**Iris Daniels**

*Cross-Cultural Challenges in Designing Instruction*

Iris Daniels, Instructional Designer, is in the *Design* phase of the ADDIE cycle. Her boss, Jim, has suggested that Iris design a prototype of interactive online training for her client’s manufacturing software. While Iris may be an expert at instructional design, she has little experience working with stakeholders from differing cultures. Iris might have researched the software audience in the *Analyze* phase*;* yet she also needed to research the cross-cultural corporate behaviors of those stakeholders with whom she would interact. Iris would need to convince them of her evolved task-oriented design; in this case, convince 7 members of the User-Consortium and the lead developer, Jacqueline Colbert. Iris and her Director, Jim Huggins, also made assumptions that their advanced interactivity approach was accepted and practiced worldwide. As German engineer, Dieter Hoffman pointed out; this was not the case. It would be up to Iris to find a way to advocate for these US methods of instructional design, while breaking down the communication barriers between cultures. To complete the prototype design, it would be necessary for Iris to reach a consensus.

**STAKEHOLDERS**

**Iris Daniels:** *Designer*, ID Team Leader. Must create a web based training (WBT) prototype. Concerned that the web-based software has functions to enable both instructional and technical approaches. Should be concerned with working cross-corporate-culturally with an international team, but she was not.

**7 Member User-Consortium:** *Client’s Audience; SMEs.* Software users. Concerned that the WBT software appeals to a universal audience, is interactive, and engaging.

**Jim Huggins:** *Director, Boss*. Concerned that the WBT software communicates design, sound instructional approach, and implementation feasibility, to an international audience. Also concerned that Iris is not prepared to deal with the cultural diversity she will be encountering.

**Kimberly Mooney:** *Project Leader for training*, Hill Industries: Client. Concerned that its customer base is well trained on use of manufacturing management software.

**Hill Industries’ Customers and Suppliers:** *Audience*. Users concerned that they will be fully trained on the software’s functions.

**Lapin:** *SMEs.* Concerned that the WBT did not work cross culturally for all international members of Consortium. Concerned with the technical constraints.

**Jacqueline Colbert:** *SME*. Lead training *developer* from Lapin. Concerned that the US contingent does not have a pulse on what learners across the globe truly want or expect.

During the first group meeting, Iris was overcome by the cultural differences in communication, most significantly with the SME, Jacqueline Colbert. The cross-cultural attendees were unable to agree on which design approach would work better: a) the step-by-step, text-based, minimalistic approach six members of the consortium were comfortable with; or b) the more engaging, task-oriented, interactive approach of the US. They were, however, able to agree on technical standards (HTML5, major browsers, Windows and Mac platforms, smart phones and tablets). Perhaps they came to an easy agreement on technical standards due to the fact that Lapin already believed there were technical constraints. The consortium members were correct to believe that these constraints would work themselves out over time with the innovation of development tools. Still, Lapin and the US design team were far apart with the design of the WBT software, adjourning for three months, adding more time to complete.

During the group meeting, Iris was unable to move forward with any discussion about design, even though what she was describing was based on standard US instructional design theory (tell-show-do, scaffolding, relevance, chunking). She had never conceived that the world at large was not well versed in these practices. There were also communication mannerisms to consider, and how outsiders might view constituents from the US. Things did not go well.

To the contrary, outside of the meeting, Iris *was* able to connect with Jacqueline on many of her ideas (which are actually not her ideas, but those formulated within instructional design theory at US programs (like Purdue!), by showing Jacqueline working *examples*. The fact that Jacqueline at the next general meeting reported the ideas as her own could be a cultural aspect of the French; either way, Jacqueline was becoming more on board with Iris’ different design plan.

Jim is pleased with the progress Iris is making, and calls attention to the difference in ways French people do business; the ideas are brainstormed in one-on-one meetings, whereas the larger meetings are used to ratify those ideas. He also suggests that Iris *work up a single module of the prototype* to demonstrate their interactive approach, and also incorporate the French “logic” and “show me” approach for compromise. After their meeting with Kimberly Mooney at Hill Industries, Jim directs Iris to get started on working up the prototype module.

