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**Intercultural Internet-Based Learning:
Know Your Audience and
What It Values**

*by Joanne P. H. Bentley, Mari Vawn Tinney,
and Bing Howe Chia*

□ As the Internet-based learning (IBL) market becomes increasingly global, understanding differing educational values and cultural expectations could provide an important competitive edge for providers (universities, publishing houses, and corporate training entities). How each of us determines good or quality instruction is to a large degree founded on what educational values we hold (Evans & Nelson, 2003; Leung, 1996). These values are primarily shaped by (a) cultural norms, (b) the philosophy of learning to which we adhere, and (c) our personal preferences for learning. When our educational values match those embedded in the course design, the match contributes to our perception of its being a *quality* educational experience; conversely, when our educational values do not match those of a course, then dissatisfaction is likely to occur.

It may take a student some time to discern the degree of match between personal values for judging quality instruction and the instructional

values embedded in the course. This is not to be confused with how easy or hard a student thinks a class will be, but this relates to philosophical values underpinning the instructional design. Sometimes, perceptive students familiar with their local educational delivery system can infer the teacher's or instructional designer's educational values quickly from how the syllabus is designed. Then based on that rough assessment, students choose to stay enrolled or not, depending on how successful they think they might be in the course, thus avoiding situations with large value differences. However, not all students know the local culture well enough to be that insightful. When international students attempt the value-matching process across cultures, differences between their home education local system and the international education local system are magnified. The result can be students choosing courses in which they are likely to perform poorly because they do not share the same educational values.

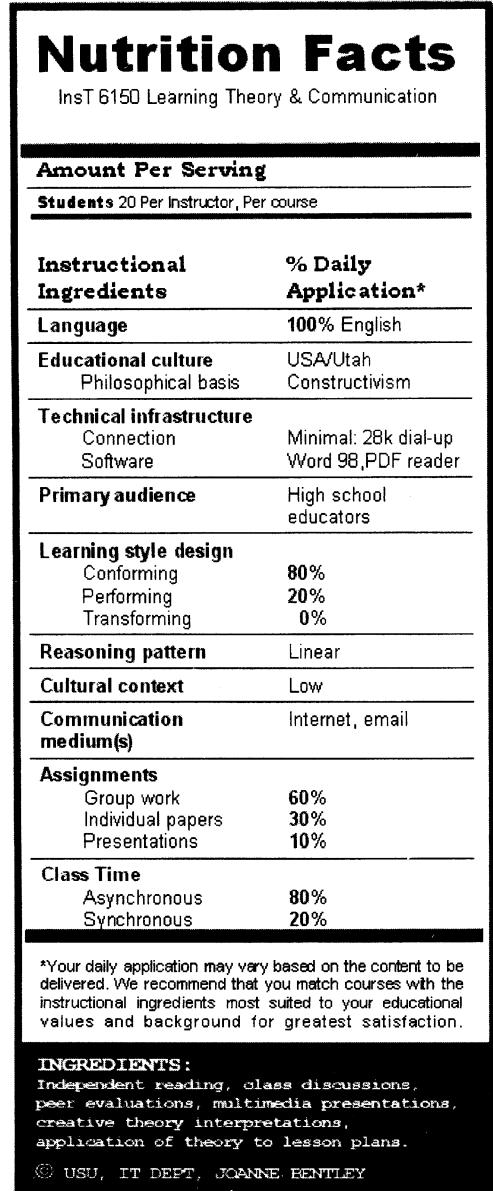
As increasing numbers of international students choose to take IBL courses that are designed by instructors outside their country of origin, they need more help than local students in selecting courses in which they are likely to have a successful learning experience. It is anticipated that they will prefer those more congru-

ent with their cultural expectations. There is an important distinction between students who take IBL classes from home and those who physically travel to another country to take classes (Tom Nickle, personal communication, May 12, 2004). Out-of-country students expect instruction delivered abroad to be different from what they would receive studying in their own country. They are likely to be actively seeking new kinds of learning experiences taught in the local metaphor. According to Zamel and Spack (2004), students can adjust faster to taking courses in a different cultural presentation style if they realize they are joining a separate academic discourse community and they begin to try on the discourse of the new setting. Learning how to read the big picture of a course and seeing what is shared and valued within the community helps them better adjust.

