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# A CULTURALLY AWARE COURSE DESIGN

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## **Abstract**

*Culture has a profound influence over student expectations and the way they engage with computer mediated teaching and learning. Models of cultural analysis from the international management literature have great potential to inform course design to minimise cultural incompatibilities. This paper discusses how Hofstede's model of cultural analysis (the most widely cited of the models) could be applied to course design. It also looks at some of the practical limitations designers would face implementing the full model and proposes a simplified version.*

## **Keywords**

*Culture, Hofstede, Course Design*

While a lot is known about the impact different learning styles have on the way students engage with computer mediated teaching and learning, the potential to design courses for people with different cultural backgrounds deserves a lot more attention. Some good work has been conducted on ways to make course design take into account Australian Aboriginal culture (see McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000) but an opportunity exists to develop a design flexible enough to accommodate a variety of cultures. This paper builds on observations made in a previous ASCILITE paper (Munro-Smith, 2002) and attempts to apply a model for cultural analysis extensively used in the international management literature to computer-based learning.

At RMIT the need for a culturally aware course design is most pressing. In the School of Management there is a high percentage of undergraduate students from overseas; both exchange students from places as diverse as Mexico, the United States, Germany, Turkey and Finland plus full time students from China, Thailand, India, and Singapore, to name just a few. Managing cultural differences have so far largely focussed on helping the visitors understand the Australian way of doing things, combined with the academic staff making adjustments to their teaching styles in the classroom. The latter works quite well when the lecturer understands cultural differences and has face to face contact but with so many courses including online components the opportunity to adjust teaching to suit different students is being reduced. Not helping is the fact that the time and effort that the development of computer mediated teaching and learning requires has typically resulted in a "one size fits all" approach. In RMIT's case this combination of factors has been producing less than acceptable outcomes. There has been a recognition recently that when a computer stands between teacher and student, cultural differences in the student population need to be taken into account in a systematic manner, otherwise disengagement and stress can become a serious problem.

The most widely cited writer on culture is Geert Hofstede. Hofstede conducted a landmark study in the late 1970s that had a profound impact on management thinking. He defines culture as the mental programming that controls behaviour or the brain's "operating system" (Hofstede, 1994). Hofstede's model originally used four dimensions to describe cultural difference, a fifth was added later as a result of research in Hong Kong and China.

## Hofstede's Model of Cultural Analysis

The five dimensions in the current version of Hofstede's model are, put simply,

- Power Distance: in some societies the people are egalitarian (low power distance) and want to be consulted while in other societies people are comfortable with hierarchies and being instructed.
- Uncertainty Avoidance: some people are comfortable with ambiguous tasks and uncertainty (ie low uncertainty avoidance), whereas people in other societies are risk averse and prefer certainty (typically in the form of clear roles or instructions).
- Individual versus Collective: is the group more important than the individual?
- Masculinity: is money or material achievement valued? Is society competitive (or are people cooperative, ie feminine)?
- Long-term versus Short-term Orientation: how patient are people for results?

For example, Hofstede characterises Australians as individualistic, with low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, largely masculine and short-term in orientation. The Chinese, he observes, are collective, have high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance, they are masculine and long-term oriented. While the methodology of the original study has been widely criticised (Mead, 1998) the model continues to enjoy wide currency in business and is taught in many undergraduate courses. But what of its application in the educational design of computer mediated teaching & learning? The premise here is that people are people, whether managers or students, so the model (despite its widely acknowledged shortcomings) does have some value in understanding student behaviour, albeit at a highly aggregated level.

How can Hofstede's ideas be taken into account in course design? This paper draws on close analysis of student feedback in two management courses at RMIT Business over two years; the scope for generalising the observations to other disciplines needs to be looked into. There are simple strategies that can be employed to address concerns raised by each of the dimensions and some are explained here. The real challenge though is putting it all together in a way that works for both the student and the academic staff.

### ***Individual versus Collective***

Most courses are clear and either do or do not require group work but an hybrid group/individual assessment design could go a long way towards accommodating the preferences of both those from individualistic and collective oriented societies. In the RMIT course *Managing Strategically*, for example, the students work on their assignments together but document their research individually. By getting people to operate as an individual in a group setting the design of the course allows the participants freedom to choose how team oriented they wish to be.

### ***Power Distance***

Students from a low power distance society would prefer to be involved in decisions affecting them, whereas in a high power distance society people expect to be told what to do. The recent experience of RMIT's School of Management is instructive in this regard as the numbers of Thai students has grown. Thais come from a high power distance culture and are mixed in Melbourne with people from a low power distance society. Many of the Thais find courses designed to help students find their own answers quite stressful. They have a predilection to do what they are told, no more, no less. Perhaps the best way of managing this divide is to offer course participants a choice between structured or self-directed learning paths to the course objectives. This would be best if it were an informed choice based on exposure to both styles of working, early in the semester.

