



Globalizing E-learning

for International Audiences



**LEARNING PROFESSIONALS
MUST MODIFY THE BUSINESS
PROCESS AND DESIGN
ALL COURSES AS IF THEY
WERE GOING GLOBAL.**

**BY DR. ANDREA
EDMUNDSON**

The globalization of e-learning is a business endeavor, whether you are doing it to accommodate a global workforce or to create e-learning for an international commercial market. Thus, it requires a business approach: analysis, market research, prioritization, planning, and so forth. Unfortunately, most organizations globalize their e-learning courses “after the fact” ... after they have been developed for American audiences, only to discover they are ineffective, irrelevant or inappropriate in other cultures.

First, let’s define “globalization” as the term is used in this article. According to the “Globalization Industry Primer” published by the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA), the term “...refers to all of the business decisions and activities required to make an organization truly international in scope and outlook. Globalization is the transformation of business and processes to support customers around the world, in whatever language, country or culture they require.” Notice the focus on business and process. Therefore, how does globalization apply to the design, development and implementation of e-learning?

To date, to globalize e-learning courses, organizations have treated them as *software products* that underwent the technical processes of internationalization, localization and translation to prepare them for global distribution. *Internationalization* ensures that developers engineer the product to accommodate subsequent localization and translation.

For example, if an organization plans to use the courses primarily in Asian (versus romance) language countries, it must prepare code to accommodate differences for character-based versus alphanumeric languages, reading from left to right instead of right to left, etc. In addition, text volume can expand or contract with translation, so facets of the user interfaces — the sizes of content fields, navigation panes, etc. — must be flexible.

Internationalization is a *technical* process whereby developers create an initial product that can undergo modifications later without additional costs. I equate the process to applying a primer coat of paint to a wall: The wall is functional and white, but you can paint it another color (localize it) later so it addresses different cultural and linguistic needs.

The next process, *localization*, is the process of modifying products or services to account for differences in distinct markets. Remember, this is a *business* process, requiring research and knowledge of the targeted cultures and markets. Localization ensures that the audience can relate to images and textual content by making them familiar and locally accurate. Localization addresses obvious differences like date formats, icons, images, symbols, colors, demographics, and so forth. It also addresses content and context variations. Failure to localize can negatively affect business.

For example, an e-learning course created by AlertDriving taught that the center lane was the safest on a multi-lane high-

way, which was not true in Dubai, where drivers use the center lane exclusively for passing. The company reported spending about \$1 million over 18 months to revamp its existing product line, honing language dialects and adapting for local driving habits!

The goal of localization is to make the course locally relevant. Imagine the reverse situation: In one instance, I incorporated an engaging, instructionally sound British e-learning course, "Finance for Non-Financial Managers," into a corporate curriculum. However, users complained that the British accents were difficult to understand; the humor was "bizarre," and that they could not relate to the content because characters calculated budgets in pounds instead of U.S. dollars. If such

processes modified to support effective product design, development, and dissemination. In this section, I review special considerations, in addition to those above, for globalizing e-learning courses – the "product."

>> Learning Objects

An important technique for globalizing e-learning courses is to assemble them as an aggregate of reusable learning objects (RLOs). From a technical perspective, an RLO is a digital self-contained and reusable entity, with a clear educational purpose, with at least three internal and editable components: content, learning activities and elements of context. Learning objects are smaller units of learning, typically ranging from 2 minutes to 15 minutes that:

matched piece and replace it with a more culturally appropriate one. I introduced the concept of cross-cultural learning objects (XCLOs) in 2007 as a way to accommodate learners' cultural preferences and learning styles by deliberately creating learning objects in anticipation of globalization. For example, the localization of e-learning products typically requires adjustments to:

- 1 content,
- 2 instructional approach, and
- 3 media technology.

If a component of an American course on effective performance reviews has a section of content that is legally incorrect in another country, an instructional designer (ID) can research and create an XCLO to replace the original one. E-learning developers and designers can catalogue and warehouse each new learning object, generating a cost-effective way to adapt content in the future for other locales or courses. In many Asian cultures, giving criticism in any form is considered rude; thus, the section that covers methods of giving performance reviews could be replaced with a learning object that accommodate Asian techniques.

Lastly, e-learning developers can easily replace media that is technologically unsupported in another country by using learning objects. If local infrastructure does not support using video, media learning objects of still frames could replace video. If media display scenes or people that are inappropriate or out of context in another culture, IDs can insert learning objects that depict appropriate images.

>> National Cultural Dimensions

Instructional designers inadvertently infuse their cultural preferences into the instructional approaches used in e-learning courses.

For example, as a member of an individualistic culture, I would tend to include course activities that favored individual learning, such as a competitive game. If the course were intended for an American market, the learners would be accustomed to — and appreciate — this approach. However, a group-oriented culture may prefer an approach that benefits from the aggregated group effort. In addition, in U.S. designed

Companies that set formal priorities for innovation as part of the planning process are much likelier to say their companies are better at innovation than their peers.

simple nuances affect our learning, or our attitude towards learning, we can appreciate the importance of localization.