Not all learners and instructors are aware of this difference in expectations. Therefore, wherever significant differences might be expected, such as with diverse new learners to a department or cohort, a new student in graduate school, or moving to a new school in another state, similar value mismatches could be expected to exist. Learners whose value differences are likely to differ most from the local norms should have the information and options that will allow them to choose courses that match their own educational values. When students choose classes that do not match their own home educational values, they should be aware that they will be required to learn in new ways that may not be comfortable or familiar.

The designer has the responsibility of making the educational values of the course explicit in its materials; it is the responsibility of learners to understand themselves as learners and to find out about the context from which the course originates. In this article, we recommend a new intercultural standard for expressing the instructional content of a course through which designers (producers) and students (consumers) can clearly communicate their educational values to each other (such as the example in Figure 1). The standard should be similar to that of food labeling. We believe that designers should make the values embedded in the course visible to the learner in an advance syllabus or course descrip-

Figure 1 □ A hypothetical course nutrition label.



tion. Eight educational value differentials or factors can help make a distinctive difference in how the learner perceives quality in instruction. We discuss how designers can integrate the eight differentials in preparing instructional materials, and apply strategies to match users to suitable courses. We conclude with two checklists of recommendations distilled from the

research; one for low-context (North American or Western) instructional designers, and one for high-context students. In future work, we will explore if the same recommendations apply in reverse for high-context instructional designers and low-context students.

Eight value differentials for IBL

Through 30 years of collective cross-cultural educational experiences and a review of literature, the authors have determined that there are at least eight educational value differentials or factors that make a distinctive difference in how the learner perceives quality in instruction. They are (a) language, (b) educational culture, (c) technical infrastructure, (d) primary audience, (e) learning styles, (f) reasoning patterns, (g) cultural context, and (h) social context. Other course information that is included in a typical syllabus, such as assignments and use of class time, will not be discussed in this paper. It is not possible to value everything equally. The competing demands on a limited set of resources influences where resources are allocated. The named value differentials appear to be the primary pivot points around which major cultural differences in perception of quality instruction currently revolve.

1. *Language differential*

Differences in cultural values, mores, and practices are heavily influenced by constructs of their native language. Every culture has a predominant language that may seem simple at first glance to its users, but each language empowers its speakers with the ability to converse, participate in life with a social identity, express a complex range of ideas verbally and nonverbally, and process time (Mayer, Sobko, & Mautone, 2003). Language and culture are intertwined, and it is difficult to understand one well without understanding the other, as new students of any given language soon discover. Just learning the words of a language is not enough. "Rather, language can serve as a bridge to facilitate a deeper understanding of culture" (Helmer & Eddy, 2003, p.35). Indeed, the social and economic

divides are growing between speakers of certain languages as the process of globalization connects and yet separates certain nations or sub-cultures within nations (Friedman, 2000).

Such a divide is obvious between the academic, social, and economic growth of English speakers and non-English speakers, for example. In a recent study, leading British linguist David Graddol stated, "In many parts of the world, English is now regarded as a basic skill, like computer skills, which children learn at an early age so they can study through English later" (Ward, 2004, p.6). He predicted that in the future, most people will speak more than one language, and switch between languages for routine tasks with the language that best suits their needs in any given situation. "English has become more than an optional lingua franca: it is now the required language of world empire: political, military, economic, and cultural" (Edge, 2004, p.35).

