Hits from Around the World: Building Websites for Multicultural Audiences

By Nikki Van Dusen

Submitted to the
University of Alberta Faculty of Extension
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communications and Technology

31 August 2010

Acknowledgements

I like to pretend that I'm fiercely independent, and in many ways I am. However, there's nothing like a Master's degree to disabuse me of the notion that I don't need anyone's help.

So, thank you to:

Wayne Williams, who cooked *and* cleaned, constructed, mowed, repaired, drove—basically did everything that needed to be done around our house except writing this project … and always believed that I could get this done.

Dr. Katy Campbell, for the wine and the baking and the Zen-koan-like insights that at once made my brain pop and my creativity flow.

Dr. Stan Ruecker, for stepping in to teach an elective that resulted in me getting this final project underway.

Diane Bégin and Nancy Bray, for the company and support on this wild ride—we all got done! Yippee!

Cohort 2007 for overall awesomeness and friendships for a lifetime … and Mr Roboto memories.

Doug Weir, Gretchen Phillips, Britta Baron and University of Alberta International for the inspiration, the material, and the International Centre meeting room.

Maryanne Wynne for strong-arming the Faculty of Extension City Region Studies Centre into letting me use their boardroom, and the staff of CRSC for putting up with my use of it.

Sheila Graham, my amazing proof-reader, who edited this monstrosity virtually overnight.

Finally, Eileen Crookes and Susan Petruszczak, who make the MACT program go, and probably don't get thanked often enough.

Disclaimer

Any tips and suggestions in this document are based on my interpretation of the existing literature and preliminary research. I am not responsible for outcomes arising from the application of this research to websites. Like any organizational guidance, use of this research must be weighed against fit with an organization's goals, objectives, and resources.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Abstract

Economic realities make it difficult for organizations, especially small, regionalized ones, to devote the time, money and human resources necessary to create and maintain multiple localized websites for these growing multiculturally diverse audiences.

With these organizational practicalities in mind, I explored several intercultural communications theories and the existing body of related web research. I discovered that contrary to what is claimed by that literature, localization of a website's design is neither pragmatic nor necessary in the 21st century— for all cultures, one design may *satisfice*[*].

Having determined that web wireframes and layouts could make do with a single universal design, I explored the possibility of universal content models for text and images on websites by addressing:

- What is an appropriate level of readability for English only content?

- How, if at all, do cultural dimension-based modifications to English web content affect an EFL culture's receptivity to it?

Though this new research is still exploratory, the evidence did point to some techniques that would, if not completely internationalize web content, increase receptivity to it among diverse cultural audiences. The resulting 10 tips for making websites better for multicultural audiences are presented in the conclusion.

[*] A blend of "satisfy" and "suffice," describing meeting the criteria for adequacy rather than for the optimal solution. ("Satisficing," 2010)

Hits from Around the World:

Building Websites for Multicultural Audiences

The World-Wide Web has truly become a worldwide phenomenon, with the United States and Canada now accounting for less than a quarter of total global Internet penetration. Since the late 1990s, interest in making websites more global has grown. From the outset researchers turned either to existing intercultural communication models or cross-cultural comparative studies as a method of predicting or explaining what layout, navigation and content characteristics might be typical of a website from a particular culture.

The rationale for why organizations would want sites tailored to cultures and countries is fairly easy to understand: we live in a global village with international markets, multi-national corporations, and cross-border partnerships, and many regions are experiencing an increasing diversity due to immigration. Economic realities make it difficult for organizations, especially small, regionalized ones, to devote the time, money and human resources necessary to create and maintain multiple localized websites for these growing multiculturally diverse audiences. With these organizational practicalities in mind, I began by exploring several intercultural communications theories and the existing body of related web research. I discovered that contrary to what is claimed by that literature, localization of a website's design is neither pragmatic nor necessary in the 21st century— for all cultures, one design may *satisfice*[1]. With this surprising discovery, I then sought to discover if web content—that is to say, text, images and multimedia—might also be internationalized in some ways. Though this new research is still exploratory, the evidence did point to some techniques that would, if not completely internationalize web content, increase receptivity to it among diverse cultural audiences. The

[1] A blend of "satisfy" and "suffice," describing meeting the criteria for adequacy rather than for the optimal solution. ("Satisficing," 2010)

resulting 10 tips for making websites better for multicultural audiences are presented in the conclusion.

The World Wide Web is truly worldwide

To begin, why would organizations need to consider multicultural web solutions? Quite simply, the whole world is getting online. In 1997, over 75% of total web users were in Canada and the United States. By 1999, this proportion had dropped to 55% (Campbell, 2006). Ten years later, those two countries account for only 15% of the world's Internet users (Miniwatts, 2009a). Though English is still the predominant language on the web, non-English speaking Internet users have increased dramatically. Pages written in Arabic and Chinese grew by 1,542% and 895% respectively between 2000 and 2008. Chinese is now the second most widespread language on the Internet, having only 10% fewer pages than those in English (Miniwatts, 2009b). Additionally, with government policies encouraging immigration and multiculturalism, many of the world's English-speaking countries are home to large groups from other cultures.

As a result, there is a need to take the needs and preferences of other cultures into consideration when designing a website and creating content for it. As early as 1997, Jehder, Millen and Schriefer emphasized the importance of making a website accessible to an international audience, reasoning that most companies had international markets, partners, locations and/or presences (as cited in Main, 2002, p. 3). It stands to reason that websites play an increasingly important role in creating or strengthening a company's brand for a product or service. On a website, user experience forms the customer's impression of the organization and determines if the customer comes back (Garrett, 2003, p. 12; Spool, 1996). So providing a quality experience for a user—regardless of where the user is from in the world—is an essential, sustainable competitive advantage. To learn how websites needed to behave so as to provide that quality user experience, attention has frequently turned to the intercultural communication models that had been guiding the behaviour of interpersonal relationships for business since the 1970s.

Intercultural communication models

While there are several intercultural communication models, the three encountered in the literature on international website design are those of Edward T. Hall, Fons Trompenaars and Geert Hofstede. All three propose different categories as ways of classifying countries or cultures. Below is a brief description of each, followed by a discussion of their similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses.

Hall's three dimensions

Beginning in 1953, Edward T. Hall began proposing several different dimensions. The two most applicable are outlined here, along with some examples of which countries he put in each category. His third dimension, personal space, has little relevance for web research and has been omitted.

