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HOW MIGHT THE CULTURAL LEARNING PREFERENCES OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE ENHANCEMENT OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN BELARUS (BELL) PROJECT IMPACT ON THEIR LEARNING DESIGNS?

Abstract

Like many other elements of education, the activity of creating learning is influenced to some degree by ways of thinking and behaving that are developed over time as part of an individual's exposure to social groups, media, history and geographical location. In other words, their *culture*. For some researchers — given a large enough data set — it is even possible to define national cultural characteristics and examine their role in fields such as international commerce and relations. Learning design places particular importance on the identification of student and environmental characteristics but little has been done to explore the impact of the cultural preferences of the learning designer on the learning situation that they create. In September 2018, the Learning Design and Course Creation (LDCC) Workshop from the Open University UK (UKOU) was attended by staff from six Belarusian HEIs in-

volved in the ERASMUS+ funded Enhancement of Lifelong Learning in Belarus (BELL) Project. The Belarusian project partners were tasked with developing and delivering five distance and online courses for the first time in Belarus. The Cultural Dimensions of Learning Framework (CDLF) was used to collect data on the cultural learning preferences of the BELL participants and the findings are presented here as a stimulus for discussion and potential comparison against the final course designs.

Context

The CDLF (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010a) has been adapted from the work of many other researchers. It identifies eight dimensions and presents them as spectrums along which designers and learners can position themselves to help articulate their cultural learning preferences. Rather than simply observing cultural *practices*, which can be rather superficial, the CDLF attempts to uncover cultural *values* that are harder to identify but may give rise to those observable practices.

The ongoing work of Gert Hofstede in developing Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede, 2011) is also an important reference. He goes so far as to assign matrix scores for many countries to his six dimensions (of which three are closely incorporated into the CDLF). For those interested, these matrix scores are available at https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/ for countries neighbouring Belarus, such as Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia, whilst scores for Belarus and Ukraine are estimated.

Comparisons and interpretations with the results in this paper should of course be treated with care since the BELL participant group is statistically small and unlikely to be representative of the country as a whole. However, it is plausible that Hofstede's matrix scores might provide a useful mechanism for wider discussions about the role of cultural values in higher education.

Data Collection

BELL participants were invited to answer 20 questions across five dimensions of the Culturally Based Learning Preferences survey. The full survey of 30 questions across eight dimensions is available online (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010b) but was adapted for this study to only include those deemed by the researchers to be most relevant to design situations. In the survey respondents were provided with two oppositional statements and were asked to indicate on a scale of 1–10 the extent to which they agreed with either of them, as demonstrated by the example below:

Class discussions are critical for learning	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Students should observe in class and not interact unless asked to do so.

In the example, selecting 3 would indicate that the left-hand statement describes the opinion of the respondent best, but only to a moderate degree, whilst selecting 10 would indicate strong agreement with the right-hand statement. 19 participants responded to the survey.

Box and whisker plots are presented below in Figures 1–5, which show the range of views held on each of the questions and dimensions. In accordance with the instructions for interpreting the results (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010c). the scores for each dimension were added together and then averaged. The resulting median number gives an indication of the group's cultural learning preference. Tables 1–5 show this data together with the interpretation suggested by the designers of the CDLF (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010a).

Dimension 1 — *equality & authority:* How is inequality handled? How is status demonstrated and respect given? What interactions are appropriate for those of unequal status?
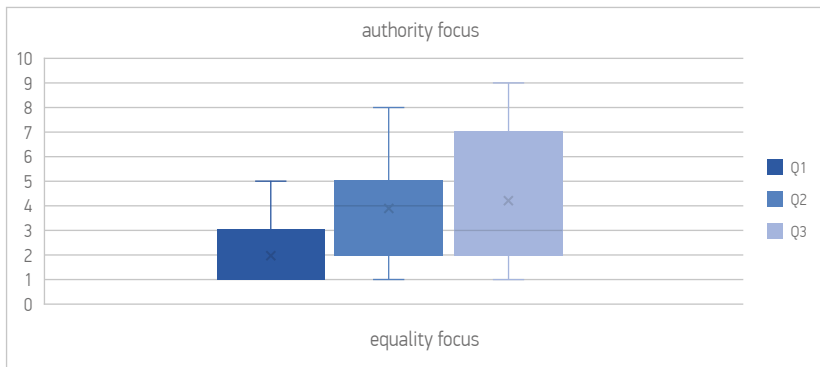