Many international English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners who take online courses find that their cultural orientation and second language abilities may magnify their problems at first, as they attempt to complete IBL courses (Warschauer, 1999), but these can be overcome with increased use. Some university leaders and course designers may think that as long as their online course is in English, it is equally available to any student who speaks English. However, instructional designers preparing for a global audience would do well to remember in their needs analysis to choose an appropriate level of English for their international courses. Because there are more ESL learners in the world today than there are native English speakers (Mauranen, 2003; Ward, 2004), instructional designers and teachers need to express content simply and precisely in English-language IBL courses.

When designers know they will have both native and non-native speakers responding to the instructional discourse style, as much as possible they should create materials that are culturally neutral. This requires use of a simple sentence structure and avoiding slang, colloquialisms, local humor, and local insider examples whenever possible. In the 21st century, IBL designers and instructors should consider that

in some ways they are always designing for a global audience. Warschauer (1999) stated that the Internet allows communication in hundreds or thousands of languages at the same time, as evidenced by Internet discussion boards available in many languages. He expected that people would use English on the Internet "for certain instrumental reasons," as a tool, while they use their other languages in their daily lives (Warschauer, 1999, p. 19).

2. Educational culture differential

There are many ways to describe culture and cultural differences. No one universal definition of culture exists because it exists everywhere, among all people, in different ways. Peter Chinn observed, "Culture is so much an integral part of our life that it is often difficult to realize that there are different, but equally valid, ways of thinking, perceiving, and behaving" (Helmer and Eddy, 2003). Neuliep (2003) defined the essence of culture as "an accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal symbol system" (p. 18). Intercultural sensitivity is not natural, but training in intercultural communication enables people to overcome and transcend traditional ethnocentrism (Bennett, 1993). Success in the workplace and in academic efforts is often seriously limited by a lack of cultural adjustment.

However, for the purposes of this article, we are interested in exploring only the differences among different cultural groups in what they value in education. It is accepted that subgroups within a country may differ in significant ways, but when compared to groups of learners from other countries, subgroups within a country have more in common with each other than with outside groups (Helmer & Eddy, 2003). Ramirez and Price-Williams (1974) and Neuliep (2003) have noted that different subcultures within the same country exist in ways that are as diverse as we might expect in persons from other countries. Some of the guidelines for creating face-to-face instruction for diverse classes apply equally well to an international IBL course. If your situation meets the criteria described here, we recommend that you employ the design heuristic at

the end of this discussion. Increasingly in the 21st century, academics are suggesting that there is no one-best, fixed, or one-size-fits-all way to teach language or culture (Edge, 2004). You must be creative.

Cultural differences created by language and the various educational and social systems around the world produce learners who are educated, trained, and comfortable learning under different conditions (Bennett 1993; Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003; Hofstede, 1986; Neuliep, 2003; Nieto, 2002). However, in North America there is a prevalent expectation that those coming to the United States should assimilate into the dominant culture and adopt its values. Historically, it has not been the norm in the United States to value cultural differences and see them as contributing positively to a rich educational experience for all involved (Lipton, 2002). Where this attitude may have served the country well in the past to unify immigrants, it is a potential weakness for providers who are trying to market American-centric IBL to a global audience without trying to account for differences in educational values and social systems (Lipton; McLoughlin, 1999). The time to account for these differences starts with the needs and audience analysis phase as designers examine their own underlying cultural assumptions and values, along with the assumptions they make concerning their learners' profiles and ability gaps.

Until they take university courses designed from a different cultural orientation, learners may not realize the effect the clash of educational values has on their ability to be successful in such courses. Solano-Flores and Nelson-Barber (2001) held that "because culture and society shape mental functioning, individuals have predisposed notions of how to respond to questions, solve problems, and so forth." These predispositions influence the way students interpret, respond, and reason. As children grow, they learn how to think and live within a given language and culture. Adult learners have developed definite ideas about what kind of learners they are and what is an acceptable, comfortable way to learn from their culture's perspective (Gunawardena et al., 2003). Creating a better match of course offerings for adult

worldwide learners will require some reeducation on the part of both the course designers and the learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Gunawardena et al.; Hofstede, 1986; Nieto, 2002; Palloff and Pratt, 2003; Smith, 2001).

