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Based on the knowledge generated from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework projects and selected external literature, the Quick Guides series provides an introduction to key issues related to flexible and online delivery of Vocational Education and Training (VET).

Cross-cultural Issues in Content Development and Teaching Online

Australian Flexible Learning Quick Guide Series

Scope of this guide

The focus of this Quick Guide is the exploration of some of the cross-cultural issues associated with developing content and designing and delivering online courses and support services. Cultural considerations are important in any teaching design. Teaching across cultures (from one place to another, or to different audiences), and the teaching of diverse groups or individuals from different cultures in one setting or dispersed across different geographic locations, presents particular challenges. This Guide includes research and resources on cross-cultural issues in relation to Indigenous students.

This Guide will be of interest to practitioners, project managers, and other staff who have concerns for effectiveness, appropriateness, and equity for online content development, and course development and delivery services within Vocational Education and Training (VET) markets. “While technology can be constructed in a culturally sensitive way, it is clear that this benefit is, in part, reliant on the cultural sensitivity and awareness of the people what are working within that technological environment. This includes the learners, developers, teachers and administrators.” (Goodear 2001)

This Guide should be read in conjunction with the Guide on *Globalisation / Internationalisation of Online Content and Teaching*.

The context

Firstly what do we mean by ‘culture’? Marinetti and Dunn (n.d.), quoting Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede, define culture as:

“patterns of ‘thinking, feeling and potential acting’ that every person carries within him or herself, and which he terms ‘mental programs’. The source of these mental programs lies within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences. In short, culture affects who we are, how we think, how we behave and how we respond to our environment. Above all, it determines how we learn”.

Teachers have always had to teach diverse groups of students, and most are aware of the sensitivities in dealing with, and using to advantage, the differences in any given group. The use of online technologies can provide both solutions and additional challenges in dealing with multi-cultural and cross-cultural issues.

The fact that VET now operates in a global market – and opportunities exist to more readily market to international audiences – places additional emphasis on customisation and relevance of training materials and courses for overseas consumption. But it is not only about catering for new markets. Locally it is expected that today’s content is built on world-views and takes account of contemporary business practices and the world of work and living built on global information and communication structures that are unprecedented in their availability and reach. There is now an expectation that ‘global’ values and international awareness be incorporated into curriculum content in implicit and explicit ways. Attitudinal changes that acknowledge cultural diversity and different perspectives can be demonstrated through both practice and design. Courses and content will be judged not just on the appropriateness of curriculum content, but the pedagogical frameworks within which they are delivered.

There are differences within nationalities and cultural groupings also. For example Australian Indigenous people are by no means homogenous - with around 90 surviving languages, 20 of these are reported to have distinct associated cultures (A&E R011RSa, p. 2).

Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder and Roche (2002) in a longitudinal study observed differing communication patterns and instances of miscommunication in online exchanges between culturally diverse learners and online facilitators. They observed that:

- 'Cyberspace' itself has a culture and is not a neutral or value-free platform for exchange.
- Cultural gaps sometimes exist between speakers and the dominant 'cyberculture', as well as between individual speakers.
- The greater the perception of cultural differences between the 'speakers' online, the greater the incidents of miscommunication.
- Attitudes towards person-to-person communication using new communications technologies vary greatly between cultures.
- Characteristics of electronic genres, communication styles and routines, and viewing/listening practices differ between cultures.
- Many communications technologies lack elements inherent in face-to-face communication.

Why is it important?

It is a requirement within Registered Training Organisations for training and assessment to be equitable for all persons, taking account of cultural and linguistic needs (AQTF, Section 8.1 viii).

When pedagogical values in one culture are culturally inappropriate to another, students question knowledge, or may challenge the teacher's view (McLoughlin & Oliver 1999). Students may question the merit in participation, or worse, feel disenfranchised if the course or learning resources do not fit their world view. There are high-drop out rates in online courses – this is a world phenomenon. Indeed Marinetti and Dunn (n.d.), based on extensive anthropological and cross-cultural research, suggest that "the lack of cultural adaptation is a leading reason for why elearning fails to engage a globally distributed audience". *Achieving Equitable Outcomes*, a supporting paper to Australia's National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998-2003, quoted in the Access and Equity Literature Review reports similar claims for Indigenous learners. Key issues for Indigenous learners are summed up thus:

"Lack of culturally appropriate learning is considered to be a major cause of unsuccessful completions. Inadequate teacher and provider sensitivity to cultural differences, lack of teacher relations with students and their communities as well as language difficulties all contribute. Distance from providers is also critical in some rural and remote parts of Australia." (A&E R019RL, p. 5)

Cultural needs and cultural differences need to be taken into account at every phase of the design and delivery of online materials and support if courses and learning content are to meet learner needs (Brennan, McFadden & Law 2000, p. 8).

