

Lealan M. Zaccone
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Online Training in a Global Society: An Analysis of the Implications of Globalization,
Cultural Diversity and the Digital Divide

By Lealan M. Zaccone

INTRODUCTION

Online training offers great promise in today's global society. It aims at breaking down time and place barriers and expands learner populations beyond geographical, economic, political and social jurisdictions. The benefits include: lifelong learning opportunities, flexible learning formats, just-in-time personalized training sessions, and cost effective training practices for a globally distributed workforce. To achieve these benefits, however, several challenges must be addressed. This paper highlights three of them--globalization, cultural diversity and the digital divide--and discusses the implications in terms of content delivery, access, learner characteristics, global policies, support services and educational quality. Rationale is supported and referenced through various research and literature in the field of distance training.

ANALYSIS

Globalization

Today, the workplace is global and there is a freer exchange of knowledge transcending across national and international borders. Business is no longer tied to one geographical location and online technologies help companies extend their reach beyond "home" borders. The global marketplace has companies [and countries] building

knowledge-based enterprises to position themselves worldwide in a global economy (Heet, 2004).

As a result of this global marketplace, education and training providers must also match the opportunities for delivering training practices across local, national, and global markets (Lundvall, 2000). According to research conducted by McPherson and Shapiro (2003), global training requires that “all countries, including the United States, consider their higher education system in an international context” (p. 6). Mason (1998) defines the “global institution” as having the following attributes:

it would not be more identified with one country or even continent than another; it would have accreditation, quality standards and administrative functions applicable to every country, and all courses in all languages. It would also serve a global student body, provide an international aim, offer multicultural course content, use a global support structure, and attract a large scale of operation (p.14).

There are many economic, socio-political and technological benefits to training online. The most compelling, however, is worldwide access. Training online has the potential to reach multiple student groups, especially those who are “geographically remote, time constrained, financially constrained, house bound, disabled, or content restricted” (Mason, 1998, p. 4). But, globalization also presents many obstacles as well. “Winning accreditation, providing student services, setting tuition, figuring out finances, and transferring course credits are among the thorny issues that administrators find themselves struggling to face collectively” (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003, para

38). Other barriers to online training in a global society include: “increased learner isolation; the reduction of education to a packaged consumer good; and the globalization of content, with a consequential loss of cultural diversity and richness” (Rumble, 2000, para. 12).

Cultural Diversity

According to Spronk (2004) culture is defined as:

ways of seeing the world and operating within. It plays a central role in learning, in terms of learners’ own cultures and cultural approaches to learning-hierarchy, learning styles, orientation to individual or society, language; and the cultural forms imposed on learning by various media (p. 169).

The big challenge in providing online training in a global society is producing content that takes into account various learner characteristics and demographic differences.

Training must meet the needs of a diverse learner population such as addressing issues around nationality, gender differences, learning style, age groups, racial or ethnic backgrounds, and/or income (Graff, Davies, & McNorton, 2004).

Research in the field highlights that learners choose online programs based on “the relevance of content to their local situations and the recognition in the service or support components of their geographical, political and cultural realities” (Spronk, 2004, p. 170). Therefore, in order to enhance emancipatory learning to an international audience, “training programs must pay increased attention to matters of culture” (Spronk, p. 171).

The Digital Divide

As stated above, information and communication technologies have great potential in a global society but there is a misconception that everyone-everywhere will have equal access to a high-quality education. According to several studies worldwide on the digital divide, “four billion people in the world are currently excluded from this group” and online training is still only available to learners around the world who have *access* to the resources required to *access* the training (Spronk, 2004). Obstacles faced by learners in Third-World Countries include: language barriers, technology hurdles, difficulties with translation, and an absence of the standard volume of knowledge as a prerequisites” (Hvorecky, 2004, p. 2).

The digital divide also resides in the United States as well. According to the US Department of Commerce’s (2000) report, “Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide,” minorities, the less educated, and children of single-parent households, particularly when they reside in rural areas or central cities, are at the heart of those groups that “lack access to information resources (EDUCAUSE, 2000, p.7). The problem with these disparities is that they “raise the very distinct danger that distance education will turn its back on questions of equity, and focus instead on those market sectors that can afford the technology and afford to buy the products that the technology brings to the market” (Rumble, 2000, para. 14).

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis presented both challenges and benefits to offering online training programs. It discussed the implications of training online in terms of globalization, cultural diversity, and the digital divide. Issues were addressed to help ensure better planning for online training in a global society.

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