

"SEARCHING FOR SYNERGY:

The Critical Link Between Intercultural Online Tools and Intercultural Classroom Training"

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Forcing square pegs into round holes, as everyone knows, is really difficult. And the result is often painful, artificial and unsatisfactory. Yet offering an on-line intercultural program that was created independently from, and not inherent to, the intercultural training in the classroom is like forcing a square peg into a round hole. This is probably true for most kinds of training, but for intercultural training - dealing as it does with the task of making formerly unrecognized differences visible, and then providing the skills to manage such differences - insuring synergy between online tools and classroom training is absolutely essential. When looking for a provider of both, therefore, it is critical for organizations to first ask their prospective providers the questions: "Is your online learning tool aligned with your classroom training?" "Was the online tool developed independently from the classroom training?" "Does the tool, and its methodology and underlying model, drive the training, or vice versa? Or, worst of all, do they work independently of one another?" In other words, "is there provable synergy between the tool and the training?" Tools typically build awareness, and training typically builds

skills, and if there is no synergy between the tool and the training, there will be little success leveraging awareness into skills.

In today's intercultural marketplace, there have historically been providers of classroom programs, and then there have been providers of on-line technology learning, creating some interesting intercultural on-line training tools. Some classroom training programs are better than others; some on-line tools are better than others. Typically, online learning tools are best when used to raise awareness of fundamental intercultural issues, and as a reference bank for intercultural information. The technology additionally allows for the development of a profile, either individually or organizationally, of the cultural orientation of the users, or their adaptability to specific or generic intercultural challenges. In either case, this can be useful as a snapshot of an individual's (or organization's) cultural "start" point, and the deficiencies which then need to be trained to, in order to create either synergy between them and a target culture with which they may be working, the training needed to create a more effective multicultural team, or the training needed to develop a "third organizational culture" which incorporates the best practices of all the participants. In any of these cases, the tool is a start-point, providing a benchmark of awareness, against which the real training can then take place. The actual development of strategies, the changing of behaviors, the moving from mere cognitive awareness to applicable and measurable behavioral change, is then best accomplished through training, usually of the trainer-driven, classroom type.

Unfortunately, what has happened in the marketplace is a conflation of these mutually different, though synergistic, goals and deliverables. Apples and oranges. Some organizations have misunderstood the best

use of the tools, and in some cases, viewed them as substitutes for valuable training. This wastes the money spent on the online tools, for the tools do not create the necessary behavioral change required for intercultural competence in the workplace, which is best achieved through critical classroom trainer-driven training. On the provider side, training organizations that had traditionally provided classroom training, in an effort to also offer on-line tools, in many cases looked elsewhere for those tools, and had to consequently either graft tools created independently from the content, design and methodology of their classroom programs onto their existing programs, or substantially change what were successful classroom programs to “fit” the limited applications of the independently created tool. Square pegs in round holes again, and again, it doesn’t work. Using externally-sourced intercultural tools with pre-existing classroom programs runs the risk of both the tools and programs being dangerously out of synch with each other. The result, for the user and the client, can be confusing at best, and at worst, useless in developing real intercultural understanding and skills.

Stated simply, synergy of information, design and methodology, is critical to the integration of tools and training, to the achieving of both awareness and skills. Without such synergy, money spent on either tools or training can make more problems than it solves. Let's look at why it is so important to maintain the link between the information, design and methodology of both intercultural tools and training:

INFORMATION & CONTENT: Fundamentally, the content, or information, provided in both the online tool and the classroom program must not contradict, or invalidate, the other. Both the tool and the training need to be built upon the same models, the same

foundation of information, and the same research platform. Yet in the intercultural world, as in most disciplines, information from one source can sometimes contradict or challenge information gathered from a different source, and there are just as many different sources of information in the intercultural field as there are in any other field. The validity of the source for all information used must be established for both the tool and the training program, and if one uses validated information and the other doesn't, the total result is less than valid. Yet this risk is high when externally-sourced tools are used to compliment the information provided in classroom training. It is like different languages are being spoken to try to convey the same information: it is difficult at best, problematic and counter-productive at worst.

