Global Partnerships for Distance Learning: Challenges and Solutions

Amy Geffen, PhD
Director Volunteer Leadership Development
ASME

Introduction

Three key challenges that face any institution working with other cultures for distance learning are: Cultural Differences, Marketing Challenges and Technology Issues. Identifying these issues was critical to the solution of the challenges ASME faced in designing and delivering distance learning internationally.

Six Cultural Differences

There are six key cultural differences identified by Hofstedter and others who define cultures.

Cultures are defined by how individuals within that culture communicate with each other, their families, their business associates and with “outsiders” or others who are not part of their culture. Some cultures are more formal in their oral and written communication, and others are informal. Some cultures use small talk about weather, cultural attractions and family, but shun taboo topics such as religion, politics and ancestor origin. Other cultures are more open and welcome talk about all kinds of sensitive, private, or controversial issues.

1. Power Distance (Hierarchy): Power distance refers to "the degree of inequality which people of a country view acceptable." If a country is high, it doesn't really see a problem with great differences in such things as the income level of people or in the distribution of power. Examples include Arab countries, Mexico, and West Africa. Low power distance countries don't find wide gaps in these areas acceptable and tend to think that people should have equal rights. Such countries include the United States, Germany, and Great Britain.

2. Uncertainty Avoidance: Uncertainty avoidance is "the extent to which people in a given culture prefer structured situations with clear rules over unstructured ones." Once again, cultures can rank as either being high or low in this dimension. If a country scores as low, you'll probably find people who are easy going, not extremely rigid, and are willing to take risks. This is common in North America and northern Europe. The opposite is true in places with high uncertainty avoidance such as Asia.

3. Individualism vs. Collectivism: As you might imagine, cultures that score high on the individualism dimension are considered to be "me" societies. They focus on the interest of the individual. This is true of North America and northern Europe. On the other side of the spectrum, you find the "we" cultures in which the interest of the group is of utmost importance. These people feel more comfortable with and want to be connected to others such as in the Middle East and Asia.

4. Thinking (Cognitive) Styles: Open minded people seek our more information before making a decision. The closed-minded person has tunnel vision or only sees a narrow range of data and ignores the rest. As an example, most theocratic (governed by religious leaders) cultures tend to be closed-minded. That would include Islamic countries in the Middle East. Some cultures value abstract thinking whereas others encourage associative patterns. An education system that teaches by rote tends to produce associative thinkers. A system that teaches problem-solving develops abstract thinking. The scientific method is a product of abstractive thinking. A
5. **Masculinity vs. Femininity** refers to the roles assigned to men and women by various cultures. Values range from assertive and competitive on one end to modest and caring on the other end. The assertive end has been called “masculine” and the modest one “feminine”. In feminine countries men and women share the same values of modesty. In masculine countries women are somewhat assertive and competitive but not as much as the men.

6. **Time Long-term vs. Short:** This is a dimension that Hofstede uncovered while doing some additional research in Asia. It refers to whether a country's focus is on the long-term or short-term. The United States, for example, scores low in this dimension. These countries pay more attention to values that represent the past and present. Japan and China, on the other hand, score highly. Their values revolve around building long term relationships and the future, which impacts how you establish and develop relationships with your partners.

**Impact on Your Negotiation Strategies**

Different cultures arrive at truth in different ways. These can be summarized as faith, facts, and feelings. People who act on faith may believe in self-sufficiency so that may reject a deal that is advantageous simply because they want their own people to do it. Presenting facts to such a person is a waste of time. People who believe in facts want to see evidence to support your position. They can be the most predictable to work with. If you offer the low bid, you get the job. People who believe in feelings, the most common throughout the world, go with their gut instincts. They need to like you to do business with you. It can take a long time to build up a relationship with them. However, once you have built that relationship they will remain loyal and not jump to the first company that undercuts your offer.

So working with China, India and the Middle East, for example, understand that they are high context, hierarchically driven, look at the long term, and see relationships as more important than achieving goals. Asians tend to avoid uncertainty, defer to authority, and employ an indirect style of communication. They will never say “no”. They might say let’s think about that or we may have a problem or remain silent. Working with Latin America is much the same, as is India. These cultures are very different from North America. Americans are individualistic, time sensitive and content driven.