- **Polychronic vs. monochronic time orientation**: Polychronic cultures prefer doing many things at one time, and they stress involvement with people and completion of transactions rather than adherence to schedules. They emphasize commitments to people and lifetime relationships, and rely on the situational context of the message. Monochronic cultures prefer doing one thing at a time and compartmentalize relationships and tasks according to strict time schedules. They value promptness and adherence to plans, and rely on communications in which most of the information must be included in the message itself with the details clearly spelled out (Hall, 1998, p. 60).

- **High context vs. low context**: High-context cultures communicate indirectly, relying on non-verbal communication and contextual clues to extract meaning. These cultures have distinct in-groups and out-groups. Low-context cultures communicate via explicit messages, verbalized details and surface reactions. Group identity is more flexible. Asian and Latin American countries tend to be high-context cultures, whereas the North American and European countries tend to be low-context (Main, 2002, p. 39).

Table 1: Hall's dimensions and country examples
(Derived from Hall, 1966; Hall, 1976; Hall, 1983; Hall & Hall, 1990; Hall, 1998)

Monochronic vs. Polychronic		
Monochronic	**Both**	**Polychronic**
Germany	Japan	Spain
UK	France	Italy
USA		Latin America
Switzerland		Arabic countries
Scandinavian countries		Greece
		Turkey
		Ecuador

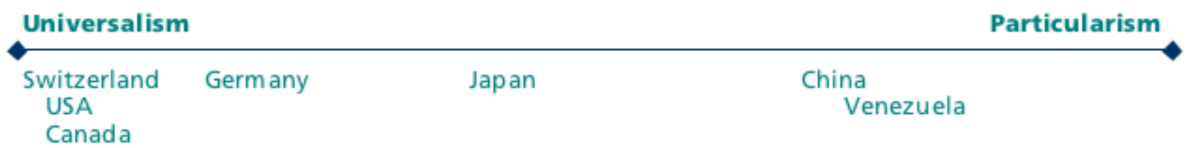
Low-context vs. High-context	
Low	**High**
Germany	France
USA	Japan
Switzerland	Arabic countries
Scandinavian countries	Iberian countries
	Mediteranean countries
	Latin America

Trompenaars' seven cultural differences

Fons Trompenaars developed a model of culture with seven dimensions. Five orientations cover the ways in which individuals deal with each other, and are based on Parsons and Shils' "General Theory of Action" (1951, cited in Hofstede, 1996). The remaining two, respectively, cover how societies look at time, and classify a society's outlook on their environment (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997; "Fons Trompenaars," 2009; Gould, Zalcaria & Yusof, 2000, p. 163). These last two are taken from Kluckhohn and Strondtbeck's human problems (1961, cited in Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

- **Universalism vs. particularism** asks, "What is more important, rules or relationships?" In Figure 1, several countries are placed on a continuum based on respondents' answer to a scenario in which they are called to choose between testifying against a friend who broke the law (universalism) and lying under oath to keep him out of trouble (particularism) (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p.35).

Figure 1: Universalism vs. Particularism with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 35)



- **Individualism vs. collectivism/communitarianism** balances between the needs of individuals or groups. Figure 2 shows a continuum based on the answer to a question about whether personal freedom improves society for all:

Figure 2: Individualism vs. Collectivism with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 50)

- **Neutral vs. emotional/affective communication styles** describes whether people keep their emotions in check and focus on arguments or show their emotions and expect emotional reactions in return. The continuum in Figure 3 is based on respondents' feeling about showing negative emotions at work.

Figure 3: Neutral vs. Emotional/Affective with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 70)

- **Specific vs. diffuse** asks "Is responsibility specifically assigned or diffusely accepted?" and also classifies whether business should be conducted on the basis of an abstract and narrowly defined relationship, as in a contract, or if it requires the development of strong, personal relationships before cooperation can begin. It also relates to the nature of the relationship in different contexts.

Figure 4: Specific vs. Diffuse with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 85)

- **Achievement vs. ascription** looks at methods of according status to others. Achieved status is earned by proving oneself, and ascribed status is given based on one's role in the society. In Figure 5, the continuum is based on responses to whether status should be ascribed based on family background. Kuwait, with 50% of respondents saying yes, is the closest country to ascription:

Figure 5: Acheivement vs. Ascription with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 106)

- **Sequential vs. synchronic time orientation** classifies whether people do things one at a time or several things at once.

Figure 6: Sequential vs. Synchronic with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 127)

- **Internal vs. external control nature orientation** looks at the extent to which societies feel the need to control our environment, live in harmony with it or be controlled by it. It also relates to whether cultures are pragmatic or deterministic, the continuum of which is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Internal vs. External with examples
(Derived from Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 143)

Hofstede's dimensional model

Working with IBM in the 1970s to 1980s and with the goal of improving intercultural communication for business, Hofstede developed a model that identified five dimensions and ranked up to 74 countries on indices for each dimension:

- **Power distance (PDI)**: the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal power distribution within a culture (Marcus, 2000, ¶14).

Figure 8: Power distance continuum with examples
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 43-44)

- **Collectivism vs. individualism (IDV)**: Individualistic societies have loose ties between individuals; collectivistic societies integrate people into strong, cohesive groups that take care of and protect their members in return for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 76).

Figure 9: Collectivism/individualism continuum with examples
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 78-79)

- **Femininity vs. masculinity (MAS)**: Masculinity pertains to societies in which gender roles are distinct—men are supposed to be assertive and focused on material success, and women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life; femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap—both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 120).

Figure 10: Masculine/Feminine continuum with examples
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 120-121)

- **Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)**: the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 167).

Figure 11: Uncertainty avoidance continuum with examples
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 168-169)

- **Long- vs. short-term orientation (LTO)**: Long-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards—in particular, perseverance and thrift. Short-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present—in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of "face" and fulfilling social obligations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 210).

Figure 12: Orientation continuum with examples
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 168-169; Moghadam & Assar, 2008, p. 375)

Discussion

These theories align and overlap. They overlap with each other: both Hofstede and Trompenaars have a collectivist/individualist dimension; all three have a time-orientation dimension, and two of those—Hall and Trompenaars—deal with sequencing of time. As well, there are correlations between collectivism—present in Trompenaars' and Hofstede's models—and Trompenaars' particularism (Smith, Dugan & Trompenaars, 1996, (p. 238), which would mean that not only do they overlap with each other, but also they overlap with themselves. Indeed, this self-correlation is an area of criticism, especially of Hall's theory.

