

# **Intercultural Internet-Based Learning: Know your Audience and What They Value**

Joanne P. H. Bentley  
Mari Vawn Tinney  
Bing Howe Chia  
Utah State University

## **Introduction**

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. These values are primarily shaped by (1) cultural norms, (2) the philosophy(s) of learning to which we adhere, and (3) our personal preferences for learning. When our educational values match those embedded in the course, the match-up contributes to our perception of it 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 in the course. Sometimes, savvy 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 an international student attempts the value matching process across cultures, differences between their (home) local system and the (international) local system are magnified. The result can be students choosing courses in which they are more likely to perform poorly educational .

As increasing numbers of international students choose to take IBL courses which 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. They will prefer one more congruent with their cultural expectations. (Tom Nickles, 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 more likely to be actively seeking new kinds of learning experiences taught in the local metaphor. According to Zamel & 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’s shared and valued within the community helps them adjust better.

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/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 , should have the information and options that will allow them to choose courses that match their own educational values.

The designer has the responsibility to make the courses educational values explicit in the course materials and it is the learner’s responsibility to understand themselves as learners and find out about the context from which the course originates. This paper recommends a new intercultural standard for expressing the instructional of a course through which designers (producers) and students (consumers) can clearly communicate the educational values to each other. It should be similar to that of food labeling. We believe that designers should make the values imbedded in the course visible to the learner in an advance syllabus or course description. Eight educational value differentials or factors can help us make a distinctive difference in how the learner perceives *quality* in instruction. will discuss how designer integrate the eight differentials in preparing instructional materials and apply strategies to match users to suitable courses. We conclude with two handy checklists of recommendations distilled from the research; one for low-context (North American or Western) instructional designers and one for high-context students.

## Eight educational 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 which make a distinctive difference in how the learner perceives *quality* in instruction. The eight educational value differentials discussed in this paper are language, culture, technical infrastructure, local/global perspective, learning styles, reasoning patterns, high/low context, and social context. It is not possible to value everything equally. The competing demands on a limited set of resources influences where resources are allocated. These eight value differentials appear to be the primary pivot points around which major cultural differences in perception of quality instruction currently hinge.

### 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 non-verbally, and process time (Mayer, et al., 2003). Language and culture are intertwined, and it is difficult to understand one well with out 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 the struggles of non-English speakers, for example. A recent study by a leading British linguist, David Graddol states, “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 predicts 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 orientations 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 of online courses. 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 currently 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 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 simpler sentence structure and avoiding slang, colloquialisms, local humor, and local insider examples whenever possible. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in general, IBL designers and instructors would do well to consider that in some ways they are always designing for a global audience. Warschauer (1999) reminds us that the Internet allows communication in hundreds or thousands of languages at the same time as evidenced by Internet discussion boards available in so many languages. He expects that people will 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. Cultural differential

There are many ways to describe culture and cultural differences, and 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) defines 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 and 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 paper we are interested in exploring only the differences between different cultural groups in what they value in education. It is accepted that sub-groups within a country may differ in significant ways, but when compared to groups of learners from other countries, sub-groups 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 different as we expect cultural differences in nationalities from persons from other countries. Some of the same 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 in this paper then we recommend that you employ the design heuristic at the end of this discussion. Increasingly in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, academics are suggesting that there is no one best way, fixed way, or one-size-fits-all way to teach language or culture (Edge, 2004) so we encourage you to 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 (Hofstede, 1986; Neuliep, 2003; Freeman and Freeman, 2001; Gunawardena, et al., 2003; Nieto, 2002, and Bennett 1993). However, in North America there is a prevalent expectation that those coming to the US should assimilate into the dominant culture and adopt its values. Historically, it has not been the norm in the US to value cultural differences and see them as contributing positively to a rich educational experience for all involved. Where this attitude might 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 their differences in educational values and social systems. 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 they have 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 course. Solano-Flores and Nelson-Barber (2000) 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 reasons so 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 (Hofstede, 1986; Nieto, 2002; Smith, 2001; Gunawardena, et al., 2003, Echevarria, 2000; Palloff and Pratt, 2003; and Freeman and Freeman, 2001).

