# Characteristics of the Online Learner

From its beginnings, online education has primarily been focused on nontraditional adult learners. However, this is changing, and we are beginning to see traditional learners considering online education. Because of the wide range of characteristics and needs that make up the online learner population, it is critical to understand the diversity of online learners in order to develop unique approaches that support learners and facilitate their ability to persist and learn.

Characteristics of diversity fall into two categories. Primary characteristics are those attributes of a person that do not change over time, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Secondary characteristics are those that are acquired or change over time and include characteristics such as occupation, income, education, marital status, and parental status, to name a few. Exhibit 1.1 describes the primary and secondary diversity characteristics of online learners.

Noel-Levitz publishes the yearly *National Online Learners Priorities Report,* which includes a comprehensive examination of online learners (Noel-Levitz, 2009). The 2009 study included 68,760 learners from 87 institutions and showed that the online learner population is 68% female and 32% male. The age distribution is 20% 24 years and younger, 32% between the ages of 25 and 34, 26% between 35 and 44, 18% between 45 and 54, and 4% 55 years and over. Ethnicity was not reported in the 2009 report, but the 2005 Noel-Levitz study reported ethnicity of online learners as 74% White, 12% African American, 4%

**Exhibit 1.1**  Diversity Characteristics of Online Learners.

| Primary Diversity Characteristics | Learner |
|---|---|
| Gender (Noel-Levitz, 2009) | 60% Female<br>40% Male |
| Age distribution (Noel-Levitz, 2009) | 20% under 24<br>32% — 25–34<br>26% — 35–44<br>18% — 45–54<br>4% — 55 and over |
| Ethnicity (Noel-Levitz, 2005) | 74% White<br>12% African American<br>4% Hispanic<br>3% Asian<br>7% Other |
| Secondary Diversity Characteristics | Learner |
| Enrollment status (Noel-Levitz, 2009) | 81% Primarily online<br>19% Primarily on campus |
| Work status (Noel-Levitz, 2005) | 70% Employed full-time<br>17% Employed part-time<br>13% Unemployed |
| Marital status (Noel-Levitz, 2005) | 37% Married with children<br>18% Married<br>31% Single<br>11% Single with children |

Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 7% of other races (Noel-Levitz, 2005). The majority of online learners are between the ages of 25 and 44, which is a wide age distribution that has implications for the types of instructional strategies that you use in your online course. Although a large percentage are White, there are a growing number of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian learners, a trend to consider as you determine the appropriate teaching strategies for your online courses.

The 2005 and 2009 reports also describe secondary diversity characteristics of online learners. The 2009 report states that 81% of online learners are primarily online while 19% are primarily on campus. The 2005 report shows 37% of learners married with children, 18% married with no children, 31% single, and 11% single with children. The 2005 report also states that 70% are employed full-time, 17% employed part-time, and 13% not employed. Most of the online

learner population are new to online learning, having taken fewer than three classes previously, and take from one to six credits at a time. Most plan to complete their degree online. The top reasons learners choose online learning are convenience, work schedule, flexible pacing, and program requirements (Noel-Levitz, 2009).

The online learner is different from the traditional learner, who is usually under the age of 25, single with no children, and attending school full-time while holding a part-time job. Most online learners have the responsibilities of children and full-time jobs, responsibilities that make it difficult to manage online learning with their already full lives. You will need to set clear expectations for learners along with some degree of flexibility. Being too flexible can result in learners getting behind and trying to catch up toward the end of the course, which can have an impact on persistence and achievement. Not having enough flexibility can cause learners to become anxious and discouraged, which may result in prematurely dropping the course.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As the diversity data show, the online learner population is a heterogeneous group of learners who come to the online learning environment with diverse values, beliefs, and perspectives. Cultural differences can have an impact on how learners engage in the online environment. Culture is the collective mind of a group or category of people that distinguishes it from other people based on a set of values (Hofstede, 2008). Geert Hofstede (Hofstede & Bond, 1984) has researched the effect of culture on psychological functioning, as well as its impact on sociological, political, and economic functioning of social systems. In his studies, he identified four cultural dimensions that influence social systems, including power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity-femininity.

### Power Distance

Power distance refers to the status position of individuals in society. It also signifies the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept that power is distributed unequally, and individuals of higher power exert influence on individuals or groups of lower power (Hofstede, 2008). Countries such as

China, India, Czechia, Poland, Korea, Japan, Russia, and those in South America have high power distances, whereas countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, and Israel have low power distances.