Hall's three dimensions have a great deal of overlap. Time, space and context are intertwined and nearly perfectly correlated (see Table 1). Hall himself wrote (1983) that the monochronic tendency to schedule everything reduces context (p. 48). Context, time and space seem to be three ways of sorting countries into the same categories each time: like sorting apples and oranges by colour, presence or absence of a core, and presence or absence of a peel. This is not to say that Hall's theory should be completely disregarded; in fact, as we will see in the next section, his dimension of context features prominently in the web literature surveyed.

Trompenaars' model does not escape without criticism, either. There is the aforementioned correlation between collectivist and particularist cultures. Also, there are some issues with the presentation of data. The figures in the Trompenaars section on pages 5 to 7 were derived from tables in his and Hampden-Turner's book *Riding the Waves of Culture* (1997). Each table showed the responses a particular question from a 79-item survey, in which multiple questions supposedly correlated to one of the seven dimensions. Unfortunately, the book did not present aggregated data for each dimension, only that of individual questions. The continuums above represent only one of these questions (outlined in the examples given). When the data is aggregated, the correlations between questions for one dimension and those of another are often greater than the questions belonging to the same dimension (Hofstede, 1996, p. 191-193). In his 1996 critique of Trompenaars' model, Hofstede performed an ecological factor analysis of Trompenaars' 1993[2] data. He wrote, "[a]t best, three separate dimensions really appear" (p. 193) and concluded that most of Trompenaars' questionnaire measures the equivalent of Hofstede's individualism dimension (p. 195).

Hofstede, however, has established clear and distinct dimensions with much less correlation than either Hall or Trompenaars. Also, Hofstede (with Hofstede, 2005) presented all aggregated data in *Cultures and Organizations*. Hofstede is not without his detractors, however. His project has been dismissed as a "misguided attempt to measure the unmeasurable" (MacIntyre, 1971, & Smelser, 1992; cited in McSweeny, 2002, p. 90) and critiqued for claiming that countries are representational units of culture (McSweeny, 2002). This critique could be made of all three theories presented here, and has been made more recently as well (Hofner Saphiere, Kappler Mikk & Ibrahim DeVries, 2005), stating that intercultural communications is best examined by individual contexts and flexible tendencies, not by immutable countries and fixed types.

[2] The first edition of *Riding the Waves of Culture* was in 1993. The author cites the second edition in this paper.

Regardless of these three theories' weaknesses, however, they, along with others, have been thoroughly examined in the literature with respect to web design and content creation.

Applying the theories to the web: literature review

In a survey of the literature, much of the research fell into two groups: either an attempt to identify and classify, or a more applied approach that included web design suggestions for various cultures or dimensions. Gould, Zakaria and Yousof (2000) compared Malaysian and US websites using both Hofstede and Trompenaars' theories. Juric, Kim and Kuljis (2003) used Badres' (2000) concept of cultural markers and analyzed hundreds of websites to seek trends as to where Koreans and Americans preferred elements to fit in a wireframe. Marcus (2000) shows examples of sites for each of Hofstede's five dimensions from countries that rated at extremes of each and correlates the characteristics of the dimensions with the website examples. Kim and Kuljis (2007) identify preferences between UK and South Korean "cultural manifestations" of website elements. Seares, Jacko and Dubach (2000) look at Swiss and American preferences to "high-end graphical enhancements." Cyr and Trevor-Smith (2004) compare German, Japanese and U.S. website characteristics such as layout, content, navigation, multimedia and colour. Gorman (2006) compares Swedish and Japanese fine china and crystal manufacturers' sites and concludes that they embody their respective Hofstedian dimensions. Gould (2006) looked at e-commerce site design for Malaysian and American audiences.

Several articles outlined specific ways to create websites for specific cultures, with regards to the design wireframes (Juric, Kim & Kuljis, 2003), textual content (Zahedi, Van Pelt & Song, 2000), visual content, (Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004), specific types of sites (Gould, 2006), or overall site construction and conception (Main, 2002; Marcus, 2000; Tindal, 2003). These tips are outlined below.

Table 2: Design tips for websites
(Juric, Kim & Kuljis, 2003; Zahedi, Van Pelt & Song, 2000; Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Gould, 2006; Main, 2002; Marcus, 2000; Tindal, 2003)

Category[3]	Design tips	
Power distance (PDI) *	**High**	**Low**
	▪ Include references to authority, power, expertise, wealth, leaders ▪ Focus on official stamps/logos ▪ Have prominent organizational charts that emphasise hierarchy ▪ State clearly any special titles conferred on organization members ▪ Emphasise the social and moral order and symbols ▪ Build a highly structured site ▪ Have secured areas visible and access based on status	▪ Give prominence to citizens, customers, employees ▪ Build transparent, integrated sites with implicit freedom to roam
Collectivism vs. Individualism (IDV) *§	**Collectivist**	**Individualist**
	▪ Downplay personal achievement ▪ Define success in terms of socio-political goals ▪ Promote group solidarity, relationships ▪ Include links to other organizations ▪ Write in an indirect, impersonal style ▪ Emphasize tradition and history ▪ Use indirect, polite language	▪ Emphasize what is new, different or unique ▪ Build customizable sites; personal profiles ▪ Emphasize truth ▪ Controversial rhetoric and/or extreme claims are okay and expected ▪ Use direct, action-oriented statements
Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS) *	**Masculine**	**Feminine**
	▪ Use traditional gender/family/age distinctions ▪ Focus on work tasks, roles, mastery ▪ Have quick results for limited tasks ▪ Build navigation oriented to exploration and control ▪ Gain attention through games and competitions ▪ Use graphics, sound and animation for utilitarian purposes	▪ Use imagery or text that blurs gender roles ▪ Focus on mutual cooperation, exchange and support ▪ Gain attention through poetry, visual aesthetics, and appeals to unifying values

Continued …

[3] * = one of Hofstede's five dimensions
† = one of Hall's dimensions
§ = one of Trompenaars' cultural differences