**RELEVANT READINGS**

Ford (2016) states that, “One reason that teams fail to meet performance expectations is their paralysis through unresolved conflict”…through these cultural “values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, behaviors, and social structures that define reality and guide everyday interactions” (p. 1). Not only do we have cultures within cultures, but micro cultures within corporate cultures. As Ford points out, there is the surface culture, and then there is the hidden deep (p. 4).

While deciphering attributes of Indian culture might be like trying to find a needle in a haystack, there are some generalizations that might apply. Ford (2016) believes that certain personality attributes such as directness, decisiveness (“Cut to the chase or beat around the bush” (p. 3) eye contact, or as in this case, knowing when and how to conduct a meeting, are all cultural traits that can be uncovered through research. It states in this case that Iris has a team. Perhaps she should have one of these members conduct a cultural research to prepare her.

Munter (2003) pointed to specific cultural differences. One great example was the Muslim culture, which does not believe in the “internal control” (p. 69) of one’s own destiny; rather, they leave the deadlines up to Allah. As France has a large Muslim population, this could be a consideration Iris might have to encompass. Research to decipher if there was a large Muslim contingent at Lapin could prepare Iris for explaining missed deadlines.

Munter (2003) also highlights the difference between Hofstede’s “power distance” of the two countries: the US has a participative, low power distance, whereas France has “little concern with participative management American-style, but great concern with who has the power” (p. 71). This explains Jacqueline’s usurpation of Iris’ ideas. Had Iris understood this as a cultural norm, she would have just shrugged, and been glad that her ideas had been adapted. Even understanding the “rank and file” system that exists in countries like France, where rank depends heavily on *grand ecole* education, would have been helpful.

There are four implementation strategies, presented in the article prescribed by Walkgrove, illustrating the key points any instruction designed for international use must accommodate to reach the greatest number of users possible:

**Blended, with regional classroom based training to address differences:** The upside is that trainers can give appropriate, specific cultural context to the training, while the downside is consistency and cost.

**One size fits all:** This is the very definition of asynchronous training, and if great attention is paid to avoid cultural references or offences, can be the best solution. But to address every culture is pie in the sky thinking. Therefore, you would have to design for the dominant culture, which is a drawback for the minority cultures.

**Localization:**  Targeting and tailoring scalable online training specifically for each and every culture. While this can be costly, it does not expose learners to other cultures. The latter seems insignificant, the former, significant.

**Cultural integration**: One size fits all with the maximum inclusion of cultures. Can be confusing to all.

**RELEVANT EXPERIENCE**

Similar to Iris, after creating a Rap video while employed by Brocade Communications, I learned that the engineering culture from India did not understand the brashness of the rap culture. In this case, the controversy played in my favor, as the video received more hits than all others produced at the company combined. However, the deafening silence after the video played at the All Hands meeting was evidence that the benefits may not have been worth the price of cultural indifference. At Amazon, I also dealt with engineers from both China and India, which required certain mannerisms when requesting expediency for problem solving. Respect and patience were both virtues.

Amazon, a Logistics organization, uses the Blended approach (blended as well with Localization) quite effectively to train Delivery Associates, with internationally based on-site trainers supported by multimedia and online modules. The training was cultural specific. Of course, this was costly, and most organizations would not have the international staff to enable the blended approach. For training independent Uber type delivery associates, this model would not work. The program became overwhelmed by popular demand. The one size fits all approach worked best in this case. Since the program was only trialed in the US, the cultural differences were insignificant, but this is not scalable.

**CHALLENGES**

The design challenge exists in creating a prototype design for instruction that will *universally* train software application users. Iris has been asked to achieve this universal design with acceptance from all 7 of the internationally diverse Consortium members, with Lapin on board as they were to re-develop the training software from Iris’ design. As Jim points out, simulating the complex systems within the manufacturing software would be a *big* *challenge*.

