LEARNERS' TRAINING APPROACH PREFERENCE: NATIONAL CULTURE AS A DETERMINANT

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Introduction

As more and more countries throughout the globe seek to advance economically, more and more institutions, such as training units in multinational corporations, consulting firms, and colleges/universities, will assign trainers to train individuals in a foreign country or to train individuals from foreign countries at home. When conducting training programs, for economic and other reasons, trainers sometimes apply a formalized training program; they identify a set of learning expectations and certain training activities applicable to all participants, such as individual projects, group projects, and tests. Subsequently, they assess the trainees' performance--those participants who best met the learning expectations receive the higher appraisals, and vice versa. And those participants which did not adequately meet the learning expectations are sometimes asked to repeat the same training program; a program which did not teach them properly in the first place (Stuart, 1992).

A formalized training approach may be adequate for a group of trainees holding similar pedagogical preferences and/or holding a homogeneous cultural orientation, but not for a group holding diverse (heterogeneous) pedagogical preferences and/or cultural orientations. A training approach which is effective with trainees from one culture is often not effective with trainees from another (Johnson, 1991; Warner, 1991). This is because, as many scholars (e.g., Holland, 1989; Kolb & Fry, 1975; Witkin, More, Goodenough & Cox, 1977) believe, fundamental differences in learning style lead to differing pedagogical preferences, and cultures develop differing learning styles. For example, some writers (e.g., Lindsay & Dempsey, 1983) have proposed that Asian and Western learners hold differing pedagogical preferences--for instance, Pun (1989a, 1989b) proposed that Western learners accept involvement, and learning through own discovery and

exploration, and Chinese learners expect the teacher to lead and provide learning points. Thus, culturally, some people want greater control and personal responsibility in the learning process, and some do not (Dejoy & Dejoy, 1987). Hence, use of an inappropriate training approach is likely to result in trainee frustration.

Therefore, to be effective in cross-cultural training, trainers would need to know the training approach preferred by trainees in the country where they are going to be training or in the country(ies) from where the foreign trainees came, and, other factors (such as economics and organizational needs) permitting, would apply it accordingly. To aid trainers in this respect, this paper describes two training approaches: "teacher-centered" learning (lecturing, and relatively low control and personal responsibility for learning is given to trainees) and experiential, "hands-on" learning (individual problem-solving projects, and relatively high control and personal responsibility for learning is given to trainees). And it discusses four cultural classifications of societies, power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucianism, and based on these classifications proposes which training approach is preferred by trainees in or from 50 countries.

Learning-Style Theory

As indicated above, effective trainers understand their trainees' training-approach preference, which is influenced by their learning-style preference. Learning-style refers to the elements of individual differences which are important to knowledge and skills acquisition (Shade, 1989a). Basically, distinctive learning style emerges among people sharing a common historical and geographical setting because they must collectively adapt to a unique set of environmental demands (Shade, 1989b). Characteristic learning-style of a nation/culture is also institutionalized

and reinforced through its child rearing practices and education systems. Hence, there are many aspects of individual differences which shape the way by which one acquires knowledge and skills (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1975). Thus, there are many learning-style theories. One is Kolb's (1976, 1984) experiential learning theory.

Kolb's theory describes four stages of learning which require four learning abilities: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. According to him, learners input information from either concrete experiences or abstract conceptualizations and process information from either effecting internally on experience (reflective observation) or acting externally on the conclusions drawn (active experimentation). According to Biglan (1973), Kolb (1977), and Fry (1978), those with the abstract conceptualization learning ability learn best in a "symbolic domain" environment, where learning is math based, hard, paradigmatic. Those with the reflective observation ability learn best in a "perceptual domain" environment, where learning is theory based, pure. Those with the concrete experience ability learn best in a "affective domain" environment, where what is being learned is humanities based, soft, nonparadigmatic. And those with active experimentation learn best in a "behavioral domain" environment, where emphasis is on practical use, application. According to Fry (1978), the teacher's role in the affective domain and symbolic domain environments is teacher-centered-like, and in the perceptual domain and behavioral domain environments it is hands-on-like.

Basically, the above discussion suggests that some trainees learn better through a teacher-centered training approach, and some learn better through a hands-on training approach. A question is: To what extent do such theories have application across differing national cultures?