The effect of power distance on teaching and learning is pronounced. In cultures where there are high power distances, learners tend to be dependent on the instructor to direct the learning experience and initiate all of the communications in the class. Learners treat the instructor with respect because they are considered gurus who transfer personal wisdom to the learners.

Cultures with low power distances are more learner-centered. Instructors and learners treat each other as equals, and learners initiate some of the communications in class. Instructors are viewed as experts who transfer their impersonal truths to learners, that is, they are more of a "guide on the side."

### Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which certain cultures are able to tolerate unstructured or ambiguous situations and environments. This relates to how a society deals with conflict and aggression, as well as life and death. Germany, Japan, South American countries, Korea, Russia, Hungary, and Israel have higher uncertainty avoidance, whereas Nordic countries, the Netherlands, China, and India have lower uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2008).

Uncertainty avoidance has an impact on how a learning environment is organized. Learners who come from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance are concerned about knowing the right answers, which they believe the instructor holds. Learners are able to express emotions in class but they feel pressured to conform to other learners.

Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance are tolerant of individual differences; however, there is little tolerance for the expression of emotions in class. Learners enjoy good discussions and it is acceptable for the instructor to not know all of the answers.

### Individualism Versus Collectivism

Individualism versus collectivism refers to the position of a culture along a continuum. On one pole is individualism, which refers to a group of people whose concern is looking after themselves and their family. On the other pole is collectivism, which refers to a group of people that look after each other in

exchange for loyalty. Individualist societies include Spain, France, the Netherlands, Nordic countries, Poland, Hungary, Italy, German-speaking countries, and the United States. Collectivist societies include Thailand, Korea, Costa Rica, Chile, Russia, Bulgaria, Portugal, China, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Greece, and the Arab world (Hofstede, 2008).

Individualist cultures believe the purpose of education is learning how to learn. Learners are encouraged to seek individual goals and are expected to speak up in class when they need or want to. They collaborate with peers who have similar interests. The value of education is to increase one's self-respect and economic worth.

Collectivist societies believe the purpose of education is learning how to do something. Individual goals are not encouraged and learners speak only when the group asks them to. Learners form collaborations based on popularity rather than similar interests. They believe that education will provide them entry into higher status groups.

### Masculinity-Femininity

In Hofstede's construct, masculinity-femininity refers to how certain cultures look at differences based on gender differences and value differences. In masculine societies, men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success. In feminine cultures, emotional roles of both genders overlap and values focus on caring for others and the quality of life. Countries such as China, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Arab world, and German-speaking countries are masculine cultures in which men are assertive and the main decision makers. Feminine cultures include Thailand, Korea, Costa Rica, Chile, Russia, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Nordic countries, where roles overlap between men and women (Hofstede, 2008).

Education in masculine societies is very competitive. It is considered a disaster to fail in school. Instructors are admired for being experts and average learners seek to do their best. Because of the focus on being the best, learners tend to overrate their own performances.

Education in feminine cultures is less competitive. Failing in school is not considered a disaster but merely a minor incident. Instructors are liked for their friendliness, and they focus on praise of weak learners for their efforts. The average learner is the norm, so learners tend to underrate their performance.

## IMPACT OF CULTURE IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Cultural differences can have a large impact on the online learning environment. Exhibit 1.2 summarizes the impact of cultural differences on learning.

Differences in power distance can have an impact on learners' perceived position in the course and may result in some learners not being able to interact as equals with other learners. Bates (2001) describes how culture influences critical thinking skills, debate, and discussion. In an online environment, learners are often encouraged to critically evaluate and debate the content being presented and share their ideas and knowledge in discussion. Cultural differences may affect the degree to which individual learners interact and can interfere with their ability to challenge ideas or express opinions contrary to those of the instructor or other learners in the class (Bates & Poole, 2003). Cultural differences can also affect learners who consider the instructor a higher power. If you participate in discussions and other activities by offering opinions on a topic or issue, a learner who views you as a higher power may find it difficult to offer opinions or ideas that are contrary to your opinions. Instructional activities that are teacher-directed tend to be best for learners from cultures with higher power distance, whereas lower power distance cultures prefer more learner-directed learning strategies.

Learners from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance may not be able to learn in an environment that is open and unstructured and learners work at their own pace and determine the goals they want to pursue in the course. To meet the needs of learners with high uncertainty avoidance, you must provide alternatives to help them achieve the intended goals of an activity.

The element of individualism versus collectivism can affect the goals of learners and their overall motivation to collaborate with other learners. Learners from collectivist cultures may not be able to set goals and may not initiate interactions with other learners. The way you form groups may also be affected by culture. You may consider having learners select their own group to ensure they can successfully participate in teamwork activities with peers.