This being Iris’ first time dealing with international constituents, Iris is challenged with cross-cultural communication, and the most challenging cross-cultural communication in this case occurs with the SME, Jacqueline. She has not only failed to analyze her target audience (who knows, perhaps the audience prefers the pragmatic French design), but she has failed to research the cultural differences of the people she will be reliant upon to complete the re-design to her and her director’s specifications.

***Communication Solution*:** As Jim told Iris, she needs to “have more one-on-one discussions with Jacqueline… and meet individually as well with the other French people.” So we have established that people of the French culture like to make decisions privately face-to-face and merely ratify during larger public meetings. Jim also suggests some give and take, to utilize components of the previous French design.

**Pros** **Cons**

Keeps everyone at the table happy. Very difficult to make *everyone* happy.

Incorporates the best of both worlds. Essentially, we are talking about 7 worlds.

**Addressing Communication Cons:** It would be necessary to prioritize pleasing the most important person. Culturally, some stakeholders may just go with the flow, whereas Jacqueline appears to be the most difficult person to please. You would also have to give top priority to the person that employs you. However, your employer is not going to be happy if you constantly run up against cultural barriers delaying the project, thought the case never mentions a firm timeline.

***Design Solution***: After the meeting with Kimberly Mooney, Iris and Jim had a plan for their module that would incorporate the original French version at the beginning as a *Tell*, and then incorporate their *Show* and *Do* aspects. I would suggest that they also follow Gagne’s Nine Events of Instruction. But there’s more to it than implementing age–old theory with modern asynchronous design. They also need to address the cultural *content* differences. Certainly, the language would need to be simplified and the graphics made relevant. Thinking in terms of implementation, which *design* *solution* would work best?

For this case, I would eliminate the cost of classroom-based training and keep it asynchronous, yet use an even more innovative approach – the branching narrative. Some activities, such as the do activities, would not require the cultural branching, while others would; this really depends on the software they are being trained upon. I would also chunk and simplify the Tell section, and use screen capture with Camtasia with some After Effects motion graphics integrated within the video to explain the complexity. Otherwise, I like the scaffolded hands-on US approach described in this case, as it shows a progression of learner independence and experience; scaffolding.

**Pros Cons**

Establish the workings of the software into working Will take more time to design, develop.

memory, and in time, long-term memory. One more thing necessary to get people

Branching addresses cultural differences. on board

Rich multimedia, engaging learning *experience*. Need for skilled multimedia developers.

**Addressing Design Cons:** The time and cost it will take to develop, even if it requires hiring temporary outside multimedia help, far outweigh the cost of hiring trainers, housing them, and creating training facilities. The branching narrative addresses the 7 cultures of the Consortiums.

**PRIORITIES**

Developing cross-cultural communication skills would be Iris’ first priority, since without these skills she will be hindered with the training design phase. For example, if she attempts to “brainstorm’ design ideas during the meetings, she will not progress. The brainstorming for this cultural group must be performed as a one-to-one exercise. Meetings are only for sign off. Once she has mastered the cultural barriers, gained acceptance of her design through adapting her ideas to meld with the existing training, the communication constraints will be removed and the ADDIE design phase will move forward.

**SUMMARY**

Iris was unaware that the US was in a different bubble when it came to interactive instructional design. She made the assumption that everyone’s instruction in all countries was as advanced as her own. Had she looked at other cultures’ instructional design practices, she would have been open to different ideas without being threatened, without calling her ideas “her own.”

As Ford (2016) states, conflict will always arise in cross-cultural situations. “How your team chooses to respond to conflict can often be the difference between success and failure.” (p. 4). To perform your job in any corporate capacity these days, you need to come well prepared to the international table by not only knowing the cultures that sit at that table, but your *own culture*. Check your assumptions at the door.

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