The (final, not first) process, translation, overlaps with localization, but its distinct purpose is to ensure that words communicate the same meanings and message. From a business perspective, software developers and content writers should manage their products towards the goal of easy and cost-effective translation. For example, business or trade terminology typically varies across languages. Phrases, especially colloquialisms, require translators to seek phrases with similar meaning in the target languages. Content writers and instructional designers that incorporate the principles of global English into their work typically reduce the cost of translation by 30 percent to 50 percent.

GLOBALIZING THE PRODUCT

Thus, globalization encompasses three processes — internationalization, localization, and translation — as well as business

- 1 are self-contained – each learning object can be taken independently;
- 2 are reusable – a single learning object may be used in multiple contexts for multiple purposes;
- 3 can be aggregated — learning objects can be grouped into larger collections of content, including traditional course structures;
- 4 are tagged with metadata — every learning object has descriptive information allowing it to be easily found by a search.

These characteristics make them reusable. They are typically warehoused electronically and catalogued (using metadata), like a library. E-learning courses composed of RLOs are more easily modified to address cultural variations and can be translated repeatedly in a cost-efficient manner.

Picture an e-learning course like a puzzle, where one piece fits well for the American culture, but not for a Middle-Eastern one. Instead of redesigning the entire course, you simply remove the mis-

courses, instructional designers prefer to facilitate the learning process versus simply imparting information (i.e., lecture).

Americans, as learners from a low power-distance culture, are also comfortable learning from the shared knowledge and experiences of their colleagues. In contrast, learners from high power-distance countries expect their instructor to be an expert; thus, they may perceive a facilitated learning experience as invalid; instead, they expect to benefit from the wisdom of the instructor, not their colleagues.

>> The Cultural Adaptation Process

The challenge, of course, is knowing what to look for and how to modify courses to align them to the preferences of learners in other countries. Instructional designers can use the Cultural Adaptation Process (CAP) Model to research cultural differences systematically, especially if they do not know where to begin. The CAP Model forces IDs to compare course characteristics (content, methodology, and media) to the cultural preferences of targeted learners, such as:

- 1 Environment – industry culture, educational level, politics, etc.
- 2 Socio-economic – values, gender roles, status, religion, etc.
- 3 Communications – language, symbolism, body language, etc.
- 4 Cultural dimensions – power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, etc.
- 5 Other – learning styles, technological savvy, etc.

>> Global English

One of the easiest but most effective ways to improve the globalization of e-learning — or any training, for that matter — is to use global English in materials, content, navigation, instructions, etc. American English is laden with colloquialisms, slang, wordiness and other characteristics that make it difficult to read for non-native English speakers. Consequently, it is also challenging and costly to translate. In addition, any literal translation of poorly written content will continue to be a challenge to learners even in their own language. Instead, IDs and other creative



address the preferences of the target audience. For example, the developers of Wii not only created different versions of their games for different countries, they even marketed the product differently in different countries.

To be maximally effective in globalizing e-learning, corporate and commercial producers of e-learning need to institutionalize these processes. In other words, don't simply decide to globalize certain courses and leave the "American" ones out of the processes described above. Instead, modify your business processes and design all courses as if they were going global — you will benefit from the improved clarity and design.

CONCLUSION

The need to globalize e-learning will challenge organizations, especially in the next 5 to 10 years, as Americans emerge from a recession and look for competitive advantages, either internally or commercially. Instead of losing money and markets by adapting e-learning retroactively for a global environment, change your mindset now; prepare your staff; modify your processes; and prepare to lead, not follow, in this inevitable situation.

Research shows that learners learn best in their native language and familiar cultural context, but by respecting local languages and cultures at every level — in their products, services, documentation, customer support, marketing, maintenance procedures, business practices, etc. — global enterprises paradoxically expand the options available at the local level. 📧

— Dr. Andrea Edmundson, CPLP, is the global learning strategist and CEO of eWorld Learning, Inc. She specializes in aligning training courses and materials (online or for the classroom) to the cultural characteristics, preferences and learning styles of the targeted learners. Edmundson's second book, "Cases on Culturally Appropriate eLearning: Challenges and Solutions," a practitioner's handbook, will be published this spring. Contact her via e-mail at ceo@eworldlearning.com.

staff, such as scriptwriters, need to incorporate the principles of global English into their products — concise sentences, tight grammar and punctuation, void of colloquialisms, and so forth. All of these modifications improve learners' comprehension and/or the time it takes to comprehend the message.

GLOBALIZING THE E-LEARNING BUSINESS

The software industry pioneered the globalization processes and yes, e-learning courses are software, but they are not culturally neutral products. Thus, to truly globalize e-learning courses, as stated above, organizations need to modify their business processes:

- >>> In the analysis processes (market, learners, etc.), acknowledge and address cultural differences and *include* the targeted learners in your research.
- >>> In the technical development process, incorporate internationalization techniques and structure courses to be ready for localization.
- >>> In the ID process, use culturally appropriate instructional design and global English.
- >>> In both the ID and development processes, generate and catalogue a library of easily accessible cross-cultural learning objects.
- >>> In creative processes, confirm that videographers, casting crews, artists, etc., all recognize culturally different environments and modify their work accordingly. Just because an actor looks or sounds "British" to us, it does not mean you can fool a Brit.
- >>> When marketing global e-learning,