Trainer Perceptions of Culture, Race and Ethnicity on Facilitation of Training Programs: A Global Perspective

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This qualitative study examined how trainers perceive and manage training programs with racially and ethnically diverse participants. Five themes emerged: global perspective, learning styles and culturally diverse participants, facilitation style, preparation for training with culturally diverse groups and, culturally sensitive training materials. Through experience, the trainers developed a global perspective, being literate about the cultural programming of diverse cultures, knowing how to manage the implications of having more than one culture in a learning event.

Keywords: Training/Training and Development, Diversity, International Human Resource Development

Problem Statement

The workplace is increasingly more diverse, global, and multicultural, and when we start to add other nationalities to our workplace, the possibilities for variations in cultural identity expand (Heistad, 2005). This is important to business because the corporate sector and society at large place a premium on training and preparing employees who are flexible and can utilize pre-existing skills and knowledge in new and varied ways in the workplace. A problem exists, however, in that little is known about the day-to-day practices of successful trainers who recognize the workplace trends and have incorporated inclusive and sensitive tools and techniques into their training practice. It would be helpful for educators to look at how trainers have modified their facilitation techniques and methods, or incorporated culturally sensitive practices as a way to be inclusive in a training program. It would also be helpful to examine how they have adapted their facilitation styles when working with culturally diverse groups in a training program. This is important because in any well-designed training program, trainers, as far as possible, need to recognize that cultural differences do not disappear simply because people live and work together. Recognizing the influence of culture helps to clarify what people new to training should do when preparing for and facilitating programs with culturally diverse groups in the workplace. In order to inform best practices, it's important to examine how the perceived effect of more than one culture in these experiences can shed light on how trainers prepare for their training programs when anticipating a culturally diverse group. Ignoring the needs and perspectives of racially and ethnically diverse employees could reinforce stereotyping, increase intolerance and misunderstanding and prevent employees from using their diversity to positively impact the bottom line. Ostensibly, training professionals have the responsibility to understand the learning styles and cognitive differences of minority learners but they also have the responsibility to understand how cultural differences of the learners in the global workplace might impede or enhance their learning. This places at the forefront the need for professional trainers to be well versed in the culture of the participants, specifically as it relates to learning styles and cognitive differences, language issues, customs, concepts, beliefs, etc.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts and ideas being discussed in this study (about what it means to professional trainers who facilitate a training program when the participants are racially and ethnically diverse) are inspired by Dilg (1999), Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998), Gay (2000), Kemper (1998), and Williams and Green (1994). With globalization and increasing cultural diversity a feature of many organizations, these authors emphasize the need for educators to understand a learner's culture and manage the implications of more than one culture in a learning event. Specifically, being aware of and understanding the implications of culture and discovering alternative approaches to facilitating training programs with diverse groups. This includes adapting and modifying methods and techniques of facilitation that might be more suitable to diverse participants.

Dilg (1999) and Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) also emphasize that trainers need to understand that managing a training program also involves knowing about the participants' cultural values and learning styles.

Williams and Green (1994) add that ignoring cultural values can lead to ineffective learning in the workplace and a loss of credibility, respect and effectiveness for trainers facilitating adult education programs.

Understanding the Adult Learners' Culture

Culture influences what people see as being new, different, significant, or obvious and if learners are from different cultures, there may be some inherent differences in their views and values. The trainer may need to establish some common ground or even decide to try to understand and work with the learner's culture and perceptions (Williams & Green, 1994). This includes: recognition of how learners see, think and feel about things and why; how they express what they see, think, and feel; how this differs from the trainer's culture and other participants' culture; and how they solve problems, both individually and in a group (which is based on their assumptions, values, and beliefs). Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) referred to these differences as a person's cultural programming. This can include differences in the foods they prefer, religious practices, dress, languages, and the homes in which they live. Understanding more about the adult learner's culture informs what training methods and techniques are effective with culturally diverse learners. Williams and Green (1994) also think trainers need to be aware of how their own culture will affect how they behave with others. This includes their attitudes toward others, how they communicate, and how they guide the learning process and training session. Generally, trainers need to explore, learn, and know enough about the learner's culture to be able to make informed decisions about the individual's learning and development needs. At the core of their ideas is recognizing and managing their own cultural differences and becoming culturally literate about the participants.