3. *Technical infrastructure differential*

Although instructional designers and learners in IBL courses will have different cultural backgrounds and educational values, naive designers may inappropriately plan a course in terms of its global reach and technical capabilities for use in nations with sufficient infrastructure. Such designers think only of bandwidth, access to e-mail, and processor speed (Hall, 2002). Economic reviews such as the Global Information Technology Report (World Economic Forum, 2003) assess each "nation's [technical] environment for the development and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT); the readiness of the community (consumers, business and government); and communities' usage of ICT." Although it is crucial for a country to have the technical ability to receive IBL content, they must also see it as a desirable thing to have (Lo, Wang, & Barrett, in press). It is offensively ethnocentric to believe that other groups of people see things the way Americans do with the same assumptions, values, and core beliefs. Technical reports such as the Global Information Technology Report do not make any attempt to assess the educational openness associated with embracing courses built on different educational values.

4. *Local versus global differential*

The learner is usually taking the IBL course from a local perspective, and is using its Website under varying circumstances, some of which the designers are not familiar with (Main, 2002). Main went on to explain that because of the ease of creating IBL courses with popular authoring tools, the general look of courses is "more or less preset and does not take into account the subjective and objective cultural issues specific to target cultures." Simon (1999) found that subjective culture is psychological and deals with

attitudes. Local context is often valued over global context, and yet there is a rush to embrace more aspects of globalization with its dependence on Internet technologies and worldwide connections (Friedman, 2000). It has been our experience that learning management systems vendors, frustrated with time and costs associated with assessing the differences between local and global perspectives, prematurely choose to ignore them in an attempt to follow a more cost effective development model.

5. *Learning style differential*

Student attitudes are based on the experiences, values, and different mental programming of a culture (Nelson, 1995). Education is value laden. How learners perceive good instruction is based on what they think and value (Pratt, 1991; Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999). What makes one group of learners happy may not meet the needs of another. Martinez, Bunderson, Nelson, and Ruttan (1999) and Bentley (2000) have shown that the learners who prefer loosely structured flexible environments that promote challenging self-discovery are unlikely to be comfortable learning in highly structured environments that deal with simple solutions and a large amount of strictly guided instruction. In our opinion, the instructional designer and the learner need to share responsibility for knowing what educational values they hold. The designer is responsible for making the educational values of the course explicit in the course materials. Learners are responsible for understanding themselves as learners, and finding out about the context from which the course originates.

It is difficult for non-native speakers to learn higher level thinking and language skills in online courses that are not designed to accommodate their thinking and learning styles. Shadbolt (2002) supported the concept of various learning styles across cultures, and maintained that typical American tell-and-test training materials "would be regarded as too authoritarian a style of teaching" in "parts of Europe, particularly in the UK . . . People here [Europe] prefer more of a self-discovery approach, particularly in the soft-skills training" (pp. 51-55). Many American training products

use models that do not fit the varying teaching and learning styles of other cultures (Dunn & Griggs, 1995).

6. Reasoning pattern differential

Thinking patterns in the form of reasoning, and approaches to problem solving are valued differently from culture to culture. The thinking pattern most prevalent in the dominant culture is usually the most highly valued. Depending on the worldview and culture through which learners filter their perceptions, they may perceive the same object in different ways according to their culturally dominant thinking pattern. Gunawardena et al., (2003) wrote that a noticeable characteristic of Anglo-American communication style is direct because they think in a "line," whereas the Japanese, for example, think in nonlinear "dots."

A useful analogy is that Anglo-Americans use the "bridge" model of thinking, which is characteristic of linear thinking, in that they send ideas explicitly and directly from point A to point B. The meaning found in the words themselves is expected to be enough for communication. On the other hand, the general Japanese "stepping stone model" of meandering dots is characteristic of circular thinking and sending ideas indirectly, allowing others to surmise the meaning. The indirect or nonverbal cues in the setting, body language, tone, pauses, and silence, and the status of individuals are important in communicating the meaning. Just words themselves, without their specific context and setting, are not enough to communicate meaning.