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Many researchers have examined how culture influences learning-style preference. However, much of the existing literature comparing cross-cultural learning-style characteristics has been contributed by educational psychologists, whose major concern has been the significantly lower academic performance by Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians than that of Whites and/ or Asian Americans in the United States. While important dimensions of cross-cultural learning-style differences are examined, these studies draw their evidence almost exclusively from racial and ethnic groups within the United States (for a review, see Dunn & Criggs, 1990; Holland, 1989). The differences in learning-style characteristics among people from different nations have been inadequately studied (Abramson, Lane, Nagai, & Takagi, 1993). Hence, such theories may have application in some societies, the American and British societies, for example, but not in all societies. This is because, as mentioned earlier, people in different societies develop different learning-style preferences. The objective of the ensuing section is thus to propose how national culture might dictate which training approach, teacher-centered or hands-on, is effective with trainees in or from that society. In this respect, the next section describes the cultural dimensions of 50 countries and proposes which training approach is likely to be preferred by trainees in or from those countries.

Cultural Dimensions of Nations and Training Approach Preference

In their search for the underlying developmental causes of variations in individual learning styles, Berry (1976), Witkin and Berry (1975), and Witkin et al., (1962) came across perhaps one of the most forceful explanations for the emergence of cross-national differences in learning-style. In their conceptualization, individuals' learning-style differs along a field-dependence/field independence dimension. Communities which rely on individuals' entrepreneurial abilities for

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survival, such as hunting, tend to foster the development of field-independence style, while those that must be involved in more cooperative means of production, such as agriculture, tend to nurture a field-dependent style. Individuals preferring a field-independent style are characterized by an easiness in abstracting important information from a distracting background, and a lack of interest in the opinions of external referents. These trainees may thus prefer a "hands-on" training approach. In contrast, individuals possessing a field-dependent style are characterized by a difficulty to perceptually differentiate a figure from its background and a willingness to be influenced by the opinions of external referents. These trainees may prefer a "teacher-centered" training approach.

Another theory which helps understand cross-cultural differences was described by Hofstede (1980a). Based on research conducted across 50 countries, he developed a typology consisting of four cultural dimensions by which a society may be classified: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. Hofstede and Bond (1988) subsequently described another cultural dimension, Confucianism, which is prevalent mainly in certain Asian countries. The power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance dimensions (the masculinity dimension is not included in this framework), and Confucianism and their potential influence on cross-cultural training approach (teacher-centered or hands-on) preference are discussed below and presented in Figure 1. Figure 2 presents the 50 countries included in Hofstede's study, indicates the countries' measure on each dimension and the proposed preferred training approach for each country.

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Figures 1 and 2 about here

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Power Distance

Hofstede (1980a) classified the culture of many of the countries included in his study as high on power distance. Individuals dominated by this cultural dimension, according to him, tend to accept centralized power and rely heavily on superiors for structure and direction. Hofstede also noted that laws and rules which differ for superiors and subordinates are accepted. Since trainees from societies holding this cultural orientation generally have not been encouraged to make decisions on their own, they probably prefer to learn through a teacher-centered approach. These learners may encounter some frustration with an assignment that requires them to make independent decisions. For example, an assignment which directs them to go to the library, scan through periodicals, select and read a training-program-relevant article, and link the thrust of it to a theory or concept in the textbook is likely to frustrate them. They probably prefer a trainer who assigns an appropriate article, gives them a fairly clear idea as to what they might look for in the article, and gives them some indication as to which particular theory(ies) or concept(s) in the textbook the thrust of the article applies.

On the other hand, Hofstede (1980a) classified the culture of some nations as low on power distance. Individuals dominated by this dimension do not tolerate highly centralized power and at least expect to be consulted in decision making. Further, Hofstede remarked that status differences (high on power distance) in these countries are suspect. Thus, trainees possessing this cultural orientation, because of their relatively low tolerance for dictatorship, may show some resentment toward a trainer who dictates specifically what they should do. Unlike learners with a high on power distance orientation, they probably prefer an assignment instructing them to look

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for an article on their own and deciding on which theory or concept in the book it best applies--
they prefer a hands-on training approach.