Risks of Ignoring Cultural Issues

With rapid organizational change, increasing free movement across borders, changing demographic trends and a workforce that is much less traditional than it was (in the sense that at one time people in a job were of the same gender, of similar educational level or background, from the same town or community, and used the same first language), the authors noted that some of the risks of not addressing cultural issues in a training program are: (a) reinforcing stereotyping and increasing intolerance and misunderstanding in the group, (b) giving the impression that people who are racially and ethnically diverse are so different that they cannot be understood, and (c) participants either physically or mentally withdraw from the training program.

The Trainer's Role and Implications for the Trainer

Dilg (1999), Gay (2000), Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998), and Williams and Green (1994) believe trainers can modify and design learning events that do not force participants to compromise the culture they subscribe to, and, to achieve a better return on investment of time and money, work with the prevailing culture rather than ignore it. It is also necessary to adopt a global perspective, and to gain cross-cultural skills to be effective in training with culturally diverse groups (Kemper, 1998). Dilg (1999), and Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) add that to be effective, trainers need to acknowledge that people bring multiple cultures to the training session and the curriculum design must acknowledge the multiple cultures, races, ethnicities, values, beliefs, etc. of the participants.

Research Questions

This study examined how trainers perceive and manage a training program with racially and ethnically diverse participants. The question to be researched was: How do trainers perceive the influence of the racial and ethnic diversity of trainees on facilitating workplace training programs? Research questions that guided this study were:

- What have professional trainers experienced when they have facilitated adult education programs with racially and ethnically diverse participants?
- What does it mean to professional trainers who facilitate a training program when the participants are racially and ethnically diverse?
- How have global workplace trends and having more than one culture represented in a training program influenced how trainers facilitate a program?
- What do professional trainers do to prepare for a group that is going to be culturally diverse?
- What methods and techniques do trainers use when facilitating a training program for a group of adult learners who are racially, ethnically and culturally diverse?

The goals of this study were to (a) provide a detailed description of the training professionals' experiences when facilitating training programs with racially and ethnically diverse participants, through first person accounts, (b) examine the meaning and essence of the training professionals' experiences when facilitating adult education programs with racially and ethnically diverse participants, (c) explore how workplace trends and having more than one culture represented in a training program influenced how trainers facilitate a program, and (d) shed light on how trainers prepare for training sessions with diverse groups and what methods and techniques they use for facilitating training programs when anticipating a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse group in the global workplace.

Methodology and Research Design

This is a qualitative investigation, using the interpretive model. Researchers operating in the interpretivist framework attempt to interpret and make sense of events, actions and interactions in context from the point of view of the individual participant as opposed to group experiences (Creswell, 1998). The study was particularly interested in professional trainers who facilitated programs on a variety of topics (which often did not include diversity training or cross-cultural training) in corporate settings that involved culturally diverse learners. The trainers in this study are not "diversity" trainers doing cross-cultural training, but they needed to address the diversity and cultures of trainees attending their programs in order to be effective and successful. The purpose of this study was to interpret and make sense of the experiences of professional trainers who facilitate education programs with racially and ethnically diverse groups. Specifically the trainers' perceived effects of race and ethnicity was explored to determine their effect on facilitating adult education programs.

Creswell (1998), Schwandt (1994), and Patton (1990) use the term 'purposeful sampling' to describe the strategy for selecting the sites and individuals to study when doing interpretist inquiry. All four authors consider purposeful sampling as selecting participants who have experienced the phenomenon, are interested in understanding its nature and meaning, are willing to participate in lengthy interviews and perhaps follow-up interviews, and will allow the investigator the right to tape-record the interview and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. For this study, the participants represented people who had experienced this phenomenon. The sample was drawn from the membership of a local chapter of a professional organization for trainers and resource professionals working and serving in the Midwest. All qualified participants:

- Held membership in the Chicagoland Chapter of American Society of Training and Development.
- Had some amount of higher education or possessed a higher education credential in training or a related field of study.
- Had at least five years of experience working in a for-profit organization where their primary job was trainer and they facilitated programs with racially and ethnically diverse employees.
- Were not "diversity trainers". They needed to address the diversity of their trainees in order to be effective and successful.
- Within the past year, were largely responsible for facilitating training programs with racially and ethnically diverse groups of adults in which 25% or more of learners represented racial or ethnic minority groups.

