Consideration of Multicultural Learning in Conference Content and Program Design

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ABSTRACT
As conferences become global, the cultural mix of their audience is becoming more diverse bringing with it cultural differences that challenge conference organizers. Learning being the main reason for conferences, it becomes important to understand and consider the learning differences of these cultures present in the audience. This paper focuses on the consideration of multicultural learning styles by conference organizers and planners. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the various ways cultural learning styles and preferences are supported and accommodated, and to gather opinions on the subject.

The research has been able to identify a not very high level of awareness of multicultural learning styles in the first instance, to be able to provide for the cultures. Hence, organizers do not consciously consider cross-cultural learning differences while designing the learning content and program. It is concluded that there is lack of the use of a culture awareness tool or method to help organizers keep themselves aware of cultural learning differences. The need for a format or tool that supports all cultures’ learning is also expressed, although financial costs and catering for the majority is of greater priority. It is recommended that organizers generate greater awareness to be able to decide and offer specific formats for specific cultures. Organizers are suggested to design formats that can integrate both interaction and observation, to create collaborative learning environments.

Keywords: conference tourism; multicultural learning styles; cross-cultural learning; conference content.

INTRODUCTION
Conferences today are considered a part of an international industry with huge investments involved (Rogers, 2008). The main objective of conferences is to provide a platform for attendees to learn and share ideas and experiences (Vanneste 2008); hence learning becomes of utmost importance and the main reason why attendees would spend time and money to travel to a conference. Failure to achieve learning objectives would result in failure to achieve a return on the high investments made in large international conferences (Phillips, Breining, & Phillips, 2008). At the same time, clients and organizers are keen in ensuring that the conference objectives are met and is able to provide a return on investment.

Background of Study
Conferences attract attendees from various parts of the world adding to the cultural mix of the conference audience. Hence, meetings and conferences are becoming more multicultural and diverse in attendance. However, attendees from different cultures communicate and behave differently (Lewis, 2006) and might have their own approaches to learning and learning styles or preferences. This could affect their learning during the conference, where program activities may not be in a way that would suit their learning style, further affecting the achievement of their learning objectives. Further, Honey and Mumford (1983 cited in Hayes and Allinson 1988) state that individuals are more likely to learn when exposed to a learning activity that matches with their preferred learning style. Therefore, awareness of cultural learning differences, background and preferences of cultures could help
conference organizers to decide the type of activities that may be included in the program and content, and the various ways that cultures may be supported for their learning.

Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of the research is to determine the consideration of attendees’ cultural learning styles by conference organizers in the content and program design of a conference.

In relation to this, the research objectives are: (a) to discuss diverse multicultural learning styles in relation to learning in conferences; (b) to evaluate the possible influence of multicultural learning styles of attendees while designing the learning content of an international conference; (c) to determine the level of awareness of conference organizers and planners to accommodate multicultural learning styles.
LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Culture?

Culture, broadly may refer to the social context within which humans live; the ways individuals perceive and respond to the world (Tosi, Rizzo, & Carroll, 1994), but in simpler form, it is the values, beliefs and practices shared by a group of people (Ziegahn, 2001). A very widely used definition of culture is that of Hofstede’s (2001 p9): “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.”

Culture is categorized into different levels as national, organizational and professional culture (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010). However, this research considers national culture, i.e. the culture that people of a country would follow collectively as one big group. When discussing national culture, it is important to consider that, ‘Characterizing a national culture does not, of course, mean that every person in the nation has all the characteristics assigned to that culture. Therefore, in describing national cultures we refer to the common elements within each nation—the national norm—but we are not describing individual’ (Hofstede, 2001 p45).

Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede (2001) identified four main dimensions to study culture: Individualism versus collectivism- the way people perceive themselves primarily as individuals or as members of a group. For example, people from United States are primarily oriented to their selves in contrast to Greeks who are oriented mostly towards common group goals (Hofstede, 2001); Power distance- the extent to which people in a society accept that power or authority in organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010);

Hofstede’s study suggested that most collectivist countries such as Philippines have a larger power distance, a culture that is comfortable with an autocratic management style than self-managed teams in the workplace (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010); Uncertainty avoidance- the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain situations and try to avoid them by providing greater career stability, forming rules, etc.; Masculinity versus femininity- the extent to which a society reflects masculine values that are dominant, such as competitiveness, success and assertiveness (e.g. Japan, Mexico) than softer values such as quality of life, personal relationships, etc. (e.g. Scandinavian countries).

In addition to these, Hofstede (based on the Chinese Value Survey) also described cultures on a long-term versus short-term orientation implying the degree to which people from different cultures act depending on their orientations towards long-term goals and results (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). However, it is important to note that most of the national culture dimensions have originated as an influence of factors such as the history of the nations, geographic and economic variables, religion etc. (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Cultural dimensions can also be correlated with a cultural characteristic of a nation. For example, the low uncertainty avoidance in the United States means the willingness to take risks and achieve more, and hence a high masculinity feature. Nevertheless, this may not be the same for all dimensions. Collectivist countries, known as dependent and for ‘groupiness’ are not necessarily feminine (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).
Hofstede’s dimensions were further expanded in the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) study in 2004, that categorizes ten cultural clusters, suggesting that countries within a cluster are more similar to each other but significantly different from countries of another cluster (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, Gupta 2004). The GLOBE study further reformed Hofstede’s dimensions into nine dimensions: in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, performance orientation, humane orientation, assertiveness and gender egalitarianism (House, et al. 2004). However, the GLOBE study was criticized for being generally descriptive and for its data collection methods (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Nevertheless, it has been able to calculate scores for cultural dimensions to compare national cultures. Similarly, the inability to replicate Hofstede’s research methodology and generalize the application of his dimensions have been criticized by other researchers (Baskerville, 2003). Some studies have also shown how Hofstede’s cultural dimensions contradict with other studies; for example cultures with high power distance scores as India preferred individual work in contrast to his collectivist characterisation in another study (Sulkowski & Deakin, 2009). While it is debated that countries are not cultures (Holtbrügge & Mohr, 2009), that there are many sub-cultures in one country and cannot be stereotyped (Wildavsky 1989 cited in Baskerville 2003), nations are the only variable that can easily be used to compare cultures (Hofstede, 2003).