Collectivism/Individualism

Hofstede (1980a) classified the culture of many nations as low on individualism
(collectivistic). Collectivistic societies are tightly integrated, and individuals belong to "in-groups"
from which they cannot detach themselves. People think in "we," as opposed to "me," terms and
obtain satisfaction from a job well done by the group. Hofstede also classified the culture of some
societies as high on individualism. People in these societies look primarily after their own
interests. Collectivistic societies tend to also measure high on power distance and individualistic
societies tend to also measure low on power distance. Hence, the training approach preference
proposed above would be applicable--collectivistic trainees prefer a teacher-centered approach
and individualistic trainees prefer the hands-on approach. This is supported by Hofstede (1987),
who proposed that in individualistic societies, the individual is held responsible for his/her own
development.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Hofstede (1980a) classified the culture many nations as high on uncertainty avoidance.
Individuals in these cultures feel uneasy in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity and prefer
structure and direction. Hofstede (1984) has proposed that improving the quality of life for
employees in these societies implies offering more security and perhaps more task structure on the
job. And he classified the culture of some countries as low on uncertainty avoidance. People in
these cultures tend to be relatively tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity and require considerable
autonomy and low structure. Hence, as in the case of high on power distance and collectivistic

trainees, high on uncertainty avoidance trainees probably prefer a teacher-centered training approach, and vice versa, as in the case of low on power distance and individualistic trainees, low on uncertainty avoidance learners probably handle independent study assignments relatively well-- they prefer a hands-on training approach.

Confucianism. It should be noted that the uncertainty avoidance measure, as developed by Hofstede, is not perfect. The measure for some countries does not appear to reflect the commonly known cultural traits of those countries. For example, Singapore measures low on uncertainty avoidance; yet, the country functions under a governance system which provides high regimentation and stability for its citizens; a system which tends to be more prevalent in high uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g., France's code law, mechanistic system) than in low uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g., United Kingdom's common law, organic system). In fact, the dimension's imperfection was later detected by Hofstede and Bond (1988), especially in countries whose cultures are based on Confucianism, a practical philosophy which is not religion-based, such as the People's Republic of China, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. They propose that cultures which are based on the Confucian philosophy develop stability-generating systems which are considerably different from those generated in religion-based cultures.

South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore measured high on power distance and collectivism in Hofstede's (1980a) study (the People's Republic of China was not included in the study). Thus, as in the case of collectivistic, high on power distance, and high on uncertainty avoidance societies, learners from countries whose culture is based on the Confucian philosophy probably prefer a teacher-centered training approach. Much support for this

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proposition is available in the literature. For example, a Western university professor has concluded that "The impression is [that] they [Asian students] learn by reproducing and are less able to apply their knowledge to practical situations [than Western students]" (Watkins et al., 1991: 22). In assessing the effectiveness of projects as a learning tool for Chinese managerial trainees, Pun (1989a, 1989b) observed that Chinese learners, in choosing project topic, were often guided more by the availability of reference books than by the practical significance of the potential solutions, and they prefer learning through concrete facts, procedures and precedents. And there is a widespread belief among Western academics that Asian learners tend to rely on rote learning to a greater extent than their Western counterparts (Watkins, Reghi & Astilla, 1991). Anecdotes abound that learner-centered, "hands-on" learning methods commonly used in Western business education, such as case studies and projects, are not well-received in many Asian countries (Pun 1989a, 1989b; Boisot & Fiol, 1987; Murphy, 1987; Rigby, 1986; Staw, 1982).

Discussion

The above has briefly described some existing national cultural classifications of societies and proposed some of the ways they might influence the training approach, teacher-centered or hands-on, preferred by trainees holding those cultural orientations. In essence, we proposed that trainees in or from a society holding an individualistic, low on power distance, low on uncertainty avoidance cultural orientation prefer a hands-on approach, and trainees in or from a society holding a collectivistic, high on power distance, high on uncertainty avoidance or a Confucian-based cultural orientation prefer a teacher-centered approach.

The intent of the framework, which is based on the "culture-specific" theory, which

assumes that different societies possess distinct and relatively stable cultures (Hofstede ,1980; Hickson, Hinings, & Schwitter, 1974), was to provide an aid to trainers who plan to train people in foreign cultures or train people from foreign cultures at home. Fundamentally, the classifications tell cross-cultural trainers that because different societies hold different views, a training approach that is effective with learners from one culture will not necessarily be effective with trainees from another, and, for training effectiveness, adaptations must be made accordingly--for example, Brazilian trainees may learn better through a teacher-centered approach, and Danish trainees may learn better through a hands-on approach. However, cross-cultural trainers need to be cognizant that there are some problems with this framework.   Most cultures which measure low on power distance also measure individualistic and low on uncertainty avoidance, and most cultures which measure high on power distance also measure collectivistic and high on uncertainty avoidance. The proposed framework may therefore have application. But the three measures are not consistent in all cases (as depicted by ? on Figure 2). For example, Germany measures high on uncertainty avoidance, but low on power distance and individualistic, and France measures high on power distance and high on uncertainty avoidance, but individualistic. Thus, one problem is determining which approach to apply with individuals in or from a culture with inconsistent cultural classifications. Is the preferred training approach in such societies teacher-centered or hands-on? The style in Germany and France tends to be teacher-centered, and both countries measure high on uncertainty avoidance. Thus, is the uncertainty avoidance measure the dominant determinant of training approach preference? Research by O.J. Stevens (Hofstede, 1980b) suggests that it might be. His research included MBA students from Germany, France (both high on uncertainty avoidance), and Great Britain (low on uncertainty avoidance). He asked the

