

# Foreword

All those who are involved in creating e-learning materials for international audiences should read this book. It is an honest attempt to come to grips with the multitude of challenges that this field provides, and a treasure trove of clever ideas.

E-learning can be a matter of instruction to individuals. Ten years ago, when I created e-learning applications to teach novices from around the world to work with office software, the students from hierarchical societies especially loved the patience of the software: They could run any movie as often as they would, and it did not become angry or impatient. Those with poor English liked the written transcripts. Those with previous computer experience simply skipped the sections with which they were familiar.

Culture certainly had an influence, but by and large this was only through the practices with which the students were or were not familiar. To some, operating a keyboard was the first adventure. To many, I suppose, the example of a pizza restaurant in the Excel course was novel. I was not aware of any major problems or misunderstandings, though.

The notion that every individual is unique and might therefore require a unique interface to his or her learning materials has become popular in individualistic societies. A lot of literature has appeared on learning styles. More recently, since the advent of the Web, cultural differences have also become salient to designers of educational materials. But how large a role should they play? It turns out that many tasks have an ideal interface, regardless of whom you ask to perform these tasks. For showing the molecular structure of a protein, a 3-D picture surpasses a text; but for carrying out a chemical experiment, a procedural text surpasses a picture. For other tasks it is not so clear-cut, and learning styles enter the picture. To complicate life for the designer, conventions in maps and pictures, and above all use of language, may differ across cultures. So this area of e-learning design poses manifold challenges. Many of them are addressed in this text.

E-learning can also be teamwork. Five years ago, I was involved in e-learning team projects across Europe and Asia. This involved virtual classroom sessions between Hong Kong, French, and Dutch students who had never met face to face. Did cross-cultural problems occur? Some said no, culture was not an issue at all. Other teams claimed that they could not work with the foreigners, and that the team failed due to cross-cultural problems. My analyses of virtual classroom sessions during project definition showed that both personality and culture were important. The French typically wanted to detail the topic further to start with, the Hong Kong males wanted to get down to work, Hong Kong females tended to be concerned with a good atmosphere and to use emoticons a lot, while the Dutch were concerned with the quality of communication, and some of them tried to be funny. In some teams, depending on, among others, mutually-accepted leadership, this mix led to disaster, while in others the team members had a splendid time. The unhappy teams came up with typical complaints: For instance, Hong Kong participants said the Dutch did not stick to the rules and were blunt. In short, if teamwork is involved, cultural differences between team members can lead to violent crises. But other factors might also carry some of the blame, most notably personalities, team composition, and supervision.

So how important to e-learning is culture? Very. But in most cases, you do not wish the participants to notice. They want to do a course with as little hassle as possible. That is a course designer's predicament. This book provides some clues. In my opinion, when group work is involved, a course designer or course leader cannot always avoid conflicts such as the ones mentioned just now. A good debriefing is crucial, so that the participants learn from the episode rather than just building prejudice. A general awareness of the importance of cross-cultural skills would, in fact, be a desirable pre-condition for participating in such a course.<sup>1</sup>

Cross-cultural challenges are part of today's life. An e-learning course never stands alone. To a learner from a different cultural background than the instructor's, an e-learning course also acts as a window on another culture. The material may contain many clues about the social assumptions of the society in which it was created. Along with the material, the student may be faced with additional practices such as how to subscribe, and how to be supervised and graded. All these elements of learning can be quite valuable for the learner, even though they are not in the terms of reference. What is more, they cannot be customized away. And I would put it even more strongly: They *should* not necessarily be customized away. People in general, and learners in particular, are very good at making their own translation from what an e-learning tool offers into what they need from it.

E-learning is also a branch of applied information systems design. If you are in the process of inventing something and you wish to know whether it is any good for the audience, the proper thing to do is to go find representatives of your audience and have them try out your concepts.

This book testifies to the creativity of instructors. A multitude of thoughts and practical suggestions are assembled in this book. As the field matures, some ideas will be more widely-adopted than others. One size will never fit all, though. The e-learning field will reflect the width of subjects and educational methods that it embraces, as well as the creativity of instructors worldwide. May this book be a source of inspiration!

## Endnote

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- <sup>1</sup> Consider Gert Jan Hofstede, Paul Pedersen, and Geert Hofstede (2002) *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories, and Synthetic Cultures*, Intercultural Press, a book for both instructors and students, to get hands-on experience with cross-cultural situations.

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