Other Ways of Comparing Cultures

Another way to identify and understand cultures is using Lewis’ model, also used by Meeting Professionals International (MPI). Lewis (2006) categorises cultures more simply into: multi-active (who are flexible, loquacious, etc.), linear active (who do one thing at a time, plan ahead, are factual and decisive planners) and reactive (who are reflective and people-oriented) cultures. Lewis (2006) also differentiates between cultures as data-oriented cultures that like to gather information such as the Swedes, etc.; dialogue-oriented cultures like the Indians, etc. who like to keep themselves well informed and listening cultures, with a natural tendency to listen more, that are similar to reactive cultures, e.g. Japan, etc. However, Lewis (2006) seems to suggest that country cultures may move from a culture type to another, with time and circumstances. For example, Singapore’s national culture has moved from a higly reactive Confucian culture towards linear active (Lewis, 2006).

Culture and Learning

A country’s culture influences the way one thinks and behaves (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010); processes information and cognition (Earley & Ang 2003 cited in Joy and Kolb 2009), communicates, interacts and solves problems and the way information is retrieved to create knowledge (Vita, 2001), thus producing different learning styles and preferences (Pratt 1992 cited in Manikutty, Anuradha and Hansen 2007).

Learning can take place in various ways- through experiential learning, assimilation or acculturation, memorization, etc. (Manikutty, et al. 2007). Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) defines learning as the process of knowledge creation through the combination of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 1984). Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory has
been used in the past for cross-cultural studies to assess how different cultures learn (Joy & Kolb, 2009).

**Experiential Learning in Cultures**

Cross-cultural differences exist even in each stage of the experiential learning cycle (Vita, 2001). Different cultures may start at a different stage of the learning cycle (Hughes-Wiener, 1986), but this does not imply that they would not go through the other stages, rather that they feel comfortable to start learning from one. Barmeyer’s (2004) research showed Germans as high assimilators and convergers, meaning greater cognitive orientation, while French as accommodators and divergers indicating emotional orientation than Germans. The Finnish are more reflective while the Americans are action-oriented (Kim and Bonk 2002 cited in Economides 2008).

Similarly, Indonesians are seen as reflectors, the Chinese as theorists and French as pragmatists or activists (Charlesworth, 2008). Both the learner’s previous experiences and the context in which learning is to take place influence the learner’s preference for a long-term behavior or learning style (Valiente, 2008). Cultures may have different interpretations of how the process of learning should take place, and may develop strategies depending on circumstances (Valiente, 2008). For example, Chinese learning styles have a different order of learning that begins with the development of skills before exploring ideas as opposed to Western cultures (Biggs and Watkins 1996 cited in Valiente 2008). While they prefer to keep silent as an expression of insight, wisdom and respect for others’ time and knowledge, Latin American and Arab cultures like to engage in long, lively conversations even with new members in a group (Valiente, 2008).

Research also shows that certain cultures are visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or tactile learners (Park, 2000, 2002). The Chinese, Arabs and Koreans are considered to be more visual learners than their U.S. and Japanese counterparts but avoid learning in groups. Some like to remain passive as a step-by-step approach to learning (Valiente, 2008). For them, brainstorming activities, debates and attendee-led activities would seem uncomfortable. Joy and Kolb’s (2009) research study concluded that due to the drive for harmony and kinship, high in-group collectivism cultures may be considered as convergers; cultures with high uncertainty avoidance as assimilators (Joy & Kolb, 2009); high context cultures tend to learn through concrete experiences and low context cultures through abstract conceptualisation (Yamazaki, 2005). However, Joy and Kolb’s (2009) study did not indicate a learning style preference for every cultural dimension outlined by the GLOBE study. Although studies by Mestenhauser (1988), Althen (1994) and Hemphill (1994) have indicated that people from various cultural backgrounds do not prefer to learn in any of the processes suggested by Kolb

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1 Experiential Learning portrays a learning cycle-experiencing (i.e. concrete experiences), reflecting (i.e. reflective observations), thinking (i.e. abstract conceptualisation) and acting (i.e. active experimentation) - a recursive process (Joy & Kolb, 2009). **Divergers** combine concrete experience and reflective observation; **Assimilators** combine reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation; **Convergers** prefer abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation and **Accommodators** use active experimentation and concrete experimentation (Kolb 1976 & Joy and Kolb 2009). Accommodators are hence individuals who learn from hands-on experiences than logical analysis preferring groupworks, divergents like to look at a situation from different points of view, assimilators like to gather information from lectures and put it into a concise written form and convergers like to put theories into practice (Loo, 2004).
(Jacobson, 1996), there are recent studies to show that cultures do tend to have preferences and certain learning styles. Nonetheless, ‘culture can and most certainly does change’ (Lawler, Walumbwa and Bai 2008 p9); nations tend to develop and grow economically and transform from traditional collective to independent cultures.

The level of difficulty in understanding cultures and developing a learning approach for multicultural abilities depends on the nature of their original culture, the learner’s personality, learning context and their interpretation of the task at hand (Valiente, 2008). Since the way one learns is greatly influenced by the national culture that one learns to learn in, it is perhaps more likely that an individual may adopt a learning style that he may have learnt from his current geographical culture than his actual national culture (as may be in the case of immigrants, which would again depend on when they migrated).