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students to write their diagnosis of and solution to a case problem. The majority of the French referred the problem to the next higher authority. The Germans attributed it to a lack of formal policy and proposed establishing one. Hence, the French and the Germans sought direction. The British, however, sought a solution to the problem.

Another problem is that in reality individual trainees must be assessed. For example, not all individuals in Belgium measure high on uncertainty avoidance, nor do all Canadians measure low on uncertainty avoidance. Furthermore, some people in, for instance, collectivistic societies may behave as such in some situations, and behave individualistic in other situations, and some people may behave collectivistic, while preferring to behave individualistic. Thus, cross-cultural training effectiveness may require that the trainer assess each learner enrolled in the training program (indeed a monumental task).

Yet another problem with this framework is that the "culture-specific" theory is not applicable in many situations. Instead, the "culture-free" theory, which assumes that certain situational factors, such as economics and technology (Hickson et al., 1974), affects decisions in all cultures. As was suggested in the experiential learning theory discussion, certain learning environments require certain teacher behaviors. For example, many technical topics, such as math- and accounting-like topics, generally require a high degree of teacher-centered direction in all cultures. Furthermore, training programs must often be designed to accommodate the attainment of the organization's goals, and such designs are sometimes not congruent with the trainee's or trainees' preferred training approach. In other words, a trainee's needs and the job needs sometimes do not match--having to train the trainee to meet the job needs (behavior modification) can sometimes result in uncertainty and unpredictability (Johnston, 1986). Also, the approached

applied is often influenced by whether the trainees want to participate or are being forced to participate in the training program--if they do not want to participate, the teacher-centered approach may (at least in the early stages of the training program) be required.

Another problem, is how to implement the framework in training programs where some trainees come from a culture which prefers one approach and others from a culture which prefers another. Customizing training approaches to trainees' individual needs is sometimes difficult to do, especially when assessing and comparing participants' performance, and can be very costly. In this respect, some psychologists have proposed providing a segment of the approaches (Stuart, 1992); i.e., at least some part of the program should be suited to each trainee's preference.

Notwithstanding the above problems, the framework can in a general way be very useful to cross-cultural trainers. It tells them that if they are training a group of learners from the same culture, organizational goals, function, and cost permitting, they ought to try to customize their approach as much as possible to the needs of that culture--for example, they may lecture more to trainees from cultures which prefer a teacher-centered approach and assign more independent learning projects to trainees from cultures which prefer a hands-on approach. In situations where trainers are training a group of learners from diverse cultures and cannot customize their training approach, the framework may help them explain lower participant performances--in training people, weak participant performance is often the result of application of an inappropriate training program. And at the very least, the framework provides a starting point for determining which training approach might be preferred by trainees in or from a country or countries.

Of course, the propositions need to be tested. A tool which is used to ascertain trainees' learning-style preference is Kolb's (1980) Learning Styles Inventory (LSI). However, such tools

often do not apply well across cultures because concepts developed in one culture often do not translate well in other cultures (Peng, Peterson, & Shyi, 1991). Trainees' preference for various types of pedagogical methods can also be measured by a self-report questionnaire (Stuart, 1992). For example, participants can be asked to rank-order major categories of learning activities which they have experienced on the basis of their conduciveness to learning. The learning activities may include lecture, video viewing, reading, examination preparation, simulation game, case analysis, research project, and problem solving exercises, and so on. However, the self-report approach will not work if the participants have not been exposed to the various learning activities. For instance, instructors in China typically use the lecture approach when conducting training programs. Hence, how would trainees in or from China know about the effectiveness of an independent assignment approach?