7. High- and low-context differential

In Table 1, Edward Hall (1966, 1976) "compares the cultures of the world on a scale ranging from high-context to low-context" (Main, 2002). The high-context, circular thinking model of group-oriented cultures such as the Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Latin American, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, French, and Vietnamese is noted in the first column. The characteristics of low-context cultures, where the focus is more on individuals than on the group, are listed in the second column. Low-context cultures are represented by

the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and most of Western Europe, including Scandinavia (Neuliep, 2003; Gundling, 1999). In education, countries described as low-context offer what is sometimes referred to as Western-style education.

Many high-context international learners have difficulty using online courses prepared in the United States, because of both their limited ability in English and their conflicting learning preferences, which do not easily accommodate to using materials prepared by and for low-context culture users. Hofstede (1986) explained that "academic learning in different industrial countries appeals to different intellectual abilities."

Differences in thinking patterns can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication and in education, because these affect students in how they interact with course content, in assumptions designers make in designing the course content, and in expectations about what courses offer and how to successfully complete them.

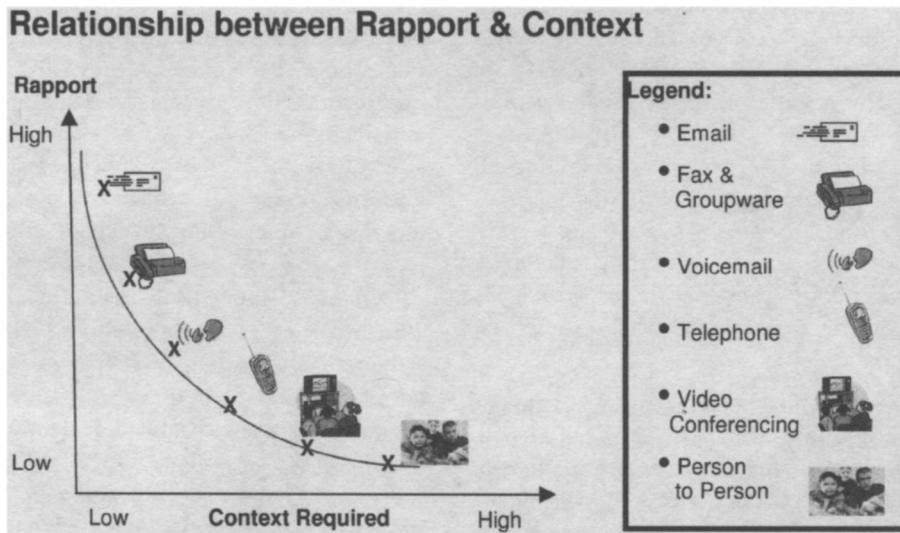
8. Social Context differential

The theory of situated cognition relates to how learners respond to new information based on the social context (Driscoll, 2000; Henning, 2004). High-context learners *require* more social context in order to read the meaning of the communication and how to respond appropriately. For a continuum of elements used in communication situations, see Figure 2.

Table 1 □ Characteristics of high-context and low-context cultures.

<i>High-Context Culture</i>	<i>Low-Context Culture</i>
Implicit messages	Explicit messages
Internalized messages	Plainly coded messages
Nonverbal coding	Verbalized details
Reserved reactions	Reactions on the surface
Distinct in-groups and out-groups	Flexible in-groups and out-groups
Strong people bonds	Fragile people bonds
High commitment	Low commitment
Open and flexible time	Highly organized time

Figure 2 □ Rapport versus context axis, adapted from Gundling (1999).