**Why Consider Multicultural Learning in Content Design?**

The content is the ‘raison d’être’ of a meeting or conference (Vanneste 2008), and should thus be designed in a purposeful way to ensure success of outcomes. Learning in conferences has three dimensions: learning from an expert, peer-to-peer learning and bottom-up education when companies learn from the participants at the conference; thus there is top, down and horizontal learning, completing the ‘educational scope of directions’ (Vanneste 2008 p61). Different cultures learn in different ways and this could be a great challenge in designing a program (Walton, 2002). The demography and culture of participants could also influence decision making while planning the content, the use of time, audio/visual technology, speakers selection, interaction, entertainment, stage design, technical and language support, etc. (Krugman & Wright, 2007). International conferences tend to be designed in a way the host country is familiar with or where the headquarters of the host company is based, thus not considering other cultures (Krugman & Wright, 2007). Krugman and Wright (2007) thus suggest that planning professionals survey the demographics of their expected participants for the dissemination of the program content.

**Cross-Cultural Learning in Conferences**

Conferences use certain formats as a part of their design such as, Open Space, Pecha Kucha, World Café, Buzz Groups, etc.\(^2\) that can add to the interactivity, involvement, crowd sourcing, democracy, reflection and fun elements of the conference (Vanneste 2008). Conferences use technology and facilitation especially for horizontal learning so that attendees learn, share and remember more (Vanneste 2008). Conference formats are changing from one-way presentations to involving more interactivity (Andelman, 2007). Depending on the overall learning objective, conference formats are designed to include workshops, training sessions, presentations, debates, groupworks, speaker talks, etc. However, it may be necessary to consider the cultural backgrounds of learners in conferences. Indeed, the cultural

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\(^2\) **Open-space** and unconference is a meeting in which participants define the agenda with a relatively rigorous process, and may adjust it as the meeting proceeds. **PechaKucha** 20x20 is a simple presentation format where you show 20 images, each for 20 seconds. **The world café** is a format designed to mimic a café environment to enable a better flow of conversation between participants. The session normally consists of 4 meeting stations / tables positioned around the room where a question or theme is posted for participants to discuss, with a facilitator and note-taker posted at each table. **A buzz group** is a small group, consisting of three to six people who are given an assignment to complete in a short time period.
backgrounds of participants affect their levels of participation, ways of interacting and communicating, satisfaction and motivation for programs and attitudes in a collaborative environment (Economides, 2008). Hence the consideration of cross-cultural learning in the learning activities of a conference is significant not just for the learner’s learning but their efficient interaction with others as well.

In conferences with an international audience of a collectivist nature, having more group works, forming groups to present questions for the speaker and presenting open-ended questions would be more supportive (Walton, 2002). The Finnish love statistics in their presentations while the Americans may find this dull (Bowden, 2006). On the other hand, the high collectivism and power distance nature of the Chinese culture, based mostly on Confucianism also prevents their willingness to communicate or accept an outsider’s culture and interact freely with speakers and peers (Kennedy 2002). A Chinese is likely to participate in a discussion only if he is sure of the topic, as commenting on unsure cues would be considered shameful (Wen & Clément, 2003). While North-Americans would like 20-minute speakers with lots of laughter, Arabs and Asians would like long, complex talks. Some cultures like interaction and ‘structured lectures that portray the speaker as an authority figure’ while others as Asian cultures are accustomed not to engage in open dialogue as avoiding loss of face is an essential part of their culture (Krugman and Wright 2007 p69 and Littlejohn 2007). Group discussions are seen to be more conducive to cultures that prefer active experimentation than lectures (Loo, 2004) and high in-group cultures learn better from workshop discussions. Cultures that prefer concrete experiences attending a conference would prefer lectures/speaker presentations, videos while those preferring reflective observation would like brainstorming and discussion sessions. Similarly, those who learn well at the abstract conceptualization stage would also prefer more lectures and presentations while cultures better at the active experimentation phase like case studies and hands-on tasks (Hawk & Shah, 2007).

Learning in groups and using an experiential approach may thus have different interpretations by different cultures (Valiente, 2008). It is a challenge to create an atmosphere that would change or complement these multicultural learning styles for a better learning approach (Valiente, 2008). Emphasis may be given on providing a customised learning environment so that they learn and remember better, perform effectively and return with a positive attitude post conference (Hefferman, Morrison, Basu, Sweeney, 2010). Bowden (2006) mentions how managers may find the different languages, cultures, humor and attitudes to challenge and limit the creation of unique activities and thus using traditional formats that have a universal appeal. Cseh (2003) however believes that the best way to create synergy between teams is to create space for dialogue, leading to collective reframing, i.e. recognising and understanding cultural diversity to achieve synergistic learning. Although people learn individually, they do not often exchange their views or are willing to experiment when working in teams (Kasl et al. 1997 cited in Cseh 2003). However, the formation of a collaborative learning environment could also support the cultural development of certain cultures (Economides, 2008). Individualistic cultures might learn to emphasize group achievement and relationships while collectivists may learn to reason and be independent with an opinion (Economides, 2008).
The Importance of Considering Cultural Learning Differences in Conferences

The more global conferences are becoming, the more important it is to understand the values and cultures while preparing programs (International Meetings Review, 2011). Although globalisation is seen to increase further, the need to preserve culture is growing as well (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). In fact, cultural diversity amongst learners is seen to be more apparent, perhaps owing to the cultural values that are difficult to be separated from the learning process (Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot 2010). It is difficult to design the content of programs keeping in mind the needs and learning style preferences of a diverse audience and organizers often settle for a ‘aim for the middle’ approach (Cufaude, 2004) or expect cultures to adopt the host institution’s culture and learning methods (Sulkowski & Deakin, 2009).