Category[3]	Design tips	
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) *	**High** ▪ Use simple designs with clear metaphors ▪ Build navigation with limited choices ▪ Restrict amounts of data ▪ Reveal or forecast results of actions ▪ Prevent users getting lost ▪ Use mental models and help systems ▪ Build in redundant clues (colour, sound, typography) ▪ Use clear, precise words that clarify	**Low** ▪ Have many choices and large amounts of information ▪ Maintain minimal control over user navigation with emphasis on encouraging browsing and wandering ▪ Complexity is acceptable
Long- vs. Short-term orientation (LTO) *†	**Long-term** ▪ Emphasize perseverance and patience in pursuing goals ▪ Content should be practical with future orientation ▪ Demonstrate relationships as a source of information	**Short-term** ▪ Focus content on truth and certainty of beliefs ▪ State rules as a source of information and credibility ▪ Build to give immediate results and achievement of goals
High context vs. Low context †	**High context** ▪ Include communications that rely on a highly developed personal relationships ▪ Post a variety of views and topics ▪ Orient content towards people	**Low context** ▪ Post detailed facts and agreements ▪ Orient content toward tasks
Polychronic vs. Monochronic †§	**Polychronic** ▪ Stress human relationships ▪ Supply high-context personal information ▪ Offer a variety of views, issues, or topics	**Monochronic** ▪ Stress the facts ▪ Offer consistent sets of views, issues or topics ▪ Focus on tasks and achievements

Problems with applying the research

For organizations, the first problem that becomes quickly evident is where to start. A good place to start is by defining terms and distinguishing between websites for international audiences that use either *internationalization* or *localization*. Internationalization refers to a universal solution that spans many cultures or countries, and localization refers to adapting the solution for a specific locale.

Internationalization and localization can be applied to websites in varying degrees to any or all of its components: e.g., the *wireframe* (layout and placement of elements), navigation, or text, image or multimedia content. With respect to text, internationalization uses simpler language that can be understood by non-native speakers, whereas localization often involves translation (Nielsen, 2000, p. 315). Localized navigation would have different menus for each culture.

There are problems with applying either localization or internationalization, though. A truly internationalized site could not exist, since every solution in the first column of Table 2 proposes its opposite in the second column. And, as far as localization is concerned, the research points to the need for several completely different sites based on the audience's country of origin. This is impractical from a site building and maintenance perspective, particularly for resource-strapped organizations. Chavan (2007), however, proposed a strategy for limiting the number of customizations based on categorization of Hofstede's dimensions. He suggested grouping country sites not geographically but by shared characteristics. In his example, 22 countries score high as collectivist cultures. "Taking advantage of this similarity, a company … could … design one … website for this group" (p. 30). There is a problem with this solution though: in Hofstede's theory, there are five dimensions. When an additional dimension is considered—and then another—the group of 22 would quickly dwindle in size. For example, adding low uncertainty avoidance brings the group of 22 down to merely six.

When elements other than content—for example: layout, navigation schemes, and wireframe design—were discussed, another weakness was discovered. For example, Juric, Kim and Kuljis (2003) and Kim and Kuljis (2007) offered suggestions as to the placement of menus, logos, and overall wireframe layout for the countries they looked at (UK and South Korea) based on trends they categorized. Several articles (Gould, Zakaria and Yusof, 2000; Marcus, 2002; Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Badre, 2000) gave examples of sites and then used the wireframe, navigation and placement of elements to draw conclusions about what a country with a specific dimension score prefers. For example, Marcus mentions axial symmetry on a Malaysian university site as connoting power for that top-scorer on power distance (Figure 13), and correlates a lack of clutter on a site from Belgium to that country's very high score on uncertainty avoidance (Figure 15). Gould et al. compare similar organizations (e.g., online book sellers) in the U.S. and Malaysia and say that their Hofstedian dimension ratings are responsible for the design choices (Figure 17 and Figure 19).

However, visits to all the sites cited in these articles tell a very different story today. In all cases, the sites have moved toward a more universally standard wireframe, evident in the more-or-less consistent placement of elements such as navigation menus, headers and logos (Figure 14, Figure 16 and Figure 18). The most telling example is the Malaysian bookseller, MPH, which today closely mirrors its American counterpart, Barnes and Noble. Indeed, a check of the *Wayback Machine* at archive.org shows that MPH changed their site to a layout much closer to that or Barnes & Nobel merely 12 months after their launch in 1998.

Even in countries where right-to-left or up-down reading direction is the norm, the placement of wireframe elements has become arguably universal. The one exception is menu placement. Cultures where the reading flows right to left tend to put their menu navigation on the right (Figure 20). However, this could still be considered a standard—one in which menus appear before the page content in the reading direction. Essentially, the number of wireframe templates required for organizations who need to localize website design has been reduced to two.

Figure 13: Universiti Utara Malaysia's website 1999.
Marcus (2000) points to the prominent placement of the crest and the axial symmetry as indicative of a high-power distance culture.

Figure 14: Universiti Utara Malaysia's website, 2009.
The axial symmetry is gone, as is the logo prominence. Menus appear on the left, the logo in the top left of a header bar, and the site is a typical three-column layout. Even the Malaysian-language student portal (not pictured) has a similar wireframe.

Figure 15: Sabena Airlines website, 1999.
Marcus (2000) explained that the simplicity and straightforwardness of this site indicated a country with a high uncertainty avoidance index.

Figure 16: Sabena Airlines website, 2009.
There are so many animated GIFs on this page that users are completely unsure where to click—and this from the country with the greatest intolerance for ambiguity.

Figure 17: MPHonline.com, a Malaysian bookseller website, 1999
(Gould, Zakaria & Yusof, 2000, p. 168; Internet Archive, 2009a). Gould et al. claim that the static design, sequestering of books and focus on corporate image reflect Malaysia’s high power distance and low individualism.

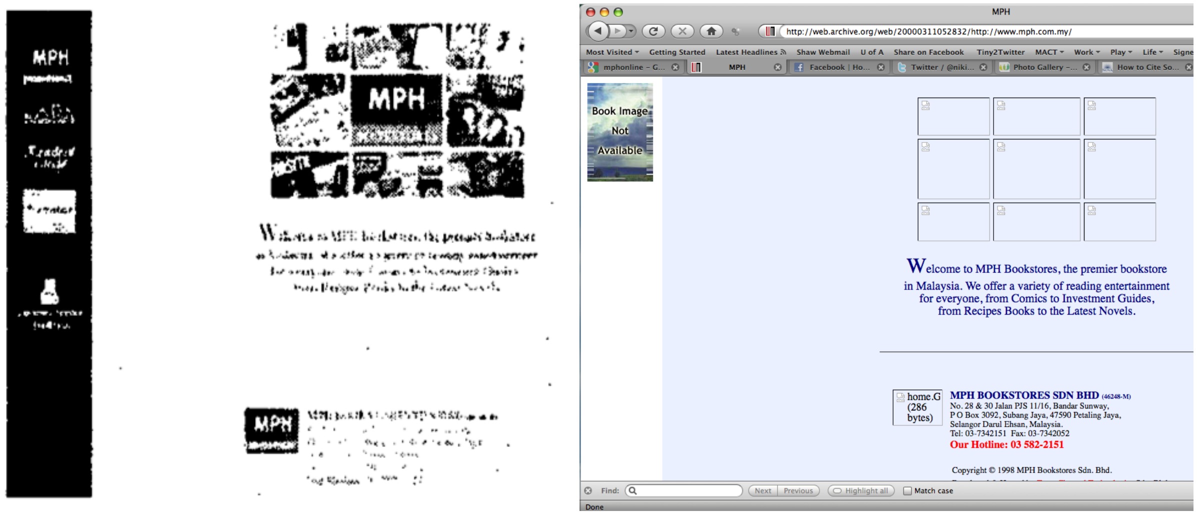


Figure 18: MPHonline.com website 2009.
Compare with Figure 19.