**Four Key Marketing Challenges**

There are four key marketing challenges. Who is your customer? Who is your competition? What do you do best? Who can do the marketing and promotion for you? This last one poses the greatest challenge. In China, for example, we often found that the universities do not have marketing departments. They do not need to market because they have more than enough students. You may have to do all the work yourselves and ship material or get an outside company to help your partner. Pushing out to people is just as important as pulling in via your website. However, not everyone has email; therefore, you may have to resort to old fashioned print, ads in local newspapers, or internal communication organs from your partner. In Latin America you can use a private company that does marketing to work with your partner. In India it is preferable to use a local company and even purchase email addresses from an Indian company which is cheaper and far more accurate than purchasing email lists in the United States. We found it useful to have links on our website to our partners including all contact information. We promote their offerings through our online newsletter and email blasts.
Three ABCs of Technological Issues

The first thing to find out about your customer is do they really want an online experience? Or, are they just wowed by the idea of online learning and really prefer the face-to-face experience in a classroom.

Keep in mind these three ABC’s of technology:

1. **Accessibility** – Does the customer have accessibility? We assume that most people have access to computers, whether at work or at home. This is not necessarily so in all countries, particularly in developing nations. What kind of company does the customer work for? We have found difficulties in overcoming firewall issues for customers in defense contractor companies, such as Pratt Whitney, Boeing and Lockheed Martin. That requires the company to accept the IP address of your online course.

2. **Bandwidth** – If your customer has access is their bandwidth 54k or high speed? That will determine how many bells and whistles you create for your online experience. Do you use flat files, flash or multiple audio and video files? If your customers have low bandwidth, then your online course should consist mainly of text files. Avoid audio and video files that take up too much bandwidth.

3. **Commitment** – How committed is your partner to launching online learning? How committed are the individual learners to using this delivery system? What time do they have after work or during the day to devote to online learning? They need to understand there is a commitment of time as much or more than a live event.

**Communication Issues**

Communicating across borders and cultures can also present major challenges when working on international project teams, such as product design teams, test teams, problem-solving teams, etc. and when working as an expatriate on an international assignment. Working on a virtual team made up of people who are not co-located, that is, a team where all the work is done primarily through electronic media and has members located in many countries poses additional challenges. It is important to have weekly telephone conference calls and visit at least once or twice during the year.

**Translation Issues**

There several solutions to the translation issue. If you choose to use US-based translators, make sure the translator is perfectly bilingual and is a professional. Trying to save money or cut corners by employing staff or faculty who are bilingual may not be the best solution.

The advantages of using an automatic translator for web pages are it is easy, fast, and less expensive. The disadvantage is automatic translation is not as successful. Translating from English with idiomatic expressions is useless. It only translates word for word with literal meanings. We encountered problems with translation and got complaints from our members about our website. So, we decided to hire an outside company to translate the top 100 pages and then leave the rest in English.

If you choose a native speaker from the US the result is better but more costly – are they up on the latest slang? A native speaker who is a professional translator in another country is generally less expensive, but do you feel comfortable working via distance only?
Selecting Your Partners

How to choose a partner based on strategic objectives and practical considerations? In China the key is to leverage contacts, work with universities, and professional societies. Start with active volunteers, or board members; provide criteria, write an RFP, select responses, choose your developers/trainers. Then you must evaluate the programs and get rid of the “dogs” or poor performers.

Case Study: China

Our problem in China was to find partners that would embrace the concept of the Engineering Management Certification International (EMCI) and promote it to their constituency. We overcame the hurdle of acceptance – they liked the idea and the content. We first tried working with Beijing Modern Management Technology Center BMMTEC but they did not meet our expectations for marketing and promotion. Subsequently we found eager partners in universities and one training organization Guangzhou Modern Management Technology Exchange Center GMMTEC that already worked with PMI (Project Management Institute) and HK Unitech in Beijing.

The other hurdle was the use of distance learning. The Chinese are still very much tied to the live face-to-face lecture, no matter how many people are in the room, they still prefer it over online learning. We found the Chinese are not particularly interested in learning online but they were open to getting material to read online pre and post event in English.