Communication and interaction cannot be achieved without understanding how cultures act and think and this would require organizers to research and understand cultures beyond their cultural protocol and business etiquette (Krugman & Wright, 2007). IMEX Research’s publication on Multiculturism also suggested the growing concern for considering multiculturism in the meetings and conferences industry and its increasing influence in achieving return on investment (ROI) (IMEX, 2007). The need to consider the diversity of learners and recognising whether they have similar values or a common culture during the analysis phase of a conference plan has been identified (Ramsborg and Tinnish 2008). Nonetheless, there appears to be very limited academic or industrial research to indicate whether multicultural learning styles could be considered as one such factor that can help create successful multicultural meetings and conferences (Ramsborg & Tinnish, 2008). Although often overlooked, culture is a part of knowledge creation, and should underpin not only the analysis phase but the design phase as well (Thomas, Mitchell and Joseph 2002 cited in Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot 2010). Culture should thus be considered throughout conference management, including the implementation and evaluation stages (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

Basis for Empirical Research

Cultures’ experiential learning styles and the use of cultural dimensions in forming these learning styles have been explored above in addition to other approaches towards learning. Cultures have specific learning styles which they are accustomed to by way of their cultural upbringing; they may have preferences for certain conference formats and activities that pertain to their learning style, but learning styles and preferences cannot be defined solely by cultural dimensions. Learning being the objective of conferences, cultures’ learning differences can influence their learning. Awareness of such differences can influence the way programs are designed and offered as the learning content. Thus, where conferences encourage interaction and collaboration to achieve learning, cultural awareness towards a synergistic environment has been emphasized.

The relation between cultural backgrounds and learning, the existence of multicultural learning styles and the learning preferences cultures might have, has also been determined. The review above has also indicated how the awareness of multicultural learning styles could challenge organizers and influence the design of activities and programs in conferences, thus achieving research objectives (a) and (b). In addition to the consideration of generations,
values and technological preferences, organizers could also consider multicultural learning to create ultimately the best learning experience, especially where there is a question of achieving learning objectives and return on investment (ROI) (Phillips, Breining, & Phillips, 2008). However both the variables culture and learning are complex, and that content design would depend on the type of audience, their age, etc. in addition to their objectives, (Andelman, 2007) and not just their cultural learning style preferences or behaviours.

Based on these explorations, an empirical research will be able to achieve objective (c), demonstrating how aware organizers are about multicultural learning styles and hence accommodate multicultural learning in their programs.

**METHODLOGY**

Based on the literature and the researcher’s interpretivist stance, an exploratory research was conducted with the aim of finding conference planners’ awareness and consideration of multicultural learning styles while designing the learning content and program structure; i.e. understanding this particular social action. Unlike most subjectivism-oriented studies with an inductive approach, this study was carried out with a quasi-deductive approach with a slightly weak hypothesis conceptualized from the framework in the literature defined and discussed earlier. Based on an a priori assumption (that organizers do not consider cultural learning differences while planning the content and program), the conceptualized possibility to be tested gives the research a deductive feel. Due to the absence of a strong hypothesis (in the sense that theory does not clearly indicate the absence or importance of considering multicultural styles in program design), it provides an element of ‘inductiveness’ to the research. This quasi-deductive approach has also allowed a structure and researcher independence to the nature of the research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), while at the same time leaving scope for further exploration. Though this qualitative research is used to test some theory, its main purpose is to provide insights, build explanations or another theory (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). The objective being to gather detailed data in the form of experiences that would represent the thoughts, views and attitudes of organizers/planners towards multicultural learning, the research took a qualitative approach, with a cross-sectional study using an in-depth survey strategy.

A social survey is generally used for gathering data from more than one case with variations at a single point of time to seek representative views (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since this research is cross-sectional and emphasizes more on understanding an issue from the organizers’ viewpoint, rather than quantifying a variable, in-depth surveys with smaller samples were considered more feasible for the research. An in-depth survey would be appropriate for this research to obtain detailed evidence from a smaller sample through a series of interviews, allowing respondents to speak freely in detail, unlike questionnaires that tend to be rather structured (Remenyi, Williams, Money, Swartz, 1998). Therefore, by using an in-depth survey, the researcher has attempted to find a balance between a large scale experimental survey and a detailed inductive study. Besides, a survey using questionnaires with open ended questions would not have been able to provide the flexibility or ability to clearly communicate, follow up and comprehend the interpretations necessary for the research questions to be answered. Even the basic terminology used in the questions may have required further explanations. It may be questioned why an exploratory research as this
on something with very little information (Neuman, 2011) and of interpretivist nature does not use a case study or historical research strategy instead. Since this research aims on understanding the perceptions and views of conference content planners (i.e. of a certain group within the industry) towards the consideration of multicultural learning styles, it is more suitable to use a survey that can generate opinions of equal depth but within a much shorter period of time, than focusing on just one or two cases. Besides, a survey of an in-depth type is not expected to be conclusive but to get ideas about a concept (Zikmund, 2000). The logic behind answering the research questions has led to the strategic choice of an in-depth survey strategy. Nonetheless, as it would not be possible to make empirical generalizations from all the members of the population, a sample has been selected for the empirical research (Remenyi, et al. 1998).

**Sampling**

Sampling here is with relevance to the research topic of generating an opinion rather than representativeness (Neuman, 2011). Due to the complex nature of the industry, the responsibility of planning and designing the content of conferences is not clear (Rogers, 2008); it may be done by event agencies, PCOs, meeting architects hired by companies/associations, marketing, HR and communications department of large organizations and associations, etc. Owing to such ambiguity and low response, the samples taken were not restricted to PCOs/event management companies.

A purposive sampling method was appropriate in focusing on contacting specific and relevant professionals. Due to the wide context both geographically and conceptually, samples were targeted from mainly associations and professional bodies as clusters. A stratified random sample of 57 conference trade journals and event directories (mainly Conference News, Event magazine, Meetings and Incentive Travel) and LinkedIn groups were also used in addition to snowball sampling. The criterion for selecting samples was that the sample provided any form of conference organizing and strategic planning services besides logistics and operational support.

