

CULTURE AND DISTANCE LEARNING

By Michael D. Lee, MBA

According to a study by Forrester Research (www.forrester.com), 70 percent of students who start an online course never finish it. This is a horrible completion rate by anyone's standards. While many possible explanations have been offered for this failure one of the most obvious seems to be missing. Perhaps some people may just not be suited to the format of distance learning.

Certain cultural groups may be particularly disadvantaged in the world of distance education which is primarily text-based. Groups such as Hispanics, African Americans and to a lesser degree, Asians, are generally much less comfortable in this world than European Americans.

Experienced course developers are very aware of the fact that there are different learning styles among the people we train. This is a particular challenge when designing distance education programs because the primary mode of delivery is written text.

First, let's examine the four basic learning styles. Studies show that some 20% of learners are visual/verbal learners who learn best when information is presented in a written language format such as that which is found on the Internet or in books. The good news is that European American students have a heavy emphasis on learning by reading early in their educational process. The bad news is that if you only use textual information you are leaving out 80% of the audience who prefers to obtain their information in a different format.

Another 20% of learners are visual/nonverbal learners who learn best when information is presented in a graphical format such as charts, graphs and on television. Asians, in particular, like pictorial information because their language is based on pictures. Unfortunately, graphical information makes up a very small part of distance education content.

If you add these visual media to reinforce the points you make with text you are now reaching 40% of learners. Unfortunately, this is still not how the majority of learners want to receive information.

Research shows that 30% of all audiences favor the auditory learning style. If you add audio clips, music and other auditory media to the previous training program you are now capturing 70% of the audience. Again, there is precious little information in the auditory format in distance education programs.

But what about the 30% of people prefer learning kinesthetically where hands-on experience helps make the learning stick. These are the most challenging students to reach both via distance education and in live classroom situations. In class, they are

constantly squirming restlessly in their seats and seem to have difficulty concentrating in lecture classes. Online, they are often in physical motion while reading textual or graphical information to help them concentrate.

So what does culture have to do with learning style? Over one-third of the average audience is composed of people from diverse cultures. Obviously, in some situations this figure could be much higher. Studies show that Hispanics tend to be highly kinesthetic. “They tend to prefer hands-on learning such as structured group exercises and the use of drawings as opposed to listening or reading”.¹ As mentioned earlier, Asians tend to be much more comfortable with pictures than other formats. They tend not to perform well when the primary mode of instruction is verbal such as in live classrooms². Anyone who has spoken in Asia knows that speakers have to change to a much more visual mode of presentation when presenting in this part of the world.

The harsh reality for course developers is that if we do not design programs using a “multi-modal” technique it becomes very difficult to connect with one or more of the learning style groups. The challenge in a diverse society is to provide information in a way that reaches all types of learners. This is especially challenging when designing distance education programs.

One of ways to reach more than one of the senses is not only to use text but also add visual verbal technique such as PowerPoint, making an effort to incorporate charts and graphs when appropriate for the visual nonverbal learners and add activities and games for the kinesthetic. While a challenge to develop, you can imagine that this can make for a much more interesting and engaging program for the audience.

Other ways to make your distance education programs more multimodal would include: online group discussions, audio and video clips, pictures, role plays, small group work, etc. The challenge is to smoothly integrate these media and activities into your training. One you do, I think you’ll find that they will add to the impact of your programs and make them more fun for all your students.

If you would like to know what learning style you tend to prefer you can go to:

Could learning style differences and culture be part of the reason for the dismally low completion rate for distance education courses? Is it just a coincidence that only about 35% of online learning consists of text or graphical content and about that percent of the population prefers to learn in those modes? This could certainly be one of many reasons that the overwhelming major of students who start an online class actually complete it.

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