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Editor

Encyclopedia of Terminology  
for Educational  
Communications  
and Technology

 Springer

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- Also See Additional Resources for Further Information on this Subject**

## Culture-Neutral Design

### SEE ALSO CONTEXT

The term culture-neutral, also referred to as culturally neutral, appears in instructional design research in a variety of contexts; however, all are tied to culture. The meanings behind culture-neutral design demonstrate a focus on factors to consider in the design process. In particular, culture-neutral examples explore design as it relates to project and product development, content (i.e., instructional materials), tools (i.e., technology), people (i.e., human performance), and practice (i.e., educational research). Collectively, there is no standard definition for the term “culture-neutral.”

In the examples of project and product development, Young (2008) states that “if the goal of the project is to internationalize, then the design specifications are generic and culture-neutral. Generic features can be generalized across cultures but they are still culture based” (p. 9). Thomas, Mitchell & Joseph (2002) argue that:

...although it may seem obvious that instructional designers intend to make culturally sensitive products, this is not always the case. Too often the intention is not to make a product that is culturally sensitive or culturally appropriate but culturally neutral. This is often done in an attempt to avoid cultural bias but also occurs as an unhappy consequence of cultural neglect or arrogance. If culture is at the heart of our thoughts and worldview, it is an inescapable element in all that we do, say, feel, wish and design (p. 42).

Bentley, Tinney & Chia (2005) suggest that “when designers know they will have both native and nonnative speakers responding to the instructional discourse style, as much as possible they should create materials that are culturally neutral” (p. 125). This means using “a simple sentence structure and avoiding slang, colloquialisms, local humor, and local insider examples whenever possible ... and consider that in some ways they are always designing for a global audience” (Bentley, et. al., 2005, p. 125).

Other examples of culture-neutral design point to tools, people and practice. Gunawardena & LaPointe (2008) ask, “Why is it necessary to understand the social and cultural factors that influence international distance education? Reasons that come to mind are...recognition that technology connects us but is not culture-neutral” (p. 52). Lee (2011) conducted research on international students’ perceptions of the teacher’s role in an online multicultural learning environment in Korea. On the administered survey, one of the pedagogical factors examined was whether teachers could “be culturally neutral regarding content” (p. 922). Parrish & Linder-VanBershot, (2010) “argue that research-based educational practices *transcend* culture or are culture-neutral and that it is simply good practice to use what research tells us works, regardless of cultural differences” (p. 14).

Future use of the term “culture-neutral” should be labeled as such to accurately represent its specificity. Terms such as multiculturalism and cultural pluralism may not provide as precise representations.

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**Also See Additional Resources for Further Information on this Subject**

## Culture-Specific Design

SEE ALSO CONEXT

The term “culture-specific” has been used to describe learners, learning, learning technologies, design applications, computer technology, and models of culture. However, collectively, there is no standard definition for the term “culture-specific.”

The meanings behind culture-specific are as diverse as culture itself. Jonanssen, Tessmer & Hannum (1999) state that “tools can be anything used in the transformation process (physical, like hammers or computers or mental, like models, theories or heuristics). The use of culture-specific tools shapes the way people act and think” (p. 161). Palaiologou (2009) proposes that “pedagogical strategies and learning models with an intercultural approach might include: (a) culture-specific and culture-general knowledge” (p. 282). In addition, Kinuthia (2007) asserts that:

Many aspects of language and communication such as humor and idioms are culturally relative or specific. This means that interface and content design should take into consideration the content layout, menus, images, color, symbols, and text layout because these elements influence the intended messages (p. 66).

Chen (2007) examined biases in computer software pointing out a “cultural preferences for such things as analytic and linear thinking, the way information is organized, and culture-specific logic and rules” (p. 1114). Culture-specific has also been used to describe learning technologies created for an ethnically diverse target audience or group (Elen, et al., 2010; Frederick, Donnor, & Hatley, 2009; Subramony, 2006).

Culture-specific design is used to explain models of culture or frameworks that guide the design of products or environments for target audiences. For example, McLoughlin’s (1999) model of online learning incorporates “culture specific values, styles of learning and cognitive preferences, and tasks that were designed to go beyond surface level comprehension to achieve deep learning.” (p. 231). Young’s (2009) model of culture states that:

All designs are based in culture; however, some are culture neutral and others culture-specific. This means that all designs are culture-based, but the degree to which one is more neutral and the other more specific is based on the goals of the project and the final product (p. 29).

The term “culture-specific” is typically more accurate and precise than the terms “culturally relevant” and “culturally responsive.”

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**Also See Additional Resources for Further Information on this Subject**

## Curriculum

Curriculum, in the briefest meaning of the term, is a course of studies, or what is to be taught. This immediately becomes problematic within an epistemological and philosophic sense as soon as one asks “Who decides?” The answer ranges from “the teacher” to “a curriculum committee” to “a government authority.” The classic historic statement of the issue was Herbert Spenser’s (1861) “What knowledge is of most worth?” (p. 1). William Shubert (1986) expanded upon this in his comprehensive and synoptic curriculum text which began “What knowledge is most worthwhile? Why is it worthwhile? How is it acquired or created? These are three of the most basic curriculum questions.” (p. 1). Robin Barrow (2006) provided a useful twenty-first century restatement of the age-old curriculum focus:

The task before us now is to attempt to outline what kinds of knowledge we ought as educators, to be concerned to pass on to students or, more generally, the kinds of things we ought to seek to promote when teaching/learning takes place (p. 38).

*Curriculum development* often follows a systematic technological model and in that sense parallels *instructional development* or *instructional design*.

Some curriculum theorists see technology as a serious force that will change and disrupt everything: “Since the advent of the public Internet in May 1995, knowledge