**Data Collection Using Semi-Structured Interviews**

A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with nine conference organizers/planners from around the world who showed interest in the research. The table below lists the final respondents that consisted of a mix of professional conference organizers (PCOs), freelance meeting architects, etc. for corporate and association conferences.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews would allow respondents to discuss other ideas, meanings of which could add to the researcher’s data and understanding to help answer research questions (Saunders, et al. 2009). Furthermore, where the logical sequence of questions to be asked could vary each time (Saunders, et al. 2009) depending on the flow of the conversation, it provides the opportunity for respondents to explain complex meanings, create arguments (Mason, 2002) or state experiences with examples. Thus, semi-structured interviews conducted not only provided guidance in the form of a structure of set questions, but also provided the scope for flexibility to follow up any other specific theme that may be generated and the ability to probe for further questions and examples (Lee & Lings, 2008).
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<td>Association Resource</td>
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<td>MPI Members’ Forum</td>
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<td>Meeting Professionals International</td>
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<td>Partners Forum of Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations</td>
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<td>Organizer 10</td>
<td>Participant of Experiential Educators in Europe Conference</td>
<td>Greece</td>
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**Table 1. List of samples interviewed**

Semi-structured interviews were used instead of in-depth interviews so that the structure would enable the possibility of comparisons later for analysis. Otherwise, a great depth of data from individual interviews would make it difficult to specify themes (Remenyi, et al. 1998), within the given time period. Furthermore it provides scope for any form of some generalization and comparison as compared to unstructured interviews (Cameron & Price, 2009).

Interviews were conducted through telephone and Skype (keeping video turned off, to avoid cultural biasness). A pilot interview was tested on the first sample that also used data to build on to the interview guide for the later interviews. An interview guide containing research questions that allowed great flexibility for organizers to answer was used for data collection. Instead of prompting for answers, critical incident technique has been used, asking for examples or events to explain an experience or opinion (Saunders, et al. 2009). To evaluate and confirm their interpretations, the researcher has practiced summarizing their thoughts (Saunders, et al. 2009), prompting them to summarize their overall opinion. While interview transcripts record other contextual data (such as the location, date and time, etc.)
there were notes taken after the recording was stopped too, because often respondents tend to
give interesting details after the formal conversation is over (Saunders, et al. 2009). Mason
(2002) argues that viewing social interaction in an interview as bias is pointless because one
cannot separate the interview from social interaction; in other words facts from the context.

**Reliability and Validity**

Validity in qualitative research is mostly to do with authenticity; providing honest account of
viewpoints (Neuman, 2011). Interviews conducted were recorded to be later transcribed in
detail. Where reliability is concerned in a non-positivist research as this, it may be argued that
the aim of the study is to investigate a particular issue at a certain setting and point of time
(Remenyi, et al. 1998). Therefore, to try to replicate it would be unrealistic (Saunders, et al.
2009). The process and methods may be replicated, but the results may not necessarily be
similar due to the change in the conditions of study or the complexity and inconstancy of the
variables (Saunders, et al. 2009). Hence it is better to accept the particularist nature of such a
research (Remenyi, et al. 1998).

**Trustworthiness**

The research has attempted to ensure much validity and reliability as possible by way of
attempting trustworthiness. In order to maintain the credibility of the research, the researcher
has created an interview guide (shown in Appendix 1) based on themes developed from the
literature and their relation to the research questions that will be used during the analysis
stage. Another interview guide (indicated in Appendix 2) used during the interview maintains
the flow of the conversation but allows the scope for modifying the sequence of questions
asked. Besides, primary data has been collected from samples that were reputed organizations
and members of recognized associations to be able to produce a credible and fair opinion
from across and within the industry. While enough space was provided for respondents
during interviews to express and provide information openly, with no empathy and controlled
participation of the researcher, prompts were also made to elaborate on topics.

Generalizability was not a worry as the researcher felt it was more important to generate
findings for an under-researched area from a small sample than generate consensual opinions;
‘transferability’ of findings to another context (Bryman & Bell, 2011) was of greater
importance.

Data collected from the interviews were transcribed and summarized, describing the
main aspects of information, following which the researcher has identified and generated
codes for any important, related or emerging ideas and opinions. These codes, as answers to
questions under each theme of the interview guide have then been categorized to answer
research objectives. Hence, a deductive open coding format was adopted, i.e. breaking down
and categorizing data for further conceptualization (Wilson, 2010). This helped to identify
any common opinions for each theme, compare and contrast those across the samples
interviewed. It also allowed new issues and views, alternative meanings and possible
relationships to be noted that were analyzed for further interpretations.

**Limitations of the Methodology**
The researcher’s social constructionist viewpoint would believe that the organizers’ viewpoints on culture and learning are merely interpretations of the respondents which are likely to change and be reformed with time and context, just as the subjects; thus the difficulty in defining how accurate the interpretations are, in the first place. The sole use of semi-structured telephone interviews has perhaps not justified the research process. If time were not an issue, perhaps in-depth interviews, where the respondent’s time is not constrained would have revealed greater data. Although the aim was not to generalize, a greater number of samples would have been able to generate greater opinions and arguments; hence access to respondents for data collection has remained a challenge.

The semi-structured interviews conducted appeared more structured at times than flexible, especially when the respondent had little time to give or share, or where the respondent’s dialect was not clearly understood by the researcher. It may be questioned that multicultursim would be considered if the panel of the decision-making conference organizing committee are not multicultural in the first place. It has not been able to clearly identify issues such as the presence or absence of a multicultural decision-making panel at the organization being questioned or to what extent the respondent represents her/his organization. Hence, the question of how multicultural represented the organization is and to what extent the data collection method has provided exploration. However, a few interviews were rather detailed and unstructured where the respondent was able to give time and willing to share more, but the respondents tended to spend time in thinking and spoke of learning in general at large rather than multicultural learning. Hence much data lost in data reduction.