There were 10 participants in the study. Two interviews were conducted with each participant, resulting in 20 interviews. The interview technique was semi-structured, open-ended using an interview outline and critical incident technique. The purpose was to relate to the interviewee's frame of reference so that each person's structure of understanding and interpretive filters could be understood as closely as possible to the way it was experienced by the interviewee. Interviewees reconstructed their professional backgrounds, and how they came to be involved in training, what they perceived as being important in facilitating, as well as what they did to prepare for a program with a group of participants who were racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. Critical incidents, according to Mezirow (1990), are designed to highlight particular concrete and contextually specific aspects of a person's experiences. The emphasis was on recalling specific events, situations, and people rather than asking to identify general assumptions about their experience.

Results and Findings

There were five major themes that emerged from the interviews. The study's first major theme *Global Perspective* speaks to the guided research question: what have professional trainers experienced when they have facilitated adult education programs with racially and ethnically diverse participants? This theme is consistent with the writings of Dilg (1999), Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998), Gay (2000), Kemper (1998), and Williams and Green (1994). They posit, with globalization and increasing cultural diversity a feature of many organizations, educators need to understand a learner's culture and manage the implications of having more than one culture present in a learning event. A majority of the trainers recognize the growing importance of globalization and an increasingly diverse workforce as the feature of many organizations and believe they have developed and adapted a global perspective. The trainers were intentional in learning about the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of the diverse groups they have worked with in multinational corporations. They believe they have gained cross-cultural skills and are becoming culturally literate. Nearly all of the trainers have lived and worked in other countries and believe this has helped them relate to culturally diverse people and understand that people are coming from a different perspective than the trainers'. They also believe their experiences living in different countries and working with diverse cultures have

taught them to pay attention to, be aware of, be in tune with, and be sensitive and empathetic to the participants' needs in a training session. Further, to these trainers, having a global perspective means handling a different set of duties to facilitate workplace training programs including being culturally literate and sensitive to the customs, values, beliefs, norms, etc. of culturally diverse groups as well as knowing about the cultural programming of diverse groups (differences in food, language, where people live, religious beliefs, etc.). They adapt their training programs to the uniqueness of the participants to optimize the learning environment for everyone. The trainers global perspective reflects a paradigm sift in workplace training trends.

The second major theme, *Learning Styles and Culturally Diverse Participants,* answers the research question: what does it mean to professional trainers who facilitate training programs when the participants are racially and ethnically diverse? This theme stems from the trainers examining their own position and role and the learning needs and knowledge acquisition process of adults. These trainers believe that everyone does not learn in the same way and that getting and keeping people actively involved in learning lies in understanding learning style differences and preferences. They believe that in order to be effective and do a good job facilitating they need to use different teaching or facilitation strategies to work with different learning styles. These findings are consistent with Dilg (1999) and Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) who suggest effective trainers need to understand the customs, concepts, beliefs, norms and attitudes of those attending a training program. Their reflections are also consistent with the writings of Dilg and Gardenswartz and Rowe who emphasize that it is not simply enough to be culturally inclusive. Rather, trainers need to understand that managing an adult education program also requires knowing about the participants' learning styles as well as cultural values.

All believe race and/or ethnicity are not solely reflective of how an individual processes knowledge and learns. They posit it is a combination of an individual's learning style and their culture. Not only did the participants acknowledge the importance in understanding that people are different on many levels; they reiterated the importance of being sensitive to the learners' needs and developing a good understanding of cultural differences when facilitating. This includes being aware of the different communication patterns, behaviors, actions, attitudes and values across cultures. They do this to avoid making incorrect assumptions and generalizations that one individual may represent an entire culture.

The third research question, how do global workplace trends and having more than one culture represented in a training program influence how trainers facilitate a program, informs the theme *Facilitation Style*. This third major theme evolved from the participants' recurrent comments stressing the importance of a flexible, facilitative, friendly, sensitive, and approachable facilitation style. Specifically, all trainers emphasized not subscribing to one particular method or style of facilitation and using different teaching strategies when they lead a training program. Many of them create a climate that encourages participation. They use open ended questions, and try to create a safe environment for the participants.