E-mail is shown in Figure 2 as a low-context medium that requires high rapport between the sender and the receiver for them to understand each other's words. Low-context North Americans, for example, emphasize the information in e-mail by focusing on the exact words, prose style, argumentation and line of reasoning, and ideas. To North Americans these are often more important than who the people involved are. Just the opposite is true for high-context persons, because they are looking for nonverbal cues, social standing, and situational contexts to know how to respond appropriately. In many Western societies, e-mail is seen as a quick, easy way to communicate, but the ease of using only words to communicate content and meaning can put members of a high-context culture at a disadvantage (Grundling, 1999; Hoopes, 1997). Arceh (2003) observed,

I do not think that 5,000 years of cultural communication patterns can be changed by mere decades of Internet usage, and with today's vastly increased communications opportunities, I believe we will see an equivalent increase in the amount of *miscommunication* between cultures When we use e-mail, we prefer fast turnarounds and quick decisions. These expectations may be totally at odds with those of our Asian partners, who may ignore our demanding e-mails or feel forced to make premature decisions. (p. 40)

High-context learners do not receive much

meaning if it is presented in text only and if they are involved in a lexical loop without some person-to-person interaction. High-context learners struggle as newbies in online environments where the technologies used may actually alter the social presence of individuals and may offer few clues as to the meanings of conversations and online content. Gundling (1999) asserted that important messages are best communicated through high-context means. In cross-cultural settings he recommended that the facilitator increase contextual cues. For example, prior to a videoconference, written background material, an agenda, a seating chart, and biographical information about the participants could be circulated in writing. Then during the videoconference, the facilitator would introduce people, act a gatekeeper to bring everyone into the conversation, and define unfamiliar terms and concepts.

How These Differentials Relate to IBL

A basic model for instructional designers stresses the need to know your audience so that your instructional intervention is most likely to meet their needs (Dick & Carey, 1996; Seels & Glasgow, 1998; Smith & Ragan, 1999). Designing quality IBL for an international audience is a

daunting task. If a mismatch occurs when students sign up for an IBL course that clashes with their cultural perspectives and learning style preferences, it likely that their sector of the market was not included in the needs and learner analysis. Although it is highly recommended that a thorough audience analysis be conducted, we realize how difficult it is to try to accommodate *all learners, everywhere*. We do not recommend that you try to be everything to everyone. The assumptions from the audience analysis that shapes the instructional design should be evident to the learner.

Understanding what the instructional designer or teacher values, and has built into a course, will help other learners anticipate their educational experience and choose IBL courses appropriately. We advocate adding a new element to the instructional process of analysis, and recommend seeking to know not only the audience but the designer as well. We encourage students to share the responsibility for finding the right course by using the eight educational value differentials to self-select classes they think would be a good match between their educational values and those of the instructional designer.

A certain degree of readiness is necessary to be able to successfully take IBL classes. There are many survey forms, such as *Strategies for Success: Study Skills for Online Learners* (Alamo Community College District, 2002), currently available, that review time management, study skills, test taking, and motivation to determine how well suited a learner is for IBL. IBL courses are offered in a location (in "space" and in the mind) that takes some adjusting to for those accustomed to face-to-face courses, no matter what culture they come from. The Internet exists on servers, wires, protocols, connections, and browsers, but it also exists in the minds of the people who use it, perceive it, and build representations of it in their minds (Bruce, 2002).

People relate to the Internet through the way it intersects with their lives, uses, applications, and contexts. Bruce (2002) explained that "out of these doings, people build individual constructs of the Internet" (p. 158) and in the form of knowledge structures that allow them to interpret and make sense of things. Gaps occur in the

continuum between actual Internet use, IBL courses offered, and the individual user's experience. Users can reduce the gap with each experience in an IBL course as they incrementally transform their perceptions and abilities. In the initial stages, however, we believe that first attempts at IBL courses will be more successful if learners find a course that offers some options that match their culturally based educational values.