The knowledge of the researcher before and while conducting the interview, the transparency of the research process, the relationship maintained with the respondents and the meaningful interpretations made (Collins and Young 1988 cited in Remenyi et al. 1998) suggest the validity of this research being maintained. The research also incorporated different sampling means to produce results of greater sample for validity. Thus, the research has remained credible by conducting a research that pertains to the theory and requirements of the empirical study. Findings from the research can also be used for further research and has provided evidence for being free from any obvious biasnesses. Therefore, it may be confirmed that the research has been able to achieve and conform to the level of validity and reliability expected. This research has been conducted and interpreted ethically, using theory and providing evidence; hence a ‘trustworthy’ piece of work that has been able to meet its aim and objectives.

The researcher has not only used data from the literature to establish questions for data collection, but also from interviews during data collection. Therefore, the research process has included learning from within the process rather than being a practiced method of research, with simultaneous data collection and analysis. This figure (Figure 1) shows the research process and the choices that underpin each.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Organizers’ Awareness of Multicultural Learning Styles and Preferences

The research indicates that organizers do not have a very high awareness of multicultural learning styles; suggesting the need to create and generate cultural learning awareness. Apart from the general observations through experience, most organizers know little about specific cultural learning styles. The organizers’ awareness due to the absence of a method to identify cultural learning styles is further discussed below.

Organizers’ Current State of Awareness of Cultures’ Approaches Towards Learning.

It appears that most organizers’ understanding is limited to languages, as a part of cultural consideration. Respondents have however shared their observations on how certain cultures behave during conferences such as ‘Eastern Europeans are very direct, have a confrontational approach’ (Organizer 8, O.8), they like hands on activities than lectures;
Thais are hesitant to ask questions as it would mean ‘a loss of face to the person presenting’ (O.8); Asians like to build relationships perhaps pertaining to their collectivist culture; ‘North-Western European audiences are, you know perhaps more receptive to meeting formats, whereas perhaps Southern Europeans and Eastern Europeans are less receptive’ (Organizer 9, O.9).

Another organizer shares an incident that indicates the high context culture or exclusionist nature of French delegates, which confirm them as accommodators with preference for active sessions or hands on activities. Another organizer mentions how delegates from certain cultures may find it uncomfortable in unconference formats especially in the presence of esteemed delegates as a Chairperson. Cultures with high power distance would find it difficult to interact in such situations. Some organizers (whose audience is mostly European) are of the view that cultures within the European Union would have similar approaches to learning, ‘we are supposedly culturally the same’ (Organizer 5, O.5), but cultures within the EU also have different learning styles and approaches (Barmeyer, 2004). Two organizers recognize that certain cultures may also have a different attitude and approach towards the use of technology, such as China’s towards the use of internet and America being more advanced and open in the use of technology. On the other hand, Organizer 7 (O.7), an MPI meetings organizer demonstrated a sound knowledge of formats and activities that cultures would prefer e.g. ‘South Europeans quite like workshops, they quite like being able to discuss and share’; Finns and Germans are more reserved. This may also be so because, being amongst the innovative leaders of the industry, they also use Lewis’ Culture Active tool mentioned earlier.

Lack of a Proper Method or Tool to Identify Cultural Learning Differences

It has been found that most organizers do not conduct a background research/study or use a tool that can help indicate the cultural learning differences to keep them informed. An organizer asserts the need to consider ‘who your audience are, the profile of delegates that needs to go throughout the program’, suggesting the importance of an effective method of profiling to be put in practice, and the need for a more sophisticated method of profiling delegates. Thus, the lack of a proper method or tool to identify cultural differences.

Consideration of Culture in Content and Program Planning

Since organizers are not greatly aware of cultural differences in learning, they do not consciously support and consider cultural backgrounds or their approaches to learning during the planning phase of the learning content and program design. Content is mostly decided by clients while organizers may discuss, advise and design the structure of the program. An organizer indicates that the absence of cultural consideration perhaps depends on the location and nature of the conferences and professional backgrounds of delegates. Only some organizers consider age, gender, organizational and professional cultural differences while planning. Most conferences tend to structure their program according to the host culture. Two organizers expressed that more would be done in knowing how they learn if they hosted at another location targeting a specific geographical audience, because potentially the audience is more used to learning in a ‘x’ particular way.
Consideration of Culture in Content Design

While most organizers have indicated content being decided largely by the client, large associations that hold conferences yearly do consider cultural differences when deciding the content, particularly in the case of development or health related professions’ conferences. Where the conference is travelling to another nation, one organizer mentions that care is taken not only in terms of language but also that content ‘would be culturally relevant’, that it does not appear very ‘Northern-agenda’ driven, avoiding any ‘geographically or historically sensitive perception to avoid any backfire’. Often the organizers’ culture is also seen differently and so there needs to be careful steps taken to appear as ‘non-descript, non-cultural entity as possible...’

Consideration of Culture in Program Design

Conference programs have been found to be mainly objectives-driven, also depending on the size of audience, the interest expressed by attendees, history of the event. What needs to be learnt or discussed dictates how it is to be learnt in formats that would suit a majority of the target audience. Some organizers also consider cultures’ approach when ‘picking the timing of events, avoiding key significant important dates of different cultures...’, deciding the concept of working lunch. The consideration of cultures depends on whether it is one of the clients’ objectives or interest, and how ‘multicultural’ the target audience is after all. It doesn’t have to be a ‘necessary word’, otherwise it would be just for name sake. For conferences to be more multicultural there needs to be more exchange and awareness of cultures amongst clients, attendees and organizers. Some organizers expressed that cultural groups should be accommodated but within the context of everybody else’s learning. Cultural learning is however considered to be of greater importance and higher on the agenda in the future, as it becomes more important to create better ‘delegate experiences’. Organizers mention that with continuing globalization, the need arises to extend and reach a wider audience not just geographically but culturally too.