Figure 19: Barnes & Noble website 2009.
Both MPHonline.com and this have many of the same elements in virtually the same place.

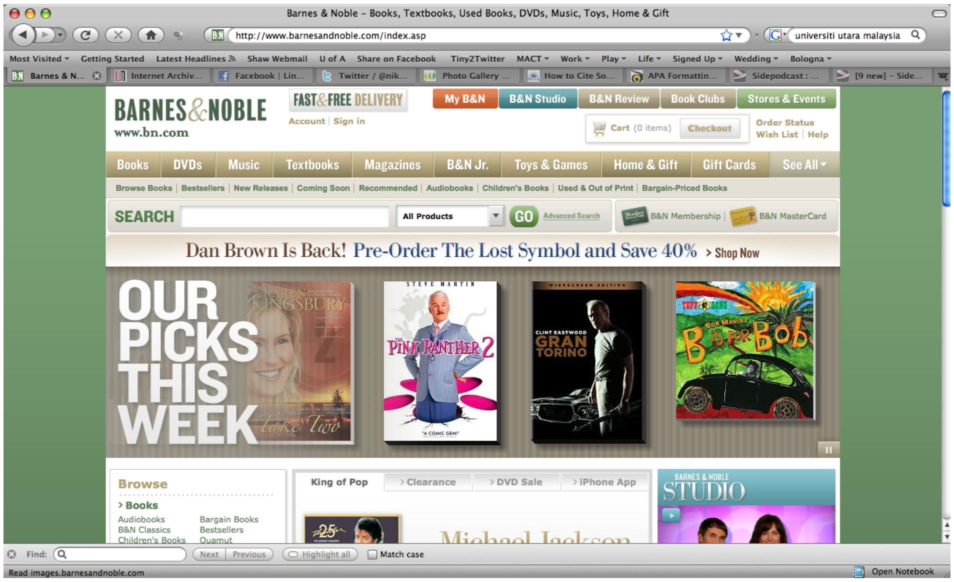
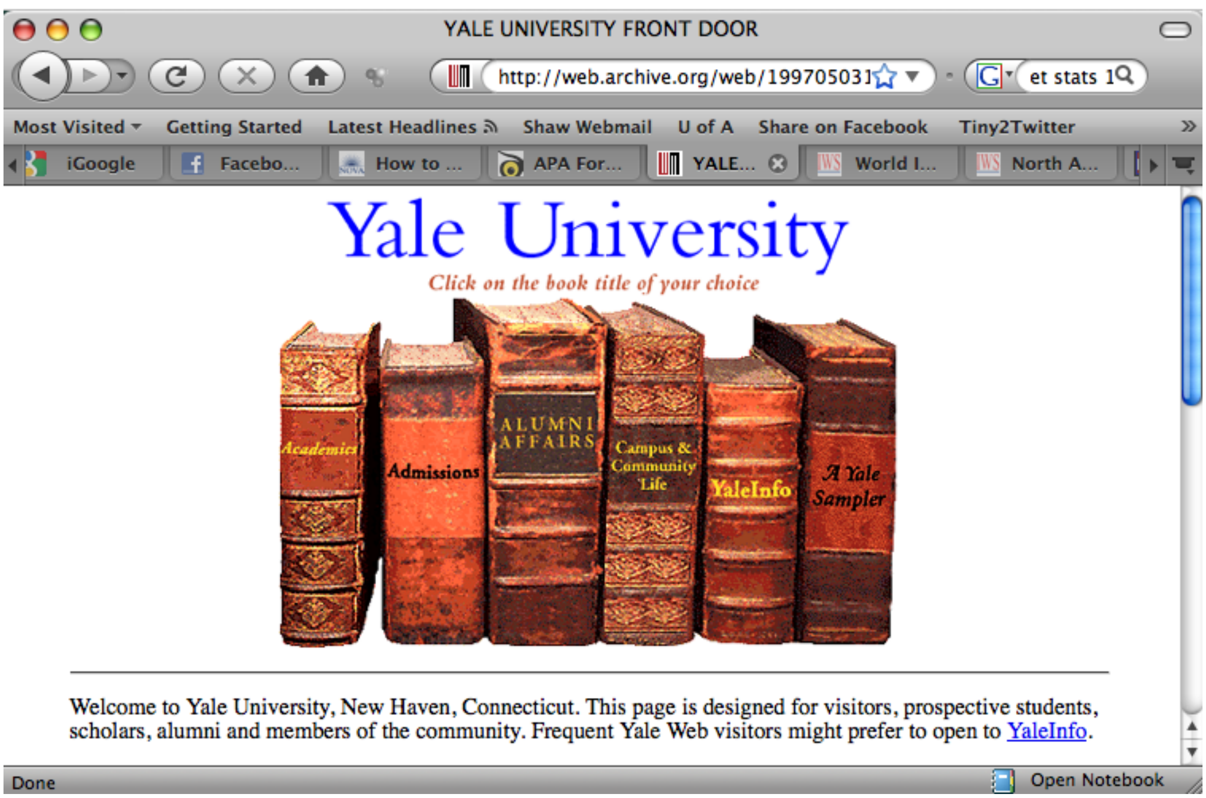


Figure 20: Recent website from Iran, in English and Persian, which reads right-to-left.
Aside from menus on the right and tabbed navigation running right-to-left, most of the elements on the page are in the same place as a typical North American site.

The likely reason for the conclusions in the literature reviewed may be due to the relative newness of the Internet in countries other than English-speaking North America and Europe at the time the site layouts were documented. In 2000, for example, Malaysia had 15% Internet penetration. By 2008, that number had increased to 60% (Miniwatts, 2009c). Comparing screen captures at the same relative time in a country's Internet history could result in a different conclusion. For example, according to US Government Census data from 1999, 22% of the American population used the Internet in 1997 (p. 3). Thanks to the Wayback Machine, we are able to view websites from that year. Figure 21 pictures Yale University's from early 1997. Note the "axial symmetry":

Figure 21: Yale University website 1997
(Internet Archive, 2009b).