Bentley & Tinney (2003) found that students with a non-U.S. educational background have statistically significant different preferences for how they want to interact with content than have those with a U.S. educational background. They went on to say that "it might appear to be common sense that cultural differences would affect how students learn, but understanding the nuances of those differences and accounting for them in the structure of the course is challenging" (p.1).

Recommendations

IBL designers, instructors, and students must be aware of the potential conflict in teaching and learning contexts. Reed (2002) concluded that "to bridge the gap that occurs in cross-cultural learning contexts, Hofstede (1986) proposes two possible solutions: (1) To teach the teacher how to teach, and/or (2) to teach the learner how to learn."

So far we have discussed how designers should prepare instructional materials, strategies, processes, and course components that are adapted to make learning better for the cultural orientation of learners, as well as how course catalog descriptions or career counselors could be more explicit in matching up users to these types of programs and courses. Tables 2 and 3 present recommendations that will aid this process. Table 1 is directed toward teachers and instructional designers. Table 2 is directed toward students.

Conclusion

The eight educational value differentials or factors that make a distinctive difference in how the

Table 2 □ Six recommendations for low-context (American) instructional designers.

1. Explicitly describe the educational values embedded in your course design and in your examples and strategies. Include these values in both the syllabus and course description to alert potential students of the course orientation.
2. Offer *optional* scaffolding elements to help learners be successful, such as mentors, a precourse orientation, and practice in prerequisite skills.
3. Consider the knowledge and skill level of English required to use the course. When you know you will have both native and non-native speakers, be sure to use simple sentence structures.
4. Avoid slang, colloquialisms, and local humor when possible, or explain your intent clearly in the next section so learners can understand what you intended.
5. Make topic information available for students to review before any real-time activity in order that they may have time to use a dictionary to define new terms, consult with others, and find suitable words to express their contributions (Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Smith, 2001).
6. For IBL courses intended for collectivist societies (high-context cultures), design materials along these guidelines (Main, 2002; Rao, 2002):
 - Place little emphasis on personal achievement.
 - Define success in terms of sociopolitical, rather than individual, goals.
 - Promote group solidarity rather than individual self-interest.
 - Write in an indirect, impersonal style.
 - Emphasize tradition and history.

learner perceives *quality* in instruction are (a) language, (b) educational culture, (c) technical infrastructure, (d) primary audience, (e) learning styles, (f) reasoning patterns, (g) cultural context, and (h) social context.

In designing IBL instruction one should take into account that users may come from various cultures; therefore, the content should be designed as culturally neutral as possible. If instructional designers and students will follow our recommendations to discover their educational values and make them explicit, we believe that much of the stress and frustration surrounding the mismatch between student educational values and educational values embedded in the course by the teacher can be resolved. Designers and students should follow Daniel

Table 3 □ Eight recommendations designers should make to their high-context students.

1. Avoid depending on a highly detailed syllabus.
2. Dispel old beliefs about how effective teaching should be taught.
3. Embrace new learning habits and adapt to them, as in an adventure.
4. Have an open mind to try new things. Be ready to be stretched mentally, socially, culturally, and technologically.
5. Do more to figure things out yourself.
6. Join study groups and social groups.
7. Seek ESL help.
8. Talk to the instructor concerning accommodations that can reasonably be made to fit the course to your style or ability level. If no reasonable accommodations can be made and you still feel uncomfortable with the mismatch, drop the class.

and Macintosh's (2003) recommendation to "be watchful that [IBL] solutions do not entrench the digital divide, or even worse widen it" (p. 822). They should also be particularly sensitive to the cultural relevance of imposing past successes of the industrialized world into other contexts.

Designers should be doing all they can to understand the audience for IBL and what it values. As we have shown, how one determines good instruction is based on what educational values one holds. Understanding where educational values come from and how they might differ across cultures is important as the IBL market becomes increasingly global. If this is done, learners can then choose courses that match their educational values for a more comfortable learning experience or know that choosing classes that do not match their educational values will require them to learn in new ways. □

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