Figure 1 — *range of responses to Questions 1, 2 & 3 in Dimension 1: Equality & Authority*

Table 1 — *average score derived from Questions 1, 2 & 3 and relevant interpretation of Dimension 1: equality & authority*

Dimension	Average score/10	Interpre-tation	Manifestation in learning situations
Equality & authority	3.4	Equality focus	Teachers treated as equals to be engaged and even challenged. Students take responsibility for learning activities. Dialogue and discussion are critical learning activities.

Dimension 2 — *individualism & collectivism:* Which prevails, the interests of the individual or the interest of the group? To what degree are interpersonal relationships valued?
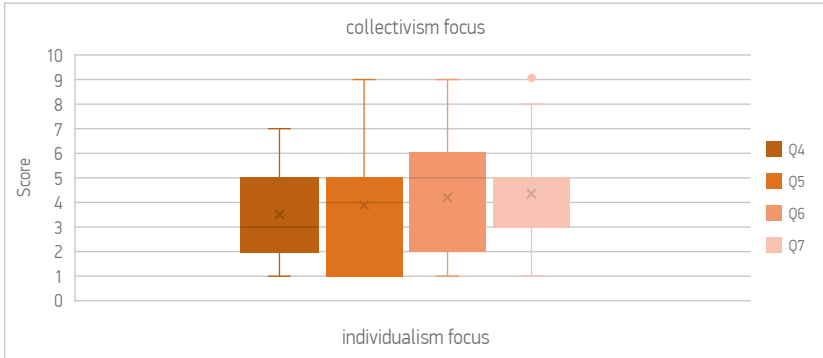

Figure 2 — *range of responses to Questions 4, 5, 6 & 7 in Dimension 2: Collectivism & Individualism*

Table 2 — *average score derived from Questions 4, 5, 6 & 7 and relevant interpretation of Dimension 2: individualism & collectivism*

Dimension	Average score/10	Interpretation	Manifestation in learning situations
Individualism & collectivism	4.0	Moderate individualism focus	Expectation that students speak up. Learning how to learn (cognitive skill) is primary (individual growth). Expressions of student's point of view is valuable component of learning. Hard work is motivated by individual gain.

Dimension 3 — *uncertainty acceptance & stability seeking:* How is uncertainty dealt with? Is it avoided or accepted? Is structure assumed more important than flexibility? What is the status of knowledge — established or in a process of development?
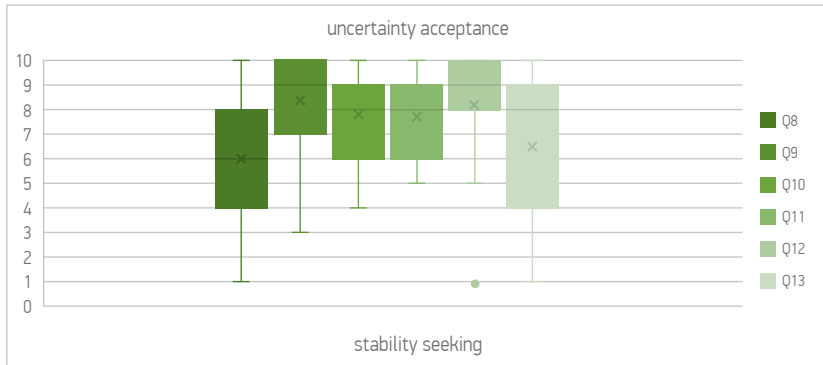

Figure 3 — *range of responses to Questions 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 & 13 in Dimension 3: uncertainty acceptance & stability seeking*

Table 3 — a*verage score derived from Questions 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 & 13 and relevant interpretation of Dimension 3: stability seeking & uncertainty acceptance*

Dimension	Average score/10	Interpre-tation	Manifestation in learning situations
Stability seeking & uncertainty acceptance	7.4	Moderate uncertainty acceptance focus	Learning activities are more open-ended. Focus on process and justified opinions. Ambiguity is a natural condition. Teachers can say 'I don't know'. Many resources used. Demonstrated ability to think is the key to academic success, not right answers.