Many of the trainers build rapport through conversation and interaction with different trainees and groups and are extra sensitive about and avoid offending anyone. This is in agreement with Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) and Williams and Green (1994) who emphasize establishing an atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable and are not threatened by external factors. Nearly all of the participants used the terms "flexible", "facilitative", "friendly", and "approachable" to describe their facilitation style. When defining facilitative and friendly, nearly all of the participants said they have the ability to improvise, take a group from one place to another, and to guide the group when facilitating. Several of the participants said they don't always follow the material; they try to add something extra to the program, vary their pace of facilitation, and use open ended and probing questions to get the people more involved. Williams and Green (1994) echo these thoughts and theorize that if trainers understand the needs of people, they might discover more suitable and alternative approaches to the situations they are dealing with in the training programs. When they talked about being approachable and flexible, several said they use humor when they facilitate. The trainers did note, however, that they are judicious about when to use humor.

Kemper (1998) suggests that trainers be perceptive to nonverbal language and pay attention to subtle messages of body language, facial expressions, what isn't being said and what is going on in the room. Dilg (1999), Gay (2000), Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998), and Williams and Green (1994) add that trainers can modify and design learning events to take account of each learner's culture and run learning events that do not force participants to compromise the culture they subscribe to. When facilitating training programs, the participants recounted using a variety of teaching strategies including writing exercises, group work, lecture, and role-playing. Some have the group do illustrations, move around, work in small groups, and mix up the activities. Others have the participants draw pictures, solve case studies, do demonstrations, play games, and role play. All of the trainers talked about the importance of accommodating differences in communication patterns among the people attending their programs. This is important because they believe that in any well designed program, trainers need to recognize and understand that cultural differences do not go away when a person comes to a training program.

All of them reinforced the need to be aware of diverse values and beliefs across the cultures of those at their sessions and were cautious about making generalizations and assumptions about how specific cultural groups respond to different teaching strategies at a training session. As Kemper (1998) recommended, the trainers let participants use their own language in small groups because more learning may transpire. They support this by having interpreters at their training sessions.

Theme four, *Preparation for Training Culturally Diverse Groups* stemmed from the descriptions of the ways the trainers prepare training materials that are more personally meaningful and more consistent with the cultural orientation of the diverse groups they work with. This theme also answers the research question: What do professional trainers do to prepare for a group that is going to be culturally diverse? Their comments and reflections are shared by Williams and Green (1994) who posit adults bring multiple cultures to the learning session and it is simply not enough to be culturally inclusive when designing training programs. Rather, the curriculum design must acknowledge the individuals' multiple dimensions of culture, race, ethnicity, values, and beliefs in order to promote development and involvement. This theme addresses how the trainers consider the culture of the participants when preparing to facilitate a program. Even though they expect a diverse audience, the trainers believe it is their job to do the research about the participants' backgrounds before the sessions. All trainers think it is important to build rapport through conversation and interaction with different trainees and groups before, during, and after a training session. The trainers also design their instruction to be more consistent with the cultural orientation of the people attending their sessions. They incorporate multi-cultural information, resources, and materials in the subjects and skills taught. This includes accounting for the cultural norms such as the holiday observances, food restrictions, the language proficiencies, the hours worked, breaks, and time off. Through their experiences trainers have recognized the importance of learning about and being sensitive to different cultures and have made efforts to accommodate these differences when preparing for adult education programs.

The trainers not only acknowledged the importance of understanding cultural programming but also the different communication patterns of multicultural groups. In response to this they secured interpreters to accommodate language barriers. They also use guest presenters who reflect the cultural diversity of the group, they read about the country's culture, economics and politics before the sessions, and they clarify terminology, words and concepts that may have different meanings or values among training participants.