The issue of masculinity-femininity may have an impact on how learners interact with one another and how they interact with you as the instructor based on gender. For instance, in masculine cultures, men are more dominant and perceived as assertive and competitive, whereas women serve and care for the

**Exhibit 1.2**  Impact of Cultural Differences on Learning.

| Dimensions | Cultural Differences | Associated Countries (Hofstede, 2008) | Teaching and Learning (Hofstede, 2008) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Power distance status — position of person in society | *Large power distance:* Power and wealth unequal with higher power exerting influence over lower power | China India Arab countries | Teacher-centered Dependent learners Teacher initiates communication Teacher respected Teacher is guru who transfers personal wisdom |
| | *Small power distance:* Power distributed equally | Netherlands Nordic countries Austria | Learner-centered Learners are equals Teacher is equal Learner-initiated communication Teacher is expert who shares interpretations, experience, and ideas |
| Uncertainty avoidance — degree to which certain cultures are able to tolerate unstructured or unclear environments | *High uncertainty avoidance:* Cultures where unstructured or unclear environments are not tolerated | Germany Japan Latin countries | Learners need right answers Teacher has right answers Emotions in class can be expressed Pressure among learners to conform |
| | *Low uncertainty avoidance:* Cultures where unstructured or unclear environments are tolerated | Nordic countries Netherlands China India | Learners want good discussion Teacher may say ''I don't know'' Emotions should be controlled Tolerance for differences in class |
| Individualism vs. collectivism — relationship with others | *Individualism:* Refers to a group of people whose concern is looking after themselves and their families | Spain France Netherlands Nordic countries Poland Hungary Italy Germany United States | Purpose of education is learning how to learn Learners' individual initiatives are encouraged Learners expected to speak up in class when they need or want to Learners associate according to interests |
| | *Collectivism:* Refers to a group of people that look after each other in exchange for loyalty | Thailand Korea Costa Rica Russia Bulgaria Portugal China Japan Mexico Venezuela Greece Arab countries | Purpose of education is learning how to do something Learners' individual initiatives discouraged Learners only speak up in class when sanctioned by group Learners associate according to popularity |

**Exhibit 1.2**  (*continued*)

| Dimensions | Cultural Differences | Associated Countries (Hofstede, 2008) | Teaching and Learning (Hofstede, 2008) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Masculine-feminine—emotional gender roles<br>Masculinity-femininity differences based on gender differences | *Masculine cultures:* Men are assertive and the main decision makers | China<br>Japan<br>Mexico<br>Arab countries<br>Germany | Brilliant teacher admired<br>Best learner is norm<br>Competition in class<br>Praise for good learners<br>Learners overrate own performance<br>Failing in school is a disaster |
| | *Feminine cultures:* Overlapping roles where neither men nor women are the most assertive or sole decision makers | Thailand<br>Korea<br>Costa Rica, Chile<br>Russia<br>Spain<br>France<br>Nordic countries | Friendly teachers most liked<br>Average learner is norm<br>Overambition unpopular<br>Praise for weak learner<br>Learners underrate their own performance<br>Failing in school is a minor incident |

*Source:* Hofstede & Bond, 1984.

family. You may find that female learners from masculine cultures are resistant to interacting in the course, so they may benefit from encouragement to interact with their peers. You may also see differences in the competitiveness that is exhibited in male learners from masculine cultures. In feminine cultures, social gender roles overlap, so you will not find so many differences between males and females.

Being aware of cultural differences can help you develop appropriate teaching strategies that consider your diverse learner population. These strategies may include structuring discussions and activities so all learners feel comfortable, and providing specific instructions to help learners understand the expectations of the activities, including the expected level of interaction. Awareness of cultural differences can also help you plan strategies to help individual learners persist. If you find cultural differences in the degree to which learners engage and interact, you may want to consider communicating with them to offer understanding and advice for how to overcome their discomfort.

In this chapter, we looked at the diversity characteristics of the online learner. We noted that the average online learner is female, around 35 years of age, works full-time, and is married with children. The majority are undergraduate learners

taking one to six credits online. They are primarily White, but there is a growing population of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian learners. We discussed cultural diversity and how it can influence how learners engage in your online course. As you can see, the online learner may differ from the typical learner in your face-to-face class, which can impact the instructional strategies you develop. Consider the characteristics of the adult learner as you develop unique approaches that support learners and facilitate engagement in your online course.