CHALLENGES FOR DESIGNING MULTICULTURAL USER MANUALS: A CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON TECHNICAL MANUALS

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Abstract
This is a review of an article written by Thomas Warren entitled Cultural Influences on Technical Manuals (2002). This article describes various cultural elements such as culture’s values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes that will affect how a user document will be designed. Warren’s article can have implications for both multicultural educators and learners. An examination of the effects of technical documents using culturally sensitive language can determine the effectiveness of technical manuals for multicultural populations. The use of culturally sensitive language in technical manuals can afford greater opportunities for marginal users to become more technologically savvy. This, too, can advance the causes of peaceful interaction and co-existence of diverse communities involved in technology.

Warren’s article delineated elements into two distinct categories, objective and subjective. Laws and regulations that govern the people are objective elements. Subjective elements in a culture tend to more invisible and hard to identify. Warren asserted that these elements are critical to producing effective user manuals. He further described additional cultural problems related to developing user manuals: language and user expectation. With regard to perspective authors’ of user manuals, Warren addressed four profiles of potential user attitudes. He applied his cultural analysis of potential user attitudes in his descriptions of two mythical cultures. Culture A and Culture B. Using the information derived from his mythical cultures, Warren provided information on organizing a technical manual that would address specific elements related to culture.

Warren provided in depth information related to the cultural problems associated with producing user manuals. He identified four subjective elements that can impact an individual’s perception about user manuals: values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes. He acknowledged additional concerns affecting the users’ understanding of language, style, examples (graphics), and text explanations.

Personal Opinion About the Article’s Findings/Conclusions
I agree with Warren’s assertion that in designing manuals, cultural elements are ignored because of time and budget difficulties. Organizations may be hesitant to spend additional
resources on a manual that is culturally-specific and not more universal in scope. Some organizations may perceive this emphasis on culture might distract from the manual’s initial purpose that is to provide user information. In trying to accommodate multicultural populations, the exclusive use of culturally sensitive language may actually make the manual even more difficult to understand. It may also cause the manual to lose its appeal to a broader audience.

Personal Opinion About the Validity, Implications, or Possible Applications of the Article’s Findings/Conclusions

Warren has validated that cultural influences should and must be considered when developing user manuals. I agree that cultural influences would impact the user more profoundly. Cultural elements of user manuals are ignored due to organizational budget and time constraints taking precedence in developing user manuals. Warren’s implications of cultural influences are relevant and resolute. Warren’s findings are applicable but not feasible in terms of cost and time.

In conclusion, cultural considerations should be as much a part of designing a manual as are other factors. When preparing user manuals, the user attitude toward knowledge, education, the project, and the need of realistic goals are considerable. Other contributing factors to the attitudes are style, content, and organization. Cultural influences should be one of the main objectives in the developmental stages of creating user manuals.

Reference