Design According to Host Location

The research has been able to indicate that most conferences tend to structure their program according to the host culture. As ascertained by Krugman and Wright (2007) in Chapter 2, organizers have also indicated giving cultural consideration and language greater priority depending on the location of where the conference is host wherein it ‘would raise up the decision making tree somewhat’ (O.4). Two other organizers have expressed that more would be done in knowing how they learn if they hosted at another location targeting a specific geographical audience; delegates from overseas would then ‘require more talking around than just listening to presentations’ (O.4). O.4 also states that ‘if we’re going to a particular geographic region, then you would tend to see your audience from that part of the globe, and as such the program that you put together might be somewhat different, and that is because potentially the audience is more used to learning in a ‘x’ particular way’. O.8 shares that ‘based on where we are going’, issues are highlighted that reflect both in ultimately ‘deciding the program, but also in prioritization of the ultimate content that would be selected for the conference’.
Catering to different cultures would oblige the design to have a variety of formats making the program innovative and break away from the traditional passive listening, inducing more interaction. The issue for organizers is whether to create a uniform learning atmosphere that encourages cultures to collaborate, engage and adapt to a style that is not of their preference or allow diverse cultural learning styles to learn in their preferred style by providing a mixed and diverse environment. Providing a comfortable learning style could ensure higher levels of learning and satisfaction of the participants, and a possible return on investment for the clients.

Some organizers agreed that learning is a part of culture that can distinguish cultures, but another organizer argued that learning is ‘much more about what role they have than what culture they are’. Although cultures may not like to learn in the same way, professional and organizational cultural differences ‘are far bigger differences’ and difficult to deal with than national culture differences. Certainly, even within a culture there may be different learning styles, but unless they are culturally categorized, cultural differences cannot be identified or resolved. Nonetheless, if organizers are to accommodate cultures knowing these differences, they would only be able to do so for the majority using cost effective means. Interaction and use of technology could mean that cultures would have to adapt to learning in a way they are not used to.

Cultures should therefore be able to adapt to another learning style and environment and embrace it as a learning-how-to-learn approach (Hughes-Wiener, 1986). Since cultures can certainly move from learning at one stage to another (Hughes-Wiener, 1986), organizers should arrange familiarizing cultures with the importance of both interactions and learning from observation and reflection. This would prepare them to induct towards learning in a style beyond their preference or comfort level. Although they may have a preferred style, true learning can only be complete when a culture can go through all the stages of the learning cycle. Organizers do not recognize cultures that need more support and how well their learning can be achieved. It is a question of being able to cater to the right targets more appropriately and effectively, if they were to know about the cultural groups and their styles.

Although not consciously, organizers look at how cultures ‘access information’, provide language translations, ask speakers to deliver accordingly, and those that are more aware provide a mix of activities, allow delegates to customize programs. A challenge for organizers could be in identifying cultures that are willing to adapt and adopt another learning style during the conference, and cultures that are deeply rooted in their values. Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, power distance, high individualism and masculinity will have less difficulty in adapting to other cultures present in comparison to those with high uncertainty avoidance and power distance and low individualism and masculinity (Valiente, 2008). Thus, recognising the need to customise or standardise design in a multicultural setting.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The research has determined the importance of cultural learning styles in conference program design. It demonstrated ‘not very high’ awareness of multicultural learning styles amongst organizers and the lack of such consideration during the program planning phase. As a result, there does not seem to be conscious efforts made to accommodate and support cultural learning differences in program and content design. However, due to practical
observations and experiences, most organizers are aware of some stereotypical considerations and agree that there may be specific cultural learning styles existent. Thus, the need for a better method to identify learning differences amongst cultures has been expressed, although catering for the majority within a certain cost remains a priority.

Organizers are therefore recommended to build a greater awareness of cultural differences not only from a logistical or operations viewpoint but with regards to their approaches towards learning and cultures’ behaviors and attitudes in a learning environment. It is also recommended that organizers continue to provide learning format options, use culturally aware facilitators and strive to create a collaborative learning environment.

Consideration of cultural learning differences could vary depending on the type of client and their objectives; therefore it cannot be said with certainty that cultural considerations could be of equal importance to conferences of all nature. Also, the diversity and complexity of the variables culture and learning itself would mean different things for different people at different situations. Though this study has referred to a number of studies and research on culture and multicultural learning styles, they cannot be used as a norm because of the different demographics and contexts the studies were conducted in.

Although the research has voiced opinions across the industry, they were not specifically from professional conference organizers neither were they organizers for a specific buyer (i.e. corporate or association). It must be noted that the consideration of cultural learning differences could vary depending on the type of client and their objectives; therefore it cannot be said with certainty that cultural considerations could be of equal importance to conferences of all nature. Although this research has been able to raise an area of concern that may require further investigation, a larger study would have been able to indicate more opinions, common or otherwise and would have been of greater use. Therefore, access and time has indeed been an issue for the research. Furthermore, this research has not treated learning styles and preferences differently but rather as an approach towards learning. Also, the diversity and complexity of the variables culture and learning itself would mean different things for different people at different situations. Thus, though this study has referred to a lot of studies and research on culture and multicultural learning styles, they cannot be used as a norm because of the different demographics and contexts the studies were conducted in. A larger study that can indicate learning styles or preferences of specific cultures could prove beneficial for comparison and organizers’ reference.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research being cross-sectional, has been able to induce discussions related to the consideration of cross-cultural learning differences, but a study that explores opinions on the same subject from the clients’ and attendees’ perspective would also be useful. More importantly, any research or survey that is able to indicate the preferences of attendees from certain cultures for learning in their preferred style would be able to indicate organizers the necessity for such consideration in design. Furthermore, a longitudinal study may be able to demonstrate whether the provision of preferred learning style for cultural groups could lead to better retention and effective achievement of learning objectives. The research has also indicated a large gap between the theoretical knowledge available and the organizers’ knowledge and awareness from practical experiences and observations. Therefore, any
industrial research that could use academic research and create a method or tool that could be targeted at specific cultures.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE
This research contributes to existing knowledge both theoretically and industrially. It has been able to suggest the use of an anthropological perspective in conference management and provided an insight to the influence cultural differences may have in conference planning, not just socially and logistically, but in terms of learning and achievement of objectives as well. Where culture is an important part of tourism, it has also made an application of culture in business travel and tourism.