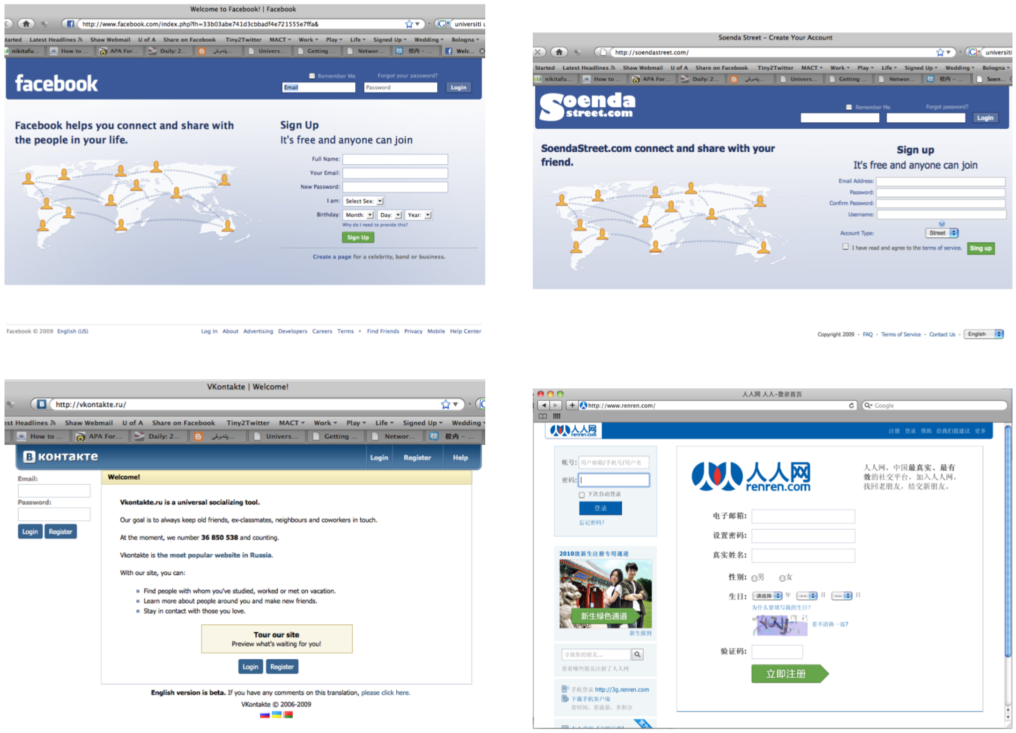


Perhaps the comparison is somewhat unfair, but it illustrates the point that it is far more likely that the layout of the Malaysian website could be better attributed to the newness of the technology in that country, the limitations of early HTML, or poor design choices. Arguably, in the first years of the Internet everywhere, websites looked pretty awful universally.

Overall then, site layouts and wireframes are trending towards universality. Therefore, those articles that claimed, "[country] prefers [characteristic] on websites" (Gould, Zakaria and Yusof, 2000; Marcus, 2002; Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Badre, 2000; Juric, Kim & Kuljis, 2003; Kim & Kuljis, 2007), whether tied to an intercultural communication theory or not, are perhaps no longer valid because of how similar the example websites in those articles look today. Why, then, have they become so similar, and is this trend a positive one?

Perhaps the social media and the open source software revolution may have affected this move towards universality. Social media sites are sites that enable users to not only read, but also write, content. These sites make it easy to contribute content, providing users with tools to publish their own material almost immediately and with very little technical expertise; for example, web-logs, or *blogs* (online journals that display posts in reverse chronological order and enable reader feedback). In an international online blog and discussion forum, a prominent UK blogger wrote to the researcher, "The presence of sites like Blogger and Wordpress (which provide templates for their users) usually means that it's rare for people to do their own thing in terms of design beyond the basic look and feel" (Journeyer, 2009, #105). Indeed, social networking sites like Facebook and their international equivalents are eerily similar, probably because they are copying each other, either in spirit, or in exact duplication of the code. (Figure 22). Again, though, are these positive trends? A brief discussion about critical theory is in order.

Figure 22: Four social network sites: Facebook (USA), Soendastreet (Malaysia), VKontakte (Russia) and RenRen (China). Notice the similarity in placement of headers, logos and data entry fields.



Critical communication theorists, especially the postcolonial school of thought, may view this homogenization of the World Wide Web as simply the latest example of Eurocentrism—or, its late-20th century counterpart, Americanization. It could be that websites are becoming universal because the western world is imposing its wireframes on the rest of the Internet. Two articles found discussed the cultural inappropriateness of the metaphors, symbols and layouts used in interface design caused by the borrowing or imposition of Western software and human-computer interfaces on the East (Li, Sun & Zhang, 2007; Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener, 1998). Recognizing that this is a larger argument beyond the scope of this project, suffice it to say that the pervasiveness of these metaphors and symbols (and over a decade of familiarity with them) has likely removed the original meaning and replaced it with a new one. Semiotic theory and Ogden's triangle of meaning explains how a symbol can come to represent an object or concept in another context (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 36). For example, the Mac trashcan icon (or the Windows equivalent of "Recycle Bin") is the way to *delete* files, not throw them out or recycle them. Even the post-computer age icon for "save" is based on now obsolete technology (the floppy disk), but Apple has no plans to retire the icon in upcoming versions (Gruber, 2010). A new generation of computer users who have never seen a floppy disk used has assigned a new meaning, or signifier, to a now meaningless sign (symbol). Whether one agrees with these arguments needs to be set aside for the purpose of this research. Empirically, a trend towards standardization of wireframes and design element placement is in evidence across all computer-literate cultures' websites. So where does that leave us with regards to building sites for international audiences or different cultural groups within our own countries? Should we discount all intercultural communications models?