DESIGN: If problems can develop when tools and training programs do not get their content in-synch, imagine the difficulties that can emerge when designs - an element of training with traditionally much more variance than static information - are out of synch. As we saw, even with fairly consistent information, variance between tool and program can be serious; imagine the differences that can emerge in the area of design, where the sky's the limit in terms of how relatively consistent content can be designed to be delivered in a variety of different ways. Effective training design, for example, needs to be highly interactive, based on unique exercises created by the provider of the training, and which often come to represent, as hallmarks, the unique and creative nature of that provider, a differentiator that often sets the design (and ultimately success) of one provider's training program over that of another. Consequently, both training program and on-line tool designs are often one-of-a-kind reflections of

entire approach suffers, with one being required to fill the gaps of the other. Additionally, redundancy can inadvertently occur, as different designs deliver information in different packets, some similar, some different: not only does this run the risk of repetition, but it additionally creates confusion in the student's mind, due to the use of two different paths to deliver the same information. Historically, face-to-face classroom training programs provide a more natural environment for interactivity, while on-line tools limit interactivity (but increase efficient content reach): the best blending occurs when classroom training interactivity supports on-line content, and vice versa; unfortunately, if the on-line tool was externally sourced after the training program was created, this kind of synergistic blending is all but impossible to create. Interactive exercises, ranging from icebreakers to in-depth and historically time-tested surveys, may work in one format, but not in the other; and while the nature of the interactivity may be the same (for example, surveys or quizzes), the validity, user-friendliness, content and research base for each may be very different. This creates a contradictory, counter-productive learning experience.

METHODOLOGY: Finally, there is the question of methodology, and the logistical administration of the training. Implementing both successful classroom training programs and the use of on-line tools requires a unified approach making the logistics of coordinating and delivering both programs and on-line tools easy and user-friendly for both the student and the client. If the design problem is solved and the on-line tool is inherently part of the classroom training program, then access to both should be available in one, clean step. If the on-line tool, however, was developed and sourced externally, then often

it is, it is out-of-synch, as we have seen, with much of the content and design of the training program; additionally, it may not be easily accessed as part of the training program, if it is licensed and delivered by yet an independent, third-party provider. And in terms of assessing the success of both a classroom training program and an on-line tool, if the goals and criteria by which we measure the success of either are different (which is usually the case when the on-line tool is externally sourced), then it will be very difficult to assess the success of any combined intervention.

Most importantly, from a business perspective, attempting to integrate externally sourced on-line tools with training programs creates a business challenge that can be compared with the difficulties that occur when businesses experience a merger or acquisition. Which design should predominate? Which content needs to be changed to fit the other? Which method or process of implementation or assessment should be adopted, and which should be eliminated? Inevitably, camps of supporters of either side develop within the provider organization with the goal of maintaining their turf and their authority; this can create a hostile and poisonous environment in which to work, with supporters of the classroom training program designers and supporters of the on-line tool designers, in competition internally with each other to dominate not only the process, but the fundamental definition of the provider organization. Are we a training and learning program company, or are we an on-line technology-based learning company? Essentially, when an externally-sourced tool is brought into an intercultural training provider, the client purchasing either needs to seriously investigate the degree to which the program they think they have been using is being substantively altered or

most profoundly, a client needs to ask itself the degree to which it is now exposing itself to working with an intercultural provider who may be going through the trials and tribulations of what amounts essentially to a merger and acquisition.

WHAT'S THE RISK?: Square pegs in round holes. Apples and oranges. Training programs and on-line tools need to be carefully integrated and aligned, or else what starts out as sounding like a synergistic dream can turn quickly into a nightmare. If on-line tools are created inherent to and emerge out from the training programs they are designed to support, then the blending can, in fact, be dreamy, providing the best benefits of both. But if the on-line tools are externally sourced, and artificially grafted onto the previously existing curriculum of the training program provider, the result can be fraught with difficulties. The upside of technology-based tools is greater efficiencies and learning reach; by spreading awareness ubiquitously and efficiently, its role is insured in intercultural training. The upside of classroom training is its power to focus on customized, behavior-changing skills-building. Together, there can be a winning synergistic team, but only if the tool is inherent to the training, produced by the same organization, the tool emerging out of the training. Any other path is a round peg in a square hole.