Another major reason is the richness diversity can bring to the learning. This was a major finding of Lyn Goodear's Flexible Learning Leaders field research on *Cultural Diversity*. Diversity has been associated with 'innovation and creativity'¹ and "students who learn in an environment where multiple and diverse perspectives are fostered and appreciated, become better critical thinkers, communicators, problem-solvers and teamplayers".² Indeed, to sanitise cultural difference has the potential to limit educational opportunities.³

"The development of a culturally sensitive learning environment should be viewed as a shared responsibility amongst teachers, developers, administrators and learners" which involves "consultation of participants to ensure a rich and purposeful model is being developed." (Goodear 2001, p. 13)

¹ Roach quoted in Goodear 2001, p. 29

² Sugar and Bonk quoted in Goodear 2001, p. 29

³ Zieghan and Martsult, quoted in Goodear 2001, p. 5

Some of the issues

Some of the broader tensions or quandaries that exist for developers are:

- Global vs local issues – the appropriateness of material developed nationally versus materials produced or adapted for local contexts.
- Adaptation vs generalised approaches – producing materials that can be used in any context, versus materials produced in ways which encourage and even facilitate local adaptation.
- Copyright concerns, and the particular requirements when materials are produced for one context but re-developed and used in another.

Technology selection and use is not bias free, nor are the websites we create. They are influenced by our biases, and the views others have of the world – they are often based on our interpretations of the way things are or should be. McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) argue that “one of the limitations in current instructional design models is that they do not fully contextualise the learning experience, and are themselves the products of particular cultures”.

Quoting various researchers McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) claim there is a need for ongoing debate and further research to improve our understandings of ‘culture’ within teaching and learning... “not enough is known about the ramifications of cultural inclusivity for cognitive design of learning resources”. Marinetti and Dunn (n.d.), borrowing from Tompenaars, use the analogy of an onion – the outer cultural levels are the most visible and easiest to change, whereas the inner core determines our cultural assumptions and is often hidden from view, more difficult to identify and not easily changed.

Different approaches

Collis and Remmers (in McLoughlin and Oliver 1999) in a simplified view define two categories of web sites that have cross-cultural implications:

- Sites that are made in one context and culture, but visited by other cultures
- Sites designed specifically for cross-cultural participation.

To respond to cross-cultural issues Ziguras (in MCRIE 2001) claims course and content producers can either tailor their products and services to particular student groups based on what is known about their needs, or build sufficient flexibility into programs so they are appropriate for diverse audiences. Either way designers of courses and learning resources, support staff, and managers need to know:

- The demographics and particular needs of individuals or groups they are catering for.
- What makes it a successful learning experience for participants?
- What are the barriers to learning and in what circumstance?

How much do we know about our students and at what point do we gather this information? Research on critical success factors for online learning suggest that considering as many of these factors as we can up-front in the design stage can ensure greater success than if left to the final evaluation. McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) claim that “systematic attention must be given to particular design guidelines, which include cultural contextualisation”. “Don’t ignore what your audience is telling you!” say Marinetti and Dunn (n.d., p. 3). “Read the feedback your learners give you and, if you’re starting to take the issue of cultural adaptation seriously, do so with an eye for comments that originate from cultural mismatches and misunderstanding”.

The case for cultural localisation

McLoughlin and Oliver (1999) undertook a study of cultural differences in online learning contexts and argue for cultural localisation incorporating values, styles of learning and cognitive preferences of target populations. Studying the needs of Indigenous populations they claimed this meant going beyond “surface-level design considerations to achieve a meaningful constructivist learning environment” (p. 1).

Marinetti and Dunn hold that mere ‘localisation’ is inadequate as a general approach to cultural adaptation, and is just one point on a spectrum of adaptation strategies that range from ‘translate’ to ‘originate’ and include the ‘how people learn’ as well as what people learn, content form and appropriate content examples.