Content

If the design of sites has universalized, the remaining concern when producing websites for multi-cultural audiences is about content. Content includes text, images, icons and multimedia. What does the research say about content? Is there room for intercultural communications models? Possibly. Returning to the "design" solutions in Table 2 reveals that many of the tips do, in fact, concern themselves with content. Included in it are solutions from Zahedi et al. (2001), who proposed a two-fold conceptual framework for international web design. It suggested that the effectiveness of web communication is influenced by both cultural factors and individual characteristics (p. 85). In this model, readers' cultural conditioning influences the effectiveness of web documents, as does their personal experiences. Effectiveness of the documents (i.e., are they perceived as reliable, comprehensible and clear) in turn influences overall user satisfaction with web design. For cultural factors, the model uses Hofstede's five dimensions plus Hall's dimension of polychromic vs. monochromic. The individual factors include demographics, education, knowledge of IT, flexibility, mental capacity and intercultural acumen. They provide examples of text that would be more appropriate for each dimension and individual factor; e.g., using indirect language for collectivist cultures and direct language for individualistic cultures. However, with the addition of individual factors, content creators have the same quagmire as with design localization: too many permutations. The solution here is likely not Chavan's (2007) model, but one rooted in strategic communication: clearly define the target audience (Potter, L., 2001, p. 119). Just because the World Wide Web is accessible to the entire world does not mean organizations need to create content for everyone in it. Organizations that plan to create localized sites may wish to identify key characteristics of their target audiences—from both the cultural dimensions and individual factors—and use that to guide the creation of content.

The return to content and website localization brings up the issue of translation. This is not to be overlooked. Surfing content in a non-native language is difficult—essentially, a user becomes illiterate. If an organization has a large market in particular countries or even a large local following from another culture, translation into a few key languages is likely a good investment. One note though: tools like Google translator are making it possible for audiences to translate text content on web pages. While some of the current translations leave something to be desired, others are actually quite accurate (Young, 2010 May). Over time, tools like this may reduce the amount of custom translation necessary for an organization. Again, though, this would be considered *satisficing*—making do—rather than pursuing the optimal solution.

Other important things to consider in the localization of content are what Main (2002) called "objective culture." For example, word meaning, address formats, calendars, currency, numbers, dates, telephone numbers and units of measurement reflect objective culture. These are concrete things that differ from culture to culture, country to country and language to language. As an example, overlooking the objective meaning of "one billion" in Europe[4]

[4] Specifically, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Spain (Main, 2002, p. 47-48).

(1,000,000,000,000) vs. North America (1,000,000,000) could have serious repercussions on a website for stock holders. Main (2002) also includes considerations for "subjective culture," which could be evaluated using intercultural communication models: authority, colours, prejudices, gender and age roles, sense of time, sounds, symbols, gestures, individuality, tone and taboos.

If, for a localized site, the audience is defined and narrowed to key target cultures and the objective and subjective culture markets have been considered, it stands to reason that we have the information necessary to generate web content. But do we? How do users really consume online content? According to usability experts—notably Krug (2006), Nielsen (2000), and Nielsen and Loranger (2006)—users scan web content. In research, Nielsen (2000) discovered that 79% of users scan a page (p. 104). Typically, this scanning behaviour lasts for 30 seconds on an average homepage. (Nielsen & Loranger, 2006, p. 32). A reason for this scanning is that reading on screen is 25% slower than reading from paper (Nielsen, 2000, p. 101). It could also be that users perceive the Internet as a resource where they get in, get information, and get out; because of this perception of speed and lack of commitment, users do not wish to spend time reading word for word.

Based on users' scanning behaviour, the abovementioned usability research, in addition to other content-specific usability books and resources (Taylor, 2009; Redish, 2007; Wiley, 2008; Bivins, 1999; Newsom & Haynes, 2005), has provided tips for writing content for the web. For instance:

- Write for scannability
- Use meaningful headings
- Chunk page content
- Write concise text
- Use nested heading styles
- Keep pages short
- Use objective language
- Use plain language
- Use bulleted lists

However, there is a gulf in the literature surveyed: none of the articles encountered about intercultural web communications examined the way users consume online content, and none of the usability or writing guides consulted made specific reference to whether the 79% of scanners is a global statistic, or if it comprises only American audiences. This has ramifications whether we are localizing content or striving for an international site that can meet the needs of a diverse audience with one web solution. If translation were not an option, would culturally focused language and tone increase user satisfaction for a specific international audience? Or would the application of North American web writing conventions and simplification of the language improve the effectiveness (i.e., clarity and comprehensibility) of the content and therefore user satisfaction? Would the lack of culturally focused language and tone reduce satisfaction and cancel out gains in clarity? Further research was needed to begin exploring these questions.

Examining English-only content for multicultural, non-native speakers of English

Research question

Having determined that web wireframes and layouts could make do with a single universal design, the main research project examined **the possibility of universal content models for text and images on websites**.[5] Using content targeted at current international students of the University of Alberta and obtained from the University of Alberta International website (www.international.ualberta.ca), the research examined the preferences of international participants with English as a foreign language (EFL) in regards to readability and culturally focused language.

The project endeavoured to answer the research question by answering these two sub-questions:

1. What is an appropriate level of **readability** for English only content?

[5] Again, with the understanding that the best possible solution is localized (i.e., translated) sites targeted carefully at the desired audience.

2. How, if at all, do **cultural dimension-based modifications** to English web content affect an EFL culture's **receptivity** to it?

Readability

In order to answer the first sub-question, we must first understand what readability is and how it is measured. Readability is "what makes some texts easier to read than others" (DuBay, 2004, p. 3). More specifically it is defined by Dale & Chall (1949, cited in DuBay, 2004) as "the sum total … of all … elements within a given piece of printed material that affect the success … readers have with it. … [S]uccess is the extent to which they understand it, read it at an optimal speed, and find it interesting" (p. 3). There are several tests that can be used to measure a text's readability, at least with respect to comprehension at an optimal reading speed. All readability tests work by analysing features such as sentence and word length (measured by syllables or number of characters), and many assign grade values supposedly equivalent to North American K-12 education ("Readability," 2008). One measure is the Flesch-Kincaid readability test, which has been employed in the analysis of web content (Wilson, Baker, Brown-Syed & Gollup, 2000). According to the National Adult Literacy Study (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993), the average American adult reads at a Grade 7 level. Canadian public relations professionals who use the Canadian Press Style Guide as a reference aim for a Flesch-Kincaid grade of 8 when writing for commercial or mass media material (Page, M. & Wright, A., 2002-3, lecture notes)—e.g., newspapers, magazines, etc.—though Wegner and Girasek (2003) argue that instructions regarding safety should be at an even lower level. In matters of health, experts recommend that the material should be written at a Grade 5 or 6 reading level (Doak, Doak & Root, 1996; Weiss & Coyne, 1997). The material taken from the University of Alberta International website scores a grade of 12—much too high for all of these criteria.