### 3. Technical infrastructure differential

Although instructional designers and learners in IBL courses will have different cultural backgrounds and educational values, naive designers may plan the course in terms of the global reach of the course's technical capabilities to teach in any nation with sufficient infrastructure. They think only of bandwidth, access to email, and processor speed. Economic reviews such as the Global Information Technology Report 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" (World Economic Forum, 2003). Although it is crucial to know the technical ability of a country to receive IBL content, they must also see it as a desirable thing to have. It is very ethnocentric to believe that other groups of people see things the way Americans do with the same assumptions, values, and core beliefs. It is important to remember that technical reports like 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 verses global differential

It is important to remember that the learner is usually taking an 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 goes on to explain that because of the general ease of creating IBL courses with popular authoring tools, the general look of courses are "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 LMS 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 cost more effective development model.

### 5. Learning style differential

Student's attitudes are based on the experiences, values, and the different ways of mental programming of a culture. Education is value laden, and how learners perceive "Good" instruction is based on what they think and

value. What makes one group of learners happy is just as likely not to meet the needs of another group of learners. Martinez, et al. (1999) and Bentley (2000) have shown that the same 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 the authors' opinion, the instructional designer and the learner need to share responsibility for knowing what educational values they hold. The designer has the responsibility to make the courses educational values explicit in the course materials. It is the learner's responsibility to understand themselves as learners and find 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) supports the concept of various learning styles across cultures and maintains 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" (p. 51-55). Many American training products use models that do not fit the varying teaching and learning styles in different cultures.

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 how a noticeable characteristic of Anglo-Americans' communication style is direct because they think in a "line", while the Japanese, for example, think in non-linear "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 to communicate. On the other hand, the general Japanese "stepping stone model" of meandering dots is characteristic of circular thinking and sending ideas indirectly for others to surmise the meaning. The indirect or non-verbal cues in the setting, body-language, tone, pauses, silence, and the status of individuals are important to communicate 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 cultures is noted in column one. The characteristics of low-context cultures, where the focus is more on individuals and not on the group, are listed in column two. 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 their limited ability in English as well as their conflicting learning preferences which do not easily accommodate to using materials prepared by and for low context culture users (Anglo-American users). Hofstede (1986) explains that "academic learning in different industrial countries appeals to different intellectual abilities."

<i>Table 1 Characteristics of High-Context and Low-Context Cultures</i>	
<b>High-Context Culture</b>	<b>Low-Context Culture</b>
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

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

8. Social context differential

The theory of situated cognition describes 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 1.

## Relationship between Rapport & Context

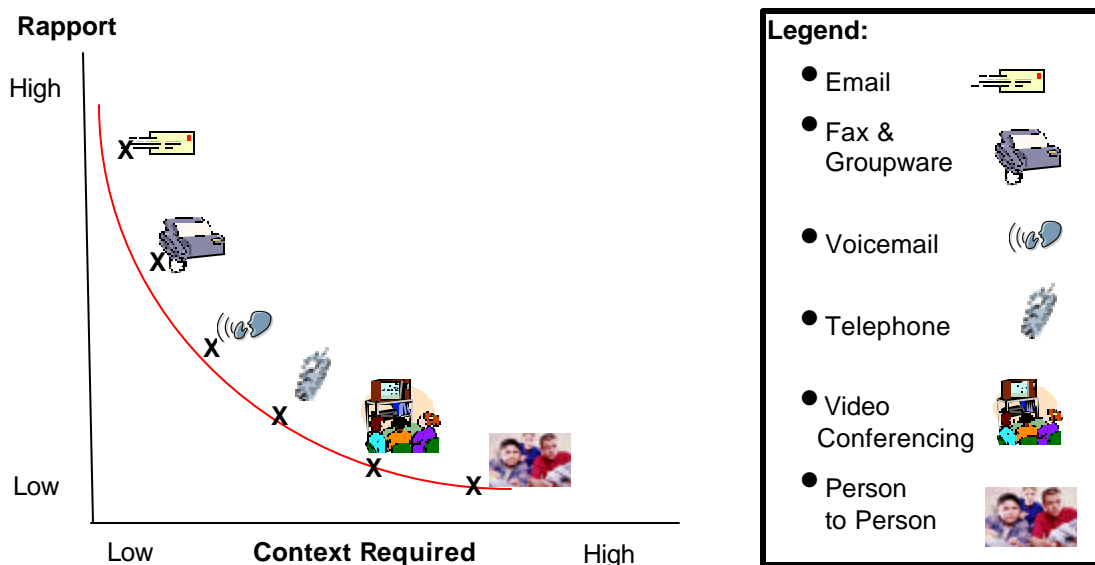


Figure 1. Rapport verses context axis adapted from Gundling (2000).