The case for cultural appreciation

As mentioned there are many arguments for building in cultural appreciation, and reasons why courses or learning materials should not be ‘santitised’ or cultural dimensions ignored. Zieghan and Martsulf (quoted in Goodear 2001) go further by saying that “hybrid learning models, devoid of cultural affiliations ignore the fact that learning is essential a social process that occurs in a cultural context” (p. 5).

Pedagogy and culture

Constructivist approaches and communication options afforded by technologies expand opportunities for cultural inclusion into teaching methods. Online learning favours constructivism and socio-cultural theory wherein it is viewed that “learning is a form of enculturation in which the individual is socialised through gradual participation in tasks, scaffolded or assisted...until full competence is attained”, and, that “learning is best achieved when it is encountered, used and applied in real world contexts” (McLoughlin & Oliver 1999). In the online classroom students are given equal voice, can engage in rich discussions, and can draw from a vast array of learning materials and life examples from the web. Students can participate in both group and individual tasks that draw upon different cultural views and perspectives, especially if guided by the teacher or learning facilitator and teaching strategies are designed appropriately. Research has shown that computer-based collaborative work can transform classroom cultures, the roles of teachers and the expectations of learners (Damarin 1998; DeVogd 1998; quoted in McLoughlin & Oliver).

Henderson (quoted in McLoughlin & Oliver) identified several instructional design paradigms that reflect particular ‘world views’ and values of designers:

Paradigm	Definition	Limitations
Inclusive or perspectives approach – which imports the social, cultural and historical perspectives of minority groups, but does not challenge the dominant culture and is therefore cosmetic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> acknowledges multicultural realities, driven by equity and social justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> soft multiculturalism inclusion of the exotic tokenism
Inverted curriculum approach – which attempts to design and instructional component from the minority perspective but fails to provide the learners with educationally valid experiences as it does not admit them into the mainstream culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> conceptualises society as unequal minority perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> avoids cognitive needs (i.e. the process of acquiring knowledge by reasoning) does not support equity in learning outcomes
Culturally unidimensional approach – which excludes or denies cultural diversity and assumes that educational experiences are the same for minority students as they are for others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cultural minorities are invisible culture is presented as homogenous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dominant cultures only are acknowledged culture is represented as peripheral

Henderson also proposed another view – a *multiple cultural* model of instructional design. A multiple cultural view is characterised by a view which endorses the multiple cultural realities or zones of development explored by Vygotsky. McLoughlin and Oliver claim this essentially to be an ‘eclectic paradigm’ which entails designing learning resources that allow variability and flexibility while enabling students to learn through interaction with materials that:

It requires a global or international perspective, and sensitivity to cultural differences and the numerous ways in which culture influences learning.

English is the dominant language

While online content is produced in languages other than English, the dominant language for learning texts and courses is English. English language proficiency is becoming increasingly important. Without entering into the debate of the negatives or merits of this it is a fact that to assist students studying online due regard needs to be given to special assistance or considerations for students whose prime language is not English.

Another side of this, beyond the scope of this paper, is the homogenisation effect of dominant languages, which some view as a form of cultural imperialism (see A&E R019RL, p. 5).

Cultural authenticity

Online technologies are being seen as a way of assisting in the preservation of cultural knowledge. Cultural authenticity adds value to cultural products. Opportunity exists for the world’s cultures to teach about themselves, in their own way.

Designing online courses and learning materials

McLoughlin and Oliver suggest that in adopting the *multiple cultural model* the design team need to investigate:

- What kind of learning environment is most familiar to the students?
- How does the cultural background of these students influence their use and view of time?
- How do students conceive the role of the teacher?
- What kind of relationship do students want with a teacher?
- What kinds of assessment tasks will be fair and unbiased?
- What rewards and forms of feedback will be most motivating for these students?
- Is the locus of control congruent with these students' own sense of personal control?
- What cognitive styles characterise the target group?

The Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE 2001) in Victoria have published a paper called *Social impact of online learning: for Discussion* which sets out strategies for considering the social implications of online learning participation and design. Not specifically aimed at any one group it promotes inclusive approaches and consideration of the needs now of students operating in a global world.