Dimension 4 — *clock focus & event focus:* Do people conform to an external measure of time, or do they allow the event at hand to unfold in its own time? Which are more important, deadlines or relationships?
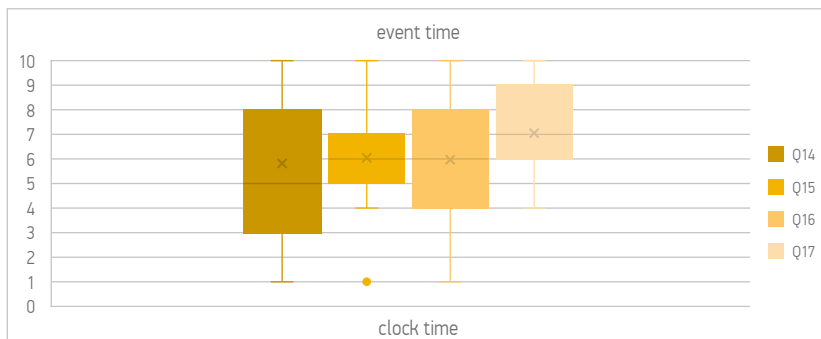

Figure 4 — *range of responses to Questions 14, 15, 16 & 17 in Dimension 4: clock focus & event focus*

Table 4 — *average score derived from Questions 14, 15, 16 & 17 and relevant interpretation of Dimension 4: clock time & event time*

Dimension	Average score/10	Interpre-tation	Manifestation in learning situations
Clock time & event time	6.2	Very small event focus	Instructional activities are allowed to continue as long as they are useful. Boundaries between class and outside class time are more fluid. Work continues towards improvements with less regard for deadlines. Willing to bypass procedures. Learners are talkative and expressive and may ignore plans.

Dimension 5 — *linear time & cyclical time:* Do people see time as a path and see goals as necessary destinations, or do they see time as a pattern of interlocking cycles into which they step in and out over the course of a life?
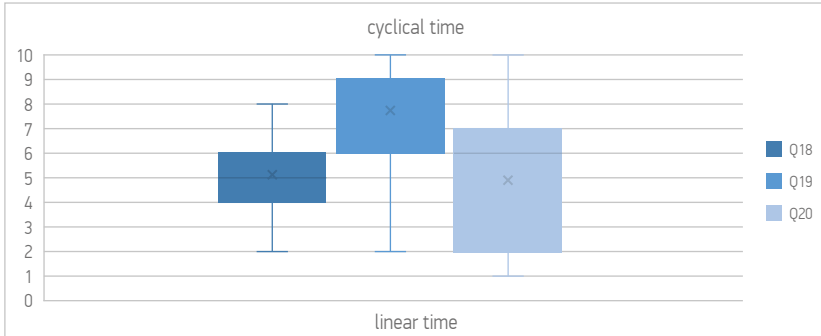

Figure 5 — *results from Questions 18, 19 & 20 in Dimension 5: linear time & cyclical time*

Table 5 — *average score derived from Questions 18, 19 & 20 and relevant interpretation of Dimension 5: linear time & cyclical time*

Dimension	Average score/10	Interpre-tation	Manifestation in learning situations
Linear time & cyclical time	5.9	Very small cyclical time focus	One adapts to time Learning is seen as practice toward slowly increasing perfection. Goals are secondary, one adapts to the situation to draw from it as much as possible. Time exists for observation and reflection. Rushing is counter-productive to achievement. Opportunities recur. The past is influential since cycles repeat. Repetition is valuable for learning.

Conclusion and Further Work

The authors of the CDLF specifically point out that their intention in developing the survey tool and framework was to 'stress the spectrums of variability' within any group of learners, rather than the 'generalised differences between cultures' (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010a, p. 6). The results above seem to support this assertion, since although certain questions do seem to indicate a group-wide cultural learning preference they also demonstrate a wide variety of values being held within each dimension and the group as a whole. Very few of the questions were answered within a narrow range.

Participants in the BELL Project have been engaging with the work of universities in several different parts of Europe. They have been filtering and adapting learning design approaches through their own cultural lenses and applying them to create culturally unique examples of learning. It is envisaged that the results of this survey could offer a springboard to further work in trying to establish what role culture has played in the manifestation of the learning situations created by the BELL Project participants.

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