Furthermore, trainers and researchers are cautioned that foreign trainees' behaviors may actually be different from those which they observed and/or surveyed. This is because foreign learners may act differently when they interact with "foreign" trainers and/or they may react differently due to language problems. For example, Bu and Mitchell (1992) have suggested that the ambivalent feelings towards Westerners shared by many Chinese learners often lead them to act abnormally reserved and deferential when under the instruction of Western professors. And the impact of language barriers on reactions to various pedagogical activities cannot be overlooked. Regardless of their preferred learning styles, foreign learners with a low fluency level in English, may resist certain pedagogical methods simply because of their inability to meet with the language requirements of those methods. For example, foreign trainees may rank video viewing and lecture low as a preferred pedagogical tool mainly because of their inadequate

fluency in English. And they may rank reading assignments high mainly because it gives them time to digest the material. Furthermore, translation of survey instruments across cultures is often a problem (Peng et al., 1991). Thus, effective research may have to be conducted in the foreign country by a local researcher/trainer using the foreign trainees' language.

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Table 1

Cultural Classifications and Training Approach Preference

Cultural Classifications	Training Approach Preference	
	Teacher-Centered	**Hands-On**
High on power distance	X	
Low on power distance		X
Collectivism	X	
Individualism		X
High on uncertainty avoidance	X	
Low on uncertainty avoidance		X
Confucianism	X	

Figure 2
Cultural Profile of 50 Countries and Learning Approach Preference

Country	Cultural Profile[1]				Learning Approach Preference	
	Power Distance	Individualism	Uncertainty Avoidance	Confucian Cultures	Teacher-Centered	Hands-On
Argentina	High[2]	Low	High		X	
Australia	Low	High	Low[2]			X
Austria	Low	High	High		?[4]	
Belgium	High	High	High		?	?
Brazil	High	Low	High		X	
Canada	Low	High	Low			X
Chile	High	Low	High		X	
Colombia	High	Low	High		X	
Costa Rica	Low	Low	High		?	?
Denmark	Low	High	Low			X
Ecuador	High	Low	High		X	
Finland	Low	High	High[2]			X
France	High	High	High		?	?
Germany (F.R.)	Low	High	High		?	?
Great Britain	Low	High	Low			X
Greece	High	Low	High		X	
Guatemala	High	Low	High		X	
Hong Kong	High	Low	Low	High[3]	X	
Indonesia	High	Low	Low		?	?
India	High	Low	Low		?	?
Iran	High	Low	High[2]		X	
Ireland	Low	High	Low			X
Israel	Low	High	High		?	?
Italy	High[2]	High	High		?	?
Jamaica	High[2]	Low	Low		?	?
Japan	High	Low	High	High[3]	X	
Korea (S.)	High	Low	High	High[3]	X	
Malaysia	High	Low	Low		?	?
Mexico	High	Low	High		X	
Netherlands	Low[2]	High	Low[2]			X
Norway	Low	High	Low			X
New Zealand	Low	High	Low			X
Pakistan	High	Low	High		X	
Panama	High	Low	High		X	

Peru	High	Low	High		X	
Philippines	High	Low	Low		?	?
Portugal	High	Low	High		X	
So. Africa	High[2]	High	Low			X
Salvador	High	Low	High		X	
Singapore	High	Low	Low	High[3]	X	
Spain	High	High	High		?	?
Sweden	Low	High	Low			X
Switzerland	Low	High	High[2]			X
Taiwan	High	Low	High	High[3]	X	
Thailand	High	Low	High[2]		X	
Turkey	High	Low	High		X	
Uruguay	High	Low	High		X	
U. S.	Low[2]	High	Low			X
Venezuela	High	Low	High		X	
Yugoslavia	High	Low	High		X	

[1] The Power Distance, Individualism, and Uncertainty Avoidance dimensions are from Hofstede, G. (1984). The cultural relativity of the quality of life concept. *Academy of Management Review*, 9(3): 391-393. The Confucian dimension is from Hofstede, G. and Bond, M.H. (1988). The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth. *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring: 12-13.

[2] Indicates that the cultural measure is near the line which divides the two opposites (i.e., a moderate measure on the dimension), thus is not included in determining the teaching approach preference.

[3] Indicates that Confucianism, rather than the uncertainty avoidance measure, is used to propose the training approach preferred.

[4] ? indicates that the learning approach preference is not proposed because the cultural dimensions are not consistent across. For example, Austria measures low on power distance and individualistic, for which application of a hands-on approach is proposed, but measures high on uncertainty avoidance, for which a teacher-centered approach is proposed (refer to Figure 1). However, if the uncertainty avoidance dimension is the major determinant of the learning approach preference, then the learning approach preference for Austria, Belgium, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, and Spain would be teacher-centered. And for India, Indonesia, Jamaica, and the Philippines it would be hands-on.