REFERENCES


**APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1. Interview guide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What type of conferences do you organize/plan? International audience? How many from other nations?</td>
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<td>2. As a conference organizer/planner, in addition to all the other responsibilities, do you also decide and design the content and program/structure of the conference?</td>
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<td>3. How do you design and decide the content?</td>
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<td>4. What are the things or variables you take into consideration whilst planning and designing the content structure?</td>
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<td>5. Can you describe some of the formats and activities you have had in international conferences?</td>
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<td>6. Do you consider the cultures of the attendees while designing the programs, such as having workshops, sessions, etc.?</td>
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<td>7. What is culture and multiculturism to you?</td>
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<td>8. How aware are you about the different ways various cultures like to learn or their approach to learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. What do you do, to help attendees from various backgrounds who have their own ways of learning, to learn more effectively (during the conference)?</td>
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<td>10. How important do you think learning is as a part of the conference’s content?</td>
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<td>11. Do you include any interactive activities within your content?</td>
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<td>12. How do you think different cultures would respond to that?/ Do you think all cultures feel comfortable learning this way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Similarly, would you say that presentations by speakers would ensure every culture learns equally well?</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. And what about the use of technology and social media for conferences? What do you</td>
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think is their attitude and approach towards media and technology?

15. Do you use facilitators, or a teambuilding or communications agency to convene and decide the conference activities? (Crystal Interactive/Blue Hat teambuilding)

16. Do you ask them to design them considering cultures?

17. Do you use any tools or do anything before and after the conference as well to help and support their (multicultural audience) learning?

18. Do you use formats like open space, unconferences? Do you think that supports all the cultures to learn well?

19. Are there any formats, tools or techniques that you specifically use for specific cultures?

20. Do you think that providing formats that are familiar to cultures and their ways of learning could help to achieve their learning objectives better?

21. Do you have a standard design or a format for all and encourage all cultures to learn differently? (Standardize or customize)

22. Do you think your diverse attendees expect any customization to enhance their learning?

23. Do you as a company do any sort of a background research on cultural backgrounds and how these cultures are used to learning, before designing the content? Use a tool like MPI Culture Active Tool?

24. How important do you think it is to design the content keeping the multicultural learning in mind?

25. Can you share any cultural challenge that you might have faced in the past, a part from logistical or operational issues with culture?

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26. Would you think it is the responsibility of the speaker or the facilitating agency to cater to multicultural learning styles?

27. But would you then choose one accordingly?

28. What about the use of actors, S/I, translators, etc. to enhance learning?

Appendix 2. Interview guide based on research themes for coding

The research questions:
- How do you design the content of your conference to accommodate multicultural learning styles of your multicultural audience?
- Do you customize or standardize the content to cater to these multicultural styles?
- How aware are you of the multicultural learning styles?
- What are the different tools that you use to cater to specific cultures or cultural learning styles?
- Do you think that your multicultural audience would expect that formats and programs be used that is comfortable to their learning style?
29. What type of conferences do you organize/plan? International audience?
30. As a conference organizer/planner, in addition to all the other responsibilities, do you also decide and design the content and program/structure of the conference?
31. Can you describe some of the formats and activities you have had in international conferences?

   a) **Consideration of cultures in Conference Content:**
   32. How do you design and decide the content?
   33. How important do you think learning is as a part of the conference’s content?
   34. What are the things you take into consideration whilst planning and designing the content structure?
   35. Do you consider the cultures of the attendees while designing the programs, such as having workshops, sessions, etc.?

   b) **Awareness of multicultural learning styles**
   36. What is culture to you?
   37. How aware are you about the different ways various cultures like to learn or their approach to learning?
   38. Do you include any interactive activities within your content?
   39. How do you think different cultures would respond to that? Do you think all cultures feel comfortable learning this way?
   40. Similarly, would you say that presentations by speakers would ensure every culture learns equally well?
   41. And what about the use of technology and social media for conferences? What do you think is their attitude and approach towards media and technology?

   c) **How do you accommodate these multicultural styles? What do you do to help them learn better?**
   42. What would you say you do, to help attendees from various backgrounds who have their own ways of learning, to learn more effectively?
   43. Do you do anything before and after the conference as well to help and support their (multicultural audience) learning?
   44. Do you think that providing formats that are familiar to cultures and their ways of learning could help to achieve their learning objectives better?
   45. Do you use facilitators, or a teambuilding or communications agency to convene and decide the conference activities?
   46. Do you ask them to design them considering cultures?

   d) **Other:**
   47. Do you as a company do any sort of a background research on cultural backgrounds and how these cultures are used to learning, before designing the content? Use a tool
e) **Overall opinion:**
48. How important do you think it is to design the content keeping the multicultural learning in mind?

If time permits:

- Would you think it is the responsibility of the speaker or the facilitating agency to cater to multicultural learning styles?
- But would you then choose one accordingly?
- Can you share any cultural challenge that you might have faced in the past, apart from logistical or operational issues with culture?