

How People from Different Cultures *Expect* to Learn

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Learners in a classroom hear their instructor say that she hopes each of them will decide on his or her own topic for the required paper. She adds that although she will be available for consultation, she wants each one to work as independently as possible with topic selection, research, and writing. Some learners are delighted. Others are silently dismayed. Why?

In virtually every nation, a major component of the socialization of youth is formal education. For some individuals, learning continues beyond schooling and into university; for some, it involves training offered by businesses, governments, and organizations as well as formal presentations during meetings in those settings. *To all of these knowledge-transfer situations, each learner or listener brings a set of expectations.* These were implicitly acquired during his or her earliest years of life at the knees of parents, clergy, and other mentors, and in nursery schools, kindergartens, and the early elementary grades.

Since 1975, I have tried to understand the expectations that learners and listeners the world over bring into knowledge-transfer settings. Each year, millions of people from certain national and cultural backgrounds sit in classrooms and meeting rooms where the instructor or presenter is from a different national or cultural background. *The outcome is a mismatch in expectations about how one best learns or listens in a formal knowledge-transfer situation,* which in turn translates into deep frustration, lowered motivation to learn, and poor learning outcomes.

Consider the vignette in the first paragraph. If someone told me this story, my first question would be, “What is the background of the instructor, and of the dismayed learners?” There’s a strong possibility that the instructor is either an American or influenced by American values, and that the dismayed learners had their early learning experiences in a national and cultural setting where American ways had not penetrated. The instructor was being guided by the American (and more broadly Western) values of individualism and self-reliance. The learners’ dismay arose from expectations grounded in a contrasting value system, one in which individualism is suspect, dependence is desired, and instructors are expected not only to dispense wisdom but also to provide strong and reliable guidance to those who know less.

“Dismay” is a strong word. Did I use it too lightly? Well, imagine that your early experiences were that mentors and teachers commanded deep respect from all those around them, and authoritatively dispensed knowledge and skills that, for the most part, have served you well. You thus gained an expectation that you can confidently rely on teachers, trainers, professors, and instructors to tell you *what to learn* and *how to learn it*. Now imagine that you’re an adult and, as part of your professional development, your employer has sent you abroad for a course. The vignette above occurs. Are you merely disappointed? I think not. You view the instructor as abrogating her responsibilities. You feel alone, rudderless, and yes, dismayed. For hers is not merely an educational failure, but a moral one.



The majority of *knowledge-transfer cultures* – in secondary and university classrooms, in training rooms of all kinds, and in business meeting rooms as well – can be placed somewhere on the continuum above. The terms *Knowledge-Focused* and *Learner-Focused* designate sets of intertwined values and expectations shared by instructors and presenters, by learners and listeners, and indeed by most citizens of the society wherein the teaching, training, or presentation is occurring. The room’s knowledge-transfer culture may lie anywhere across this continuum, from extremely Knowledge-Focused (1) to extremely Learner-Focused (9).

The following chart lists five of the many complex distinctions I’ve been able to draw between extremely Knowledge-Focused and extremely Learner-Focused classrooms and meeting rooms:

Extremely Knowledge-Focused	Extremely Learner-Focused
Instructor delivers solid content to learners	Instructor facilitates learners’ involvement and activity
All knowledge believed inherently worthwhile	Knowledge of a practical nature is believed worthwhile
Instructor tells learners <i>what</i> and <i>how</i> to learn	Learners encouraged to be very largely self-reliant
Atmosphere is formal and “face”-conscious	Atmosphere is informal and friendly
Intense study is viewed as the path to mastery	Problem-solving is viewed as the path to mastery

In Knowledge-Focused settings, enduring emphasis is placed on the transfer of copious quantities of information and skill to the learners. But that’s merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg. As the left side of this chart only begins to demonstrate, the centrality of knowledge is supported by many other interwoven values and assumptions. The same degree of richness and complexity is true of strongly Learner-Focused settings. It is these complexly interwoven values and assumptions that my work has revealed.

Let’s return to the vignette. You might think that those who were dismayed were from a Learner-Focused culture, and that they wanted more focus on themselves by the instructor. But the opposite is true. For this vignette is a classic case of what happens when people from Knowledge-Focused cultures enter a Learner-Focused classroom in the U.S. Accustomed to instructors’ telling them *what* to learn and *how* to learn it, they await strong guidance from an authoritative source, which they perceive as supportive, even indispensable, for learning. What they want is *more focus on the knowledge* – delivered via overt instructor directiveness.

What else might we observe in this classroom in which the instructor and some of the learners are American or American-influenced, while the rest are from different backgrounds? Most likely, friction will occur between contrasting ideas about the proper process of learning. As hinted in the chart, the Learner-Focused Americans – instructor *and* learners – will unite in expecting: (1) That the practical features of the topic will receive much airtime, with scant attention being paid to historical antecedents and theoretical underpinnings. (2) That the learners will contribute proactively to classroom activities (by, for example, freely stating their own views), thus casting the instructor more as a fellow learner than as a respected authority. (3) That the instructor will soon provide problems for solution by the learners, requiring the latter to use a trial-and-error approach and inevitably leading some of them to publicly fail.

These typical features of daily work in U.S. classrooms are unexpected and upsetting to learners from Knowledge-Focused cultures. These three, among others, erect *barriers* to their learning. These features lead them to question the value of what is being taught as well as the seriousness of purpose of the instructor and their fellow learners. For the sake of politeness and a desire to be seen as cooperative – enduring values in most cultures – few will exit or openly criticize the proceedings. But many newcomers would learn more and retain more if only their American instructors or business presenters had known about, and had respected in daily practice, at least some of their expectations about how best to learn.

U.S. businesses and organizations of many types, not to mention U.S. educational institutions, provide instruction attended ever more frequently by learners recently arrived from abroad. Such instruction is expensive; those who pay for it want it to be effective. The knowledge and skills being transmitted are sound, but some of the methods used to transmit it create hurdles for learners from different backgrounds. The same may be said for formal business presentations. In this case as well, when the listeners are nationally mixed, the soundness of the ideas and plans can unwittingly be obscured by the methods used to present them. Objectives are not attained; time and money are wasted. These challenges *can* be overcome.

This paper is freely available at
Grovewell.com/pub-expect-to-learn.pdf.

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