The pragmatics

It is not possible, nor is it necessarily desirable to address every idiosyncrasy, or every identifiable cultural trait. 'The key to designing courseware for cultural preferences...is to find just those elements that make or break the learning experience'. It is not just about changing 'place names' - it is getting to the heart of how people operate, make meaning of things, and how they learn. (Marinetti and Dunn, n.d.)

Marinetti and Dunn, drawing extensively on the work of Trompenaar and Hofstede, provide a way of identifying 'the least' you have to do, by using established theories relating to cultural difference, then show how these different orientations and values can be used to design courses that are appropriate to different cultures. Their table is a useful tool to identify different learning preferences:

Universalism - v - Particularism	
Universalist cultures tend to adhere to societal rules and not to make exceptions for particular circumstances.	Particularists adopt a relative perspective, pay more attention to unique circumstances and their obligations to personal relationships.
Individualism - v - Communitarianism	
Individualists regard themselves primarily as individuals, ideally achieve alone and value personal responsibility.	Communitarianists regard themselves as primarily part of a community, value group achievements and tend to assume joint responsibility.
Neutral - v - Affective	
For neutral cultures the nature of interactions should be objective and detached. Feelings should not be openly revealed, and self-possessed conduct is admired.	For affective cultures it is acceptable to openly express thoughts and emotions verbally and non-verbally.
Specific - v - Diffuse	
Specific cultures tend to separate personal from professional life and people are more direct, purposeful and transparent when relating to others.	For diffuse cultures, personal contact pervades every human transaction and relations with others tend to be indirect.
Achievement - v - Ascription	
Achievement-oriented cultures judge people according to what they have accomplished. They make limited use of titles and respect to superiors in hierarchy is accorded depending on their knowledge and performance.	Ascription-oriented cultures attribute status depending on birth, kinship, gender, and age but also connections and educational record. They make extensive use of titles.
High Uncertainty Avoidance - v - Low Uncertainty Avoidance	
Cultures with a high uncertainty avoidance score try to avoid ambiguity. Teachers are expected to have all the answers and students are comfortable in structured learning situations.	In cultures with a low uncertainty avoidance score students are comfortable with unstructured learning situations, open-ended questions and discussions.

Indigenous students might for example be high on 'communitarianism', similar to student from Italian cultures, and would benefit from group work and group discussions online, whereas students from countries that promote individualism like the USA might be low on this score and be better placed to cope with autonomous work and adapt to the isolation of learning online more readily. Research, such as that carried out by the Access and Equity Project will assist practitioners understand the various profiles and preferences of different cultural groups. Guidelines prepared by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEA) for evaluating web content acceptable to Indigenous cultures, and many of the other references cited in this Quick Guide also contain useful information.

Addressing the identified needs and preferences might be through student orientations strategies, assessment approaches, particular teaching strategies, facilitation processes, or by addressing head-on the differences in values within class discussions. The first step is identifying that differences exist.

One of the best ways, however, of finding out about the different cultures within any group taught is to do one's own research – finding out about the different cultural mixes from preliminary investigations, and engaging in meaningful and purposeful discussions with students individually and collectively as a group.

Objects and culture

As elearning becomes more object-based (i.e. learning material is divided into adaptable and reusable 'chunks') cultural adaptation is becoming more feasible. There is a way to go yet, however, with the metadata standards and formats that identify pedagogical purpose and cultural differences (Marinetti & Dunn n.d.).

Copyright

When seeking copyright clearance to use materials owned by others one needs to specify in what contexts the materials are to be used. If adaptation is required, or the material is to be used in a context different to that nominated then further clearance is necessary. For example if the material is first developed for use in Australia but the course or resource containing that material is then delivered off-shore then new permissions are required. Careful tracking is required of copyright permissions and the contexts to which they apply.

What do we know about the different cultural groups participating in VET?