Taking Email as an example from this chart, we see that it's a low context medium that requires a high rapport between the sender and the receiver to understand each other's words. Low-context North Americans for example, emphasize the information in Emails 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 non-verbal cues, social standing, and situational contexts to know how to respond appropriately. In many Western societies, Email is seen as a quick, easy way to communicate, but this ease of using only words to communicate content and meaning can often put members of a high-context culture at a disadvantage. Archee (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 emails 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 with others. High context learners struggle as newbies in online environments when the technologies used actually alter the social presence of individuals and offer few clues as to the meanings of some conversations and online content. Gundling (1999) asserts that important messages are best communicated through high-context means. In cross-cultural settings he recommends 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 eight value differentials relate to IBL**

The most basic ADDIE 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 & Ragland, 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 this sector of the market was not included in the needs and learner analysis. While it is highly recommended that a thorough audience analysis be conducted, the authors realize the how difficult it is to try to accommodate *all learners, everywhere* and do not recommend that you try to be everything to everyone. The assumptions from the audience analysis which 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 including a new element to the instructional process of analysis and recommend not only seeking to know the audience but the designer as well. We encourage students to share the responsibility for finding the right course themselves by self-selecting classes they feel would be a good match between their educational values and those of the instructional designer using the eight educational value differentials.

A certain degree of "readiness" is needed to be able to successfully take IBL classes. There are many survey forms such as Strategies for Success: Study Skills for Online Learners, currently available that review time management, study skills, test taking, and motivation to determine how well suited a learner is for IBL (Alamo Community College District, 2002). 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 which 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, p. 158).

People relate to the Internet through how it intersects with their lives, uses, applications, and contexts. Bruce (2002) explains that "Out of these doings, people build individual constructs of the Internet" and in the form of knowledge structures that allow them to interpret and make sense of things (p. 158). Gaps occur in the continuum between actually using the Internet, 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 with each successive using. In the initial stages, however, we believe their first attempts at IBL courses will be more successful if they find a course that offers some options that match their culturally based educational values.

Bentley & Tinney (manuscript under review) found that students with a non-US educational background have statistically significant different preferences for how they want to interact with content than students with a US educational background. They go 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) concludes 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 learners' cultural orientation 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. Now we present the following checklist from the research to help aid this process. The checklist is primarily categorized into two parts; recommendations for teacher/instructional designers and recommendations for students.

#### **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 pre-course 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 they can understand what you intended.
5. Before any real-time activity, make topic information available ahead of time for students to review 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), Main (2002), Rao (2002) suggests that materials should be designed along these guidelines:
  - Place little emphasis on personal achievement;
  - Define success in terms of sociopolitical, rather than individual, goals;
  - Promote group solidarity rather than individual self-interest;
  - Be written in an indirect, impersonal style;
  - Emphasize tradition and history.

### **Eight Recommendations Designers Should Make to Their High-Context Students:**

Students from high context cultures are accustomed to a systematic, step-by-step, highly disciplined approach to teaching. Hopefully, these suggestions can help high-context learners as they shop for online courses to quickly adapt to a low-context IBL learning environments.

1. Be less dependent 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. Do you have an open mind to try some new things? Are you ready to be stretched mentally? Socially? Culturally? 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 be reasonably 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, then drop the class.

## **Conclusion**

The eight educational value differentials or factors which make a distinctive difference in how the learner perceives *quality* in instruction are language, culture, technical infrastructure, local/global perspective, learning styles, reasoning patterns, and social context.

In designing IBL instruction one should take into account that users may well 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. We should follow Daniel and Macintosh's (2003) recommendation to "be watchful that [IBL] solutions do not entrench the digital divide, or even worse widen it (p. 822). We should also be particularly sensitive to the cultural relevance of imposing past successes of the industrialized world" into other contexts.

We should be doing all we can to understand the audience for IBL and what they value. As we have shown, how we determine "good" instruction is based on what educational values we hold. Understanding where our educational values come from and how they might differ across cultures is important as the internet-based learning (IBL) market becomes increasingly global. If we will do so, learners can then choose courses that match their educational values for a more comfortable learning experience or know that choosing classes which do not match their educational values will require that they learn in new ways.

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