The genesis of theme five, *Culturally Sensitive Training Materials,* evolved from the statements of the participants throughout the interviews indicating that presentation material has to be relevant and meaningful to the participants. This major theme speaks to the research question, what methods and techniques do trainers use when facilitating a training program for a group of adult learners who are racially and ethnically and culturally diverse? The trainers all use real life work situations that feature the cultures of the group they are working with, use storytelling and scenarios as team building activities. Scenarios are based on situations relevant to participant's actual day to day work, culture, life experiences, and values. Trainers use a variety of presentation methods including pictures, writing exercises, videos, movie scenes, lecture, role plays, debates, demonstrations, etc. to accommodate cultural differences and individual learning styles, to elicit participation from all, and to ensure all have an opportunity to be heard.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The trainers expressed that through their experiences with various cultures, they have developed a *global perspective* which seemed to emerge as a paramount feature of all of the trainers' backgrounds and experiences. To the trainers, having a global perspective meant being literate about the cultural programming of diverse cultures and knowing how to manage the implications of having more than one culture present in a learning event. This global perspective not only influences the way the trainers approach training; in fact, it is a level of awareness, a broader way of seeing themselves and the people who attend their training sessions, that shapes everything they do as trainers, from the planning stage to the preparation and facilitation stages of training delivery. Rather than adapting their regular training sessions in order to accommodate diverse groups, these trainers assume that every training group they have is going to reflect some type of diversity, and therefore, their training content and facilitation approaches, materials, preparation and every other aspect of training are designed to be inclusive from the start. Then, when they are making adaptations to the basic curriculum, the trainers are customizing it to fit the specific cultures of the groups represented in each specific training group, not simply planning for a homogenous or diverse group in general.

While five themes emerged from the interviews with trainers, the trainers seemed to ground their views in a global perspective, which was more of a paradigm shift from which the other four themes emanated. Because of their global perspective, the other four themes came naturally to the trainers.

Figure 1 is a framework for understanding facilitating workplace training programs and shows four themes emanating from the central theme, global perspective. Having a global perspective has taught the trainers to be aware that diverse participants bring different perspectives to the training session and to be effective they needed to educate themselves about the learning styles of culturally diverse groups, learn how to prepare meaningful and culturally sensitive training materials, and learn what facilitation methods and techniques to use to compliment and support the learning needs of the culturally diverse participants.
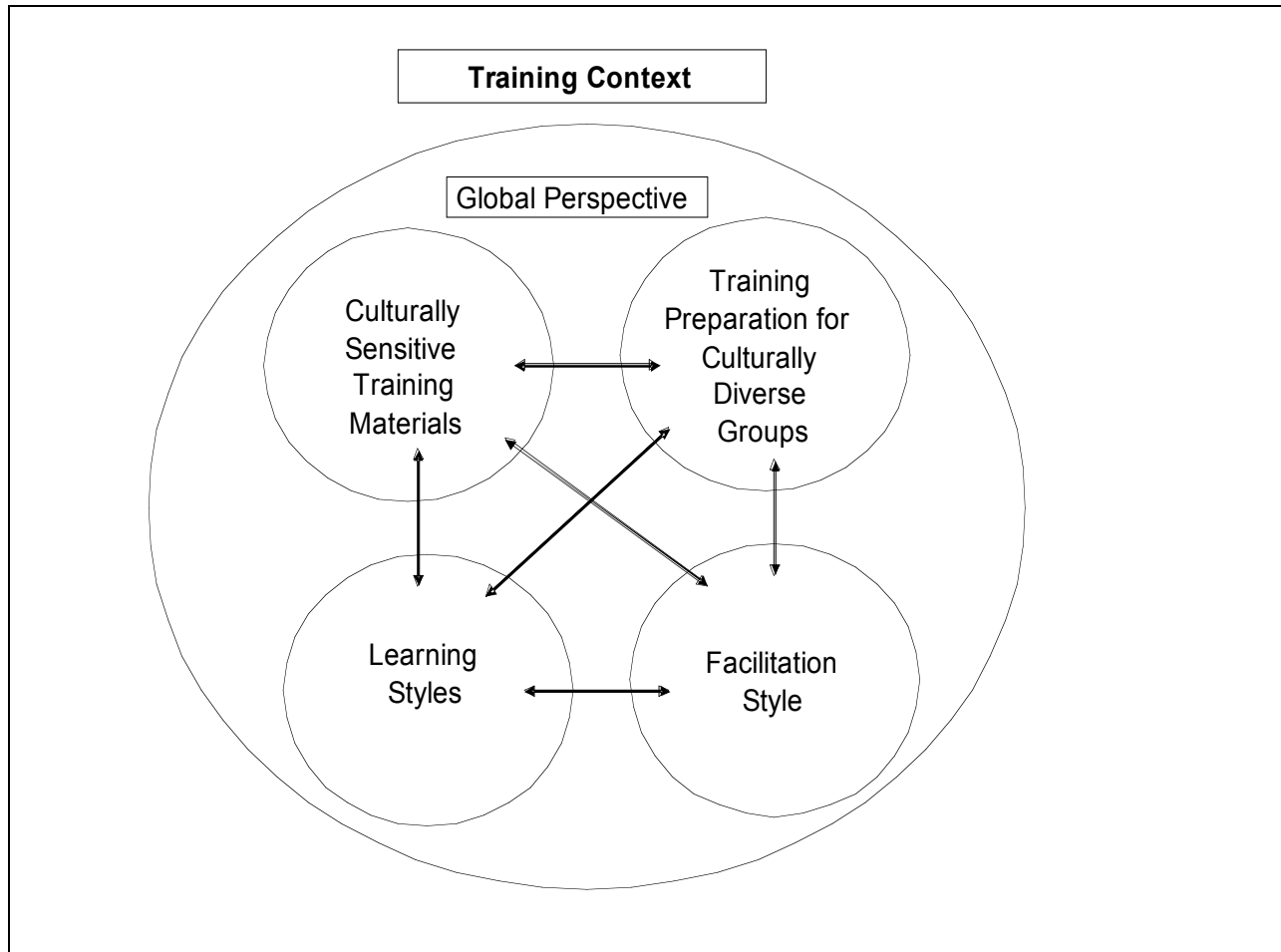