An issue that often arises with readability is the belief that writing for lower grade levels is undesirable. This could be due to several reasons: for example, the target audience is literate (as is the case for a university recruitment website) and therefore an attitude of "they should be able to read it if they want to get in" is often encountered; also, writing in easier English is viewed as "dumbing down" the content and a more literate audience might take offence. This belief is contradicted both by universal design (UD) theory and by usability theory.

Universal design refers to a broad-spectrum solution that produces buildings, products and environments that are usable and effective for everyone, not just people with disabilities ("Universal Design," 2010). The concept of universal design originated in the architectural field, with the work of Ron Mace and others (Welch, 1995). One of its sub-categories, universal instructional design, applies here because it is concerned with accessibility of instructional materials—i.e., content. Making information accessible, according to Allen (2005), insures that materials, activities, or goals are attainable by individuals who may have differences "in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage and remember" (p.1). Universal design has its roots in standpoint theory, in that designing for the needs of the most excluded group will result in increased awareness of design practices that exclude others (Campbell, 2006, p. 45), as well as benefiting the so-called dominant culture. For example, curb cuts were designed to make crossing the street a wheelchair-accessible activity, and in the process, it also made it easier to push a stroller or shopping cart or to ride a bike, skateboard, or rollerblades off the sidewalk and across the road (Welch, 1995). With regards to text content, material that is easier to read for those with low literacy is also easier to read for those with advanced literacy skills, which has to do with the usability of the content.

Usability In the movie *Beetlejuice*, ghost Adam Maitland is reading *The Guide to the Afterlife*. He exclaims, "It reads like stereo instructions!" and sets it aside, frustrated (Geffen et al., 1988). As discussed in the "Content" section, usability theory states that making content usable is to make it more readable. Many extremely literate people have had the experience of being exasperated with reading a difficult textbook, but they will fly through the pages of a romance or adventure novel. Why? In one study, Plucinski et al. (2009) measured 50 accounting textbooks and discovered that even the easiest textbook required at least a Grade 11 education to read. By contrast, John Grisham, Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, and Mark Twain all wrote at the Grade 7 level (Impact Information, 2008). Frustrated readers often stop reading without even knowing they have, and subconsciously move on to other, more pleasurable tasks—not a desired behaviour for textbook authors, professors, or recruitment personnel at a university. Avoiding this is an excellent reason to write for the most disadvantaged group—in this case people with lower literacy.

A further discussion of how readability was calculated and applied in this project is discussed below in the Methodology section.

Cultural dimensions and receptivity

To attempt to answer the second sub-question, once the text was at an appropriate reading level, the language was modified according to Hofstede's (with Hofstede, 2005) cultural dimensions and intercultural communications research. Hofstede's intercultural communications theory was chosen for reasons outlined in the Methodology section (see sections "Why Hofstede?" and "Preparation of test samples"). The text was then presented to focus groups from targeted cultures (see "Recruitment"). The results from the focus group were then analyzed (see "Results and analysis").

Methodology

Theoretical underpinnings

I have approached this project from a practical, pragmatic framework. A number of theoretical traditions underpin the research: the sociocultural tradition, which we have examined above in the cultural communication theories of Hall, Trompenaars, and Hofstede; as well as the critical tradition—standpoint theory and universal design. A modified grounded theory approach was used to collect and analyse the data.

First, I am seeking to "provide … a set of understandings that lets you weigh alternative courses of action to achieve goals" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 26); hence, a practical theory. Philosophically, practical theories are humanistic—viewing knowledge as interpretation—pragmatic and value-conscious (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 27). Given that the project investigated how the participants respond to web content, epistemologically, a practical theory makes sense. Also, since the goal is to provide solutions for web design that satisfices when resources are scarce, a pragmatic view seems reasonable as well. This also fits from an axiological standpoint, since my values no doubt affected the choice of project and the creation of the test samples. A practical theory also fits with a need for classification possibilities rather than strictly controlled variables, since it was difficult to control all variables in something as varied as text and pictures.

From the critical tradition, the project was informed by standpoint theory as proposed by Harding (1991) and others. As discussed above, standpoint theory claims that research from the perspective of the non-dominant culture provides a more objective view of the world. It is because of this that either interviews or focus groups were considered essential to the methodology. Since I explored the perceptions of international students (the non-dominant culture), how else but by hearing the first-hand opinions of international students could the project be true to the theory? Ultimately, focus groups were selected for reasons outlined later.

User-centered design is "a philosophy that requires the inclusion of users throughout the entire design process" (Campbell, 2006, p. 41). A related philosophy, universal design, and its roots in standpoint theory, was discussed briefly in the readability section, above. According to Campbell (2004), the design of many websites is ethnocentric, and one of the ways to overcome what Richard Saul Wurman (cited in Campbell, 2004) called "the disease of familiarity" is through usability testing (p. 246). *Usability testing*, a "large set of methods for identifying how your users actually interact with your content", is done to get the users' perspective on elements or stages of the design (Campbell, 2004, p. 246). Only users can really know if the product is actually going to work for them. For this reason, usability testing should be performed throughout a user-centered design process. University of Alberta International's website and information architecture (where pages go in the navigation) was informed by a user-centered design process using existing research data obtained from focus groups about recruitment materials and less formal methods of talking to users and collecting anecdotes—what Krug (2006) described as usability testing "on the cheap". The web content, however, had not been tested, though when the International Student Handbook, a print publication, went to press in June 2008, it was discovered that it read at a Grade 12 level—higher even than Plucinski's (2009) accounting text books. Since most of the content in the handbook had been taken from the website and expanded, clearly there was a need for usability testing on the web content as well if user-centered design philosophies were to be continued throughout. Campbell (2004) suggests recruiting users from a variety of backgrounds and that focus groups can be one method to collect data.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from China, Japan, Iran and Germany. These countries were chosen for the following reasons:

- They are regions where English is a foreign language.
- They present opposing extremes along the cultural dimension continuums in relation to each other.
- I could obtain relatively easy access to subjects from these cultures.

Between three and eight participants from each culture/region were recruited. This was not the desired number—it was hoped that more could have been recruited. Given that grounded theory was used, and researchers should conduct as many focus groups with similar demographics until no new ideas or themes emerge (Rhine, 2009; Halcomb et al., 2007), it would have been better to have at least 20 participants in a minimum of three focus groups per culture. Also, because the sample size is so small, any quantitative analysis would have virtually no statistical significance.

Recruiting was done in the following ways:

- E-mail solicitation for volunteers