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# Learning styles and their impact on cross-cultural training: An international comparison in France, Germany and Quebec

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## Abstract

Every person has his or her own individual way to learn and to solve problems in day-to-day situations. These personal cognitive strategies, acquired in a long socialization process are called “learning styles” and may differ depending on gender, age or culture.

In this study, the learning styles of over 300 students in business administration in France, Germany and Quebec are examined with the *Learning Style Inventory (LSI)*. Representative and significant learning differences were found. This is why the LSI can be used in a first step for the illustration and comparison of typical patterns of learning. In a second step the results may be of use to international trainers in making decisions about course design and methods of cross-cultural training in relation to the learning profiles of the participants.

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## 1. Introduction

On account of increasing globalization, cross-cultural training has become more and more important. The diversity of people coming from different countries and working together in multicultural groups may lead to cultural synergy as well as misunderstandings. Most of the previous literature on cross-cultural differences in behavior has so far focused on values and attitudes (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2002; Dupriez & Simons, 2000; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, 1980, 2001). One of the problems of these studies, in terms of concrete application, is that it has been difficult to show that the differences in values or attitudes are directly linked to behavioral outcomes such as managerial performance.

Another problem is the relationship between culture and personality, meaning the group and the individual. This is also particularly important in the process of cross-cultural training because even if the contents of the training are of high quality and interest, what about the learning process and the transmission of knowledge according to the participants' personalities and cultures? Only a few international studies of learning styles and their influence on cross-cultural interaction and training exist (Jackson, 1995; Oxford, 1995), but there is a growing interest (Abramson, Keating, & Lane, 1996; Holman, Pavlica, & Thrope, 1997; Nishida, Hammer, & Wiseman, 1998).

This is why in the present article, cultural differences in learning styles of business students—future managers—in France, Germany and Quebec will be examined. The results should give some essential orientation for nationally bound attitudes and explanations for the use of this knowledge in relation to the design of cross-cultural trainings.

## 2. Culture and learning

Every person has his or her own *individual way* of gathering and processing information, which means ways of learning and solving problems in day-to-day situations. These personal cognitive abilities, acquired in the course of a long socialization process are called “learning styles” (Reynolds, 1997). A learning style can be defined as the individual, natural and preferred way of a person to treat informations and feelings in a certain (learning-)situation which will influence his decisions and behaviors. Each culture trains and molds those within its system for what it considers the most appropriate methods of problem solving, as Geert Hofstede explains:

[...] our cognitive development is determined by the demands of the environment in which we grew up: a person will be good at doing things that are important to him/her and that (s)he has occasion to do often. Cognitive abilities are rooted in the total patterns of a society. (Hofstede, 1986, p. 305)

Culture, defined by Hofstede as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede, 1980,

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