Figure 1. Framework for Understanding Facilitating Workplace Training Programs in Multinational Companies

Theme 1: Global Perspective

Because of their global perspective, the trainers were intentional in learning about the different cultures, religious practices, customs, and beliefs of those attending their training programs. Most of the trainers learned about cultural programming and the influence of language, food, holidays, religious beliefs, where people lived, etc. and all of the trainers seemed to ground their views in their global perspective. Doing all of these things has become second nature for them; they do not think of it as extra work. This reflects a paradigm shift in workplace training trends. In the past, trainers have juggled analysis, design, delivery, logistics and evaluation.

Theme 2: Learning Styles

Because of their global perspective, developed through their experiences working with culturally diverse groups in multinational companies around the world, the trainers in this study know how to be sensitive to the different learning styles culturally diverse participants bring to the training session. From their global perspective, they believe no matter what the racioethnicity of the group, there will always be some differences in learning styles among the participants. To deal with language differences or dialect and differences in communication patterns of a global workforce, the trainers use different teaching strategies to accommodate differences, they bring in interpreters for training sessions, print materials in multiple languages, and adapt and use different teaching and facilitation

styles to accommodate these differences.

Theme 3: Facilitation Styles

To be an effective facilitator requires creating a climate that encourages participation for all participants attending their training program. The trainer's facilitation style is informed by their global perspective and experiences which have taught them to use different teaching strategies to accommodate learning style differences as well as cultural differences in communication patterns, and language and dialect differences of the culturally diverse groups with whom they work. They use pictures, written communication, and videos and they vary their facilitation style when they are facilitating an adult education program with a culturally diverse group.

Theme 4: Training Preparation for Culturally Diverse Groups

Another important theme influenced by their global perspective is how the trainers prepare for training culturally diverse groups. This speaks to developing materials that are personally meaningful and consistent with the cultural orientation of the diverse groups with whom trainers work. But it also speaks to making accommodations for holy days, eating restrictions, travel needs, etc. of those attending their training sessions. The trainers have learned to get to know people before the session and establish relationships with the participants. They all make a point of talking with trainees (frequently) during planning and preparation stages to reinforce purpose, goals, needs, and outcomes. Most of the trainers tapped into their own personal experiences living and working in other countries which taught them to use real life situations in training materials that are based on relevance to participants' actual day-to-day work and life experiences.