There have been a number of research studies within VET and higher education that have specifically sought to identify the needs of particular cohorts. Examples are:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

- The Australian Flexible Learning Framework Access & Equity Strategy 2000 Project researched requirements of, and issues associated with, participation in online delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners. This work was extended in the Strategy 2001 Access and Equity Project. Two reports in particular are relevant.
- [A&E R011RSa] *Access and Equity in Online Learning: Summary: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners (R011RSa)*.
<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/accessequity/downloads/R011RSa.pdf>
- [A&E R019RL] *Access and Equity in Online Learning: Literature Review: Digital Divide (R019RL)*
<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/accessequity/downloads/R019RL.pdf>

For information about the Access and Equity project visit the project website at:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/accessandequityonline.htm>

- Edith Cowan University obtained funding to develop an online pre-university bridging course for Indigenous learners through increased proficiency and awareness of computer technology, and as part of that project investigated the needs of Indigenous learners. McLoughlin and Oliver report on this study in their paper *Instructional Design for Cultural Difference: A Case Study of the Indigenous Online Learning in a Tertiary Context*, and provide a useful table of key elements to consider when design culturally responsive web resources. See references for details.
- The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), as part of the Murra Project sponsored under an EdNA initiative, has prepared a set of guidelines for the evaluation of Indigenous content on the web. Published in June 2000 it sets out strategies for practitioners looking for appropriate Indigenous content, runs through five main questions to ask in evaluating the credibility and validity of Indigenous websites and suggest other (non-web) resources that can inform Indigenous needs.
<http://www.vaeai.org.au/edna/guidelines.htm>

International students

- The Monash Centre for Research in International Education, under the leadership of Dr Christopher Ziguas, conducted preliminary research to assist in the planning of future research projects on specific issues identified to inform the development of more culturally reflexive use of educational technologies in international contexts, and in particular South East Asia. See Ziguas and MCRIE references below.

Students from Non-English-Speaking (NESB) backgrounds participating in VET

- Volkoff, V & Barry, G 1998, *Vocational Education and Training for People from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds: Review of research*. National Centre for Vocational Research (NCVER), ISBN 0 87397 516 2.

Provides a summary of the major research conducted into the issue of the participation in VET programs by those with a non-English-speaking background. NESB students include Indigenous populations as well as students from other countries. It covers who NESB students are, the policy agenda, their participation in programs, the outcomes achieved and factors influencing both participation and outcomes. Printed copy can be ordered online at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>

Tools and Guidelines to assist in the preparation of culturally acceptable material/courses

- Lyn Goodear's report of her Flexible Learning Leaders study of *Cultural Diversity and Flexible Learning*, contains a Framework which lists in point form issues to consider in developing culturally sensitive Flexible Learning Models. The questions provide a useful checklist for course designers and developers. See appendix B in Goodear (2001).
- As mentioned above, The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) as part of the Murra Project has prepared a set of guidelines for the evaluation of Indigenous Content on the web.
- ANTA has produced a Support Materials Guide that ensures content is accessible and appropriately designed. Replacing the previous Print Guidelines, the Support Materials Guide contains sections on preparation of web resources and other learning formats, and among other things it provides guidelines on language and style that is culturally appropriate. It contains a series of checklists for use by designers, desktop publishers, writers and project managers. <http://www.anta.gov.au/publication.asp?qsID=29>

On participation in international online education markets

Cultural considerations are particularly important when designing and implementing online courses, or course material, for international markets. The Quick Guide *Globalisation/Internationalisation of Online Content and Teaching* discusses this and provides references to research that identifies learner and market needs in specific cultural contexts. See in particular, Goodear 2001; Mitchell 2000a; 2000b; and Smith & Smith 1999.

Student support for online study within VET

- The Australian Flexible Learning Framework Strategy 2000 Student Services project identified the need for adequate and appropriate support to ensure successful online learning experiences and outcomes for all students. The report does not single out the specific requirements of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds but talks about the need to identify and meet the needs of students in a variety of contexts.

Disclosing information to prospective and enrolling students from international markets “adds an additional informational need, dealing with the cultural differences in educational approaches between the host and parent countries” (Lapham 2000, quoting Hampton 1997). The report claimed there appeared to be more activity on the marketing of courses, but not much on disclosure. There is a great need for strategies to assist prospective students to make informed decisions about their studies. See project website:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/onlinestudentservices.htm>

- The Access and Equity Project reports on support needs for students from different cultures and ability groups. The various reports refer to essential support for all students, and the need to cater for particular support needs also. Providing appropriate support pitched at levels of understanding, accounting for linguistic ability, and provision through multiple channels, were the main messages. See references.

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For a list of other Quick Guides see:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/sharingknowledge.htm#guides>

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