Solution: Blended learning approach. We came up with a solution that combined the reading of material online in English with a two day live program with a Chinese lecturer to review the material and answer questions. Our partners selected the lecturer based on our criteria including subject matter expertise and ability to communicate. We required the lecturers to audit one iteration of the live course.

The key is to develop a relationship over a long time several years. We started with emails to top tier and second tier universities and institutions. We also worked with the Chinese Mechanical Engineering Society. Then we followed with more emails, telephone calls and schedule face to face visits. You will need to visit at least twice a year – so build that into your budget. We did not translate materials into Chinese. We kept course material in English and use live instructors to offer a two day program in Chinese.

Case Study: Latin America

Problem: How to translate our engineering courses into an online format in Spanish and find a company to market and promote them throughout Latin America. Although Latin America is a smaller market, it was a practical choice because of the number of volunteers and engineers who speak Spanish.

Solution: One of the challenges was to translate the material into Spanish, knowing that Spanish terminology varies among the nations in Latin America. We hired several different native engineers, each a subject matter expert, for our content. In addition, we had one engineer develop a 700 word glossary that covered the use of technical engineering terminology across all Spanish speaking countries in South America. Paying for the development allowed ASME to own the intellectual property of the courses and the glossary. We contracted with local engineers to develop the courses in Spanish and paid them so ASME could retain the intellectual property.

The second part of the challenge was to find a way to market and promote the courses. Once again, we found the universities ill-equipped to promote to our corporate market. We identified an individual private training company EngineZone through our volunteer contacts. That company organized,
scheduled, negotiated for space, wrote and distributed the promotional material. We negotiated a royalty arrangement. The partner charges according to the market value and pays AMSE a percentage royalty for each registrant. Revenue is generated by a percentage of revenue from registration for the courses.

**Case Study: Middle East**

Problem: Build partnerships in the Middle East to offer Engineering Management Certification International (EMCI) courses and testing live and online. Language was not a barrier because we would use our English language courses. The key issue was finding a suitable partner who would meet our strategic objectives and who would recognize the value of the certification program and be able to market it.

Solution: We built upon our existing relationship with the American University of Cairo and created a new relationship with the Kuwait University. ASME licenses the material to them to teach non-credit courses towards a certification. Revenue is generated through the annual license and the test application fee. This success required working on the relationship over a period of time, attending a Middle East conference, visiting several universities, following up through email and telephone, and then going on a second visit. Before the first trip to the conference we called several universities to set up appointments. While at the conference we made sure to speak with key people and solidify our relationships. After the visits, we followed up with emails and made plans for a second visit with more appointments.

**Case Study: India**

Problem: Develop a live conference via distance with a virtual team in several locations. In India there are issues of time – long term view and actual time differences as well as building trust so it is helpful to work with a known entity, leverage contacts – use an American company with ties to India or a trusted Indian company.

Solution: We leveraged our volunteer contacts in the United States that had contacts in India. Each of our volunteers had to communicate with their contacts and keep talking with them to identify speakers. We had many last minute replacements and cancellations. We used an outside AV firm in New Delhi to help with registration, AV and other logistics. We used an Indian firm to rent email lists, which was more extensive and less expensive.

**Conclusion**

The most important things to remember about working with other cultures are the following: Be ready to build long term relationships. Consider licensing agreements and initiate royalty arrangements. Create a win-win situation by working with trusted partners and giving them an opportunity to earn revenue. Look for ways to meet the needs of the customers through blended or hybrid learning solutions. Use local services and resources and don’t be afraid to call on the telephone.

**References**


Author Summary

Amy Geffen, Director of Volunteer Leadership, former Director of Strategic Initiatives for ASME, has over twenty years experience developing, delivering, and promoting distance learning. She has built partnerships with universities, non-profits and for-profits in Latin America, China, India and the Middle East. Prior to joining ASME she was Director of Professional Development for the RIMS where she launched e-learning. She was Assistant Dean of Continuing Education for Westchester Community College where she started their first online learning courses. She has a bachelor’s degree from Brooklyn College, a master’s degree from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from New York University.

Address: ASME, Three Park Avenue 22 W-2
          New York, NY 10016
E-mail:  geffena@asme.org
UR:      L www.asme.org
Phone:   212-591-7375