Theme 5: Culturally Sensitive Training Materials

To accommodate cultural differences and individual learning styles, trainers use a variety of facilitation styles to present materials. They also emphasize how important it is to design training programs to be more consistent with the cultural orientation of the people attending their training sessions and so they incorporate multicultural information, resources, and materials into the subjects and skills taught. Curriculum materials and the methods and techniques used in a training program must acknowledge the multiple dimensions of culture including race, ethnicity, values, rituals, holidays, holy days, etc. in order to promote development and involvement. Finally, the training materials have to be culturally relevant in order to be meaningful and effective for participants.

In light of the findings of this study and in keeping with the recommendation of Dilg (1999), Gay (2000), Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998), and Williams and Green (1994), this researcher implores trainers, instructional designers, and educators to learn the importance of: (a) managing the training environment where more than one culture is represented, (b) identifying how culture can influence training design and facilitation, (c) becoming well versed in learning styles that influence learning and processing knowledge, (d) becoming well versed in the cultural context (norms, values, beliefs) of each individual in the training program, (e) adapting and modifying training materials to reflect the diversity of the group, (f) acknowledging that all people do not see learning the same way and (g) varying facilitation style to suit each individual and multi-cultural group as much as practicable.

Furthermore, trainers may encourage other educators to consider their cultural assumptions and the messages that they directly or indirectly pass along to their peers regarding cultural programming. Perhaps there would be a shift away from giving the impression that people who are racially and ethnically diverse are so different that non-diverse groups cannot understand them and, as a consequence, create and perpetuate stereotypes. Through self-examination of their own cultural assumptions, other educators may realize and discover more suitable approaches to program design.

How This Research Contributes to new Knowledge in HRD

When training with racially and ethnically diverse groups, it might be helpful to explore the level of experience of trainers who work with culturally diverse groups in multinational companies by researching:
- What should be the level of experience of trainers in the workplace who will be working with culturally diverse groups?
- Should they have lived abroad?
- Should they be multilingual?
- Should they have experience working in global organizations?

With the trend toward an increasingly diverse workplace, and as a way to meet the needs of a culturally diverse workforce, more research needs to be conducted about trainee responses and feedback regarding the effectiveness of the trainers' styles of facilitation, their instructional materials, and their training techniques with diverse groups. Further, human resource development could focus on the racioethnic and cultural backgrounds of the trainees and how this influences their perception of the trainer. Ultimately, they are the ones most affected by what a trainer does or doesn't do and trainers might use this information to prepare materials and adapt their facilitation methods and

techniques to better meet the needs of the trainees.

  This study could be expanded by researching the similarities and differences among racially and ethnically diverse trainers' (African American and Caucasian trainers) overall perceptions of their experiences working with culturally diverse groups. For a couple of participants, religion seemed to be an important component of who they are. A broad reach of diversity should include the religion of the participants. Demographic shifts and workplace trends suggest there will be an increase in minority workers and invariably an increase in racial and ethnic minority participation in work-related learning activities for working adults. Training professionals have the responsibility to not only understand the characteristics of adult learners, but also to know how the cultures of adult learners might impede or enhance their learning. In response to this, trainers and educators ought to consider the findings from this study as a way to understand the need for developing the skills necessary to effectively prepare for and facilitate adult education programs with culturally diverse groups. Additionally, this study's findings offer practical ideas about how to manage the training environment where more than one culture is represented. Human resource development providers are dealing with rapid organizational change and changing demographic trends in the workforce. As a way to meet the training needs of an increasingly diverse workforce, human resource providers might want to consider recruiting new hires that are familiar with the cultures represented within their company. Specifically, when hiring trainers, they might want to consider what the qualifications are of people who are going to train multicultural groups. Some of the important issues to consider are:

- Do trainers have a global perspective? How can this be measured?
- Do they have the ability to adapt materials to meet the needs of the diverse work groups? How can this be demonstrated?
- What is their comfort level and sensitivity toward culturally diverse groups?
- How well-versed are they in learning style differences of culturally diverse people?
- What do they do to prepare for a training program with culturally diverse participants?

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