Cultural Adaptation of E-Learning
In an earlier white paper we discussed designing e-learning courses so that they may more easily be adapted to different localities and cultures. This is what is known as the process of “globalization” or “internationalization.” The next step is actually adapting a course for a specific audience, the process known as “localization.” Localization involves adapting the e-learning modules to ensure that they conform to local conditions and usages.

The need to adapt course content to the local culture is often underestimated. To get the point across, Dr. Andrea Edmundson, a well-known expert in cultural adaptation of e-learning, gives the example of when she integrated a British course on “Finance for Non-Financial Managers” into a curriculum for a U.S. corporation. “[Users] complained that the British accents were difficult to understand; the humor was ‘bizarre,’ and that they could not relate to the content because budgets were calculated in pounds instead of U.S. dollars.”

Likewise, we cannot assume that we can take an e-learning course aimed at a U.S. audience and simply export it, either in English or in simple translation, to a totally different audience.

As Dr. Edmundson has noted, anticipating and adapting courses for specific cultures is particularly important in the context of the self-paced or on-demand e-learning modules that are becoming more and more popular, especially as a means of workforce training. If the course doesn’t fit cultural expectations, all the time and expense spent on translating and rolling out the course in another country could be money down the drain when the course fails to deliver results.

The path she suggests is to conduct a cultural audit of the course and, based on the outcome of the audit, adapt the course to fit the target audience prior to translation and technical localization of the modules.
Cultural Audit: The First Step in Cultural Adaptation

Dr. Edmundson, who created the cultural audit process for e-learning, says that a good cultural audit will review:

- the course content,
- the instructional techniques used, and
- the media relied on to deliver the course.
Cultural Audit (cont.)

Course Content
In looking at course content there are two broad questions to consider:

1. Is the course a high-context or low-context course?
2. Is the tone of the course formal or informal?

High-context courses are those where cultural assumptions about the subject matter are likely to be embedded in the course material. Topics like leadership skills and business ethics are in this category. In contrast, a low-context topic would be something like software training or quality assurance procedures where the underlying assumptions are not as likely to vary from culture to culture.

In high-context courses, it is necessary to look into attitudes on the topic in the target culture. Any available research on relevant cultural attitudes to the topic should be consulted. If there is no existing research, you will need to do some investigation, if only consulting with people who are familiar with that culture. The research may reveal assumptions embedded in the course material that cannot be taken for granted in the target culture. These assumptions may be about attitudes (e.g., nepotism is bad) or about the surrounding legal or physical environment (e.g., everyone drives on the right side of the road).

Is the tone and language used in the course more informal and idiomatic? If so, there will probably be more need for content changes than if the tone is more formal and the language used is straightforward. In some cultures, a higher degree of formality may be expected. Sports metaphors, common in the U.S., can be a particular problem.
Even the order in which information is presented in a course relies on assumptions.

Cultural Audit (cont.)

**Instructional Technique and Assessment**

Even the order in which information is presented in a course relies on assumptions, notes Dr. Edmundson—not only assumptions about the best way to engage students, but also about the students’ cultural backgrounds. These are assumptions that have to be challenged when taking a course developed for one culture to a different culture.

In the United States, for example, it may be common to start with a provocative question to grab the students’ interest and then to introduce the material that will give them the answer. In other, more risk-averse cultures, this approach may be offputting or confusing. In these cultures, it may be better to go straight to the information you are trying to get across.

**Media Used**

The technical infrastructure of different countries and regions can vary tremendously. In some places, internet connections may be less ubiquitous and slower. In many places, the major means of access to the internet may be mobile devices. Things like embedded videos or other media that increase the bandwidth requirements may make the course difficult to access or use. Cultural reactions to media such as video can also vary. Dr. Edmundson also notes that images and icons should represent the learners’ context, not that of the course designers.
Cultural Adaptation: Revising the Course

The cultural audit will review the course materials with all of the factors mentioned above in mind and make specific suggestions for changes to the course.

Suggestions as to content may involve changing the tone, eliminating or explaining assumptions that may be questionable in that culture, the elimination of idioms, changes to case studies and examples used, and even changes to the course title to accurately convey the purpose of the course. Changes may also include replacing graphics that would not have meaning in the other culture or that might be culturally offensive or jarring (e.g., having all the people depicted in the course of a different race or ethnicity than the target audience).

In terms of instructional technique, the audit may suggest a more straightforward approach to laying out information, rather than a Socratic approach or vice-versa. It may be necessary to introduce some concepts with “scaffolding”—supporting information to explain a concept that is unfamiliar in that culture or that may be viewed differently in that culture. Dr. Edmundson has given the example of teaching business ethics in a country where bribery is common and not necessarily disapproved. For a multinational company, it may be necessary to include the subject in a business ethics course, but you may want to introduce the concept with information about the different view of the practice in other countries and legal systems.

“A very culturally nuanced aspect of online courses is how the learners are ‘tested,’” states Dr. Edmundson. If a method of assessment is involved, the audit may advise changing the method used or to have more frequent assessments, depending upon what testing methods are common in the other culture as well as the relative familiarity of the course subject in that culture.

Finally, the audit may advise simplifying the course in terms of design and media used, either because of infrastructure conditions in the target country, cultural attitudes, or because of the platforms (that is, desktop computers, mobile devices, etc.) that are in use there.
Translation and Localization

MTM LinguaSoft strongly advises that the translation process begin after a revised, culturally accessible version of the course has been prepared. There may, of course, be some suggested adaptations that can only be performed as part of the translation process, where the language will be adapted to convey the desired tone and the intended message in the target language. If some concepts are too foreign to the target culture, parts of the course may need to be “transcreated”—rewritten in the target language to be more accessible and relevant.

This process may sound daunting and expensive, but preparing the course with localization in mind will limit the amount of adaptation needed, and your language service partner should be able to help guide you through the process. The alternative may be training programs that don’t achieve the desired results, resulting in making much of your investment in rolling out the training in a new culture of questionable value.

Conclusion

Knowing your audience, including its cultures, traditions, and environment is crucial to the success of localized e-learning. The proper language service partner, with access to e-learning experts such as Dr. Edmundson, can help you through this process from planning, through auditing, and translation and localization.
Further Reading

“Designing E-learning for Translation,” MTM LinguaSoft White Paper

Andrea Edmundson, “Globalizing E-learning for International Audiences,” Elearning! (March/April 2011)

Andrea Edmundson, “Training for Multiple Cultures,” Infoline (January 2010)

“The Transcreation Process,” MTM LinguaSoft White Paper
Checklist for Evaluating Cultural Adaptation of E-Learning

☐ **Resources:** What resources are available to help you with the cultural adaptation of your e-learning course? (For example, a knowledgeable language service partner).

☐ **Cultural Audit:** Has a cultural audit been conducted to get specific recommendations on adapting the course to the target audience?

  ☐ **Subject Matter:** Is the course topic high-context or low-context?

  ☐ **Tone:** Is the tone of the course formal or informal and idiomatic?

  ☐ **Instructional Technique:** What instructional techniques are used?

  ☐ **Assessment:** How and how often is the student’s mastery of the material tested or assessed?

  ☐ **Media:** What media is used in the course? Is it simply text or are materials like audio and video files included?

☐ **Revisions:** Have you revised the course in accordance with the audit recommendations before proceeding with translation and localization?

☐ **Translation and Localization:** Does your language service partner have the technical expertise to handle the localization of e-learning courses?