### ***Masculinity***

A masculine course design is one where competition between students is encouraged or implied. In contrast a feminine design would be one where the participants are expected to cooperate. One form of implied competition is grading. Most of RMIT's Australian students, when offered a choice, opt for

grading rather than a simple satisfactory/unsatisfactory assessment. Very few chose to enrol in courses that did not offer grading and few courses are still offered on that basis. So RMIT's experience suggests accommodating differing attitudes to cooperation or competition lie not in offering choice in grading systems but in other ways like allowing students to choose whether or not to share their research. This can be done without undermining individual accountability by using assessable individual research journals.

### ***Uncertainty Avoidance***

Many Asian people, especially the Chinese and Thais, exhibit strong uncertainty avoidance in an educational context and prefer structured learning activities and assessment. In other words they want to be told what they need to know and precisely how to prove that they have learnt it. In contrast, Australians prefer (but not universally) scope to interpret the task their own way. RMIT's experience (more by accident than design) indicates that something as simple as providing detailed instructions suits people from both low and high uncertainty avoidance cultures. The low uncertainty avoidance Australians, for example, do not read the instructions!

### ***Long Term Orientation***

Hofstede's research suggests that there is a quite obvious divide between Westerners (Americans and Australians in particular) who tend to be short term oriented and Asians (particularly the Chinese and Japanese) who lie at the long-term end of the spectrum. This suggests some people want to take their time (presumably in this context to digest the material) whereas others want to get the task done as soon as possible. Anecdotally, the observations of academic staff at RMIT are that actual student behaviour is often at odds with Hofstede's findings (short-term Australians taking their time but long-term Chinese being in a rush) but in principle courses can be (some are) designed to be accelerated or slowed down. The observed behaviour of students being opposite to what Hofstede would lead us to predict warrants further research.

## **Implementing the Model**

The ideas under each of the five preceding headings barely scratch the surface. There are a great many other ways of tackling the problem, however there are limits to how far a course can be adapted to take into account cultural differences. The key to the successful development of a culturally aware course is to have flexibility so that the students themselves can dynamically reconfigure it to suit their cultural preferences - but to do so in such a manner that the course does not lose its coherence and integrity. This latter point becomes problematic if something that clashes culturally is required for valid educational reasons; group work for example. Many individualistic Australians are uncomfortable with group work (many are even hostile) and, when given a choice, elect to work alone. For example, over the last three years in a RMIT management course called Business & Government in a Global Context, where the participants may choose between group or individual work, about 80% of Australian students have elected to work alone. In the following semester the same students undertake Managing Strategically, where teamwork is as close to compulsory as it can be made, the lecturers consistently find that the Australians still express strong preferences for individual work despite the educational objectives of the group work design being explained at length. The end result is too often stress, disengagement and disappointing learning outcomes.

Taken to its extreme, cultural sensitivity could produce a course with a large number of modules that can be assembled by individual students to best suit their needs resulting in a huge task for the academic staff to manage (and it may not solve the problem anyway because research into culture shows most people have a low cultural self-awareness). Even the apparent simplicity of the ideas discussed here under the headings of the five Hofstede dimensions could still lead to a complex course design. However it may not be so great a challenge since in practice the boundaries between these dimensions are not sharply defined and people who are, say, low in power distance tend to be low in uncertainty avoidance and individualistic as well. So people can be grouped together, reducing the complexity. According to Hofstede, some cultures (American and Australian, or Chinese and Vietnamese, for example) are broadly similar so perhaps designing a workable culturally sensitive course could boil down to two questions; group versus individual work and structured versus self-directed, leading to four versions of a single course (see below).

Going by the findings of Hofstede and subsequent writers on culture (especially Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner) version A should suit most Chinese and Vietnamese, version B, most Indians, version C, most Germans and version D, most Australians. However, some people would not easily fit into this simplified system. So while there are limits there is still a great deal of scope for more culturally compatible course designs.

	Structured	Self-directed
Group	A - collective, high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance.	B - collective, low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance.
Individual	C - individualistic, high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance.	D - individualistic, low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance.

#### *A Simplified Application of Hofstede's Model*

A redesign of some of the current management courses at RMIT is under way to experiment with some of the ideas here. It is anticipated the findings will be presented to future ASCILITE conferences. A tentative first step in second semester 2003 was the implementation of a student expectations questionnaire; but a lot more work needs to be done. Implementing the full Hofstede questionnaire may be necessary.

One crucial caveat needs to be noted here; not all Australians (or Thais, Chinese or whoever) are the same and cultural stereotyping is a real risk if models like Hofstede's are applied superficially. Hofstede alerts us to the variability of behaviour within cultural groups and how this variability differs between groups. Yet at the same time, as the research into culture strongly suggests, culture is deeply ingrained at a young age and is expressed in many ways. Recent observations by *The Economist* ('Roll over Confucius', 25 January 2003) about the situation in China where innovative schools are being shunned by parents in favour of schools retaining the traditional methods, further reinforce the need to grasp the underlying cultural dynamics. Flexibility is the key (if it can be adequately resourced).

## Conclusion

The importance of designing culturally sensitive learning environments is widely recognised but as McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) point out, there is still a lot to be learnt about the complexities of culture and the cognitive design of computer mediated teaching and learning. In this regard, RMIT's experience to date indicates that models like the one provided by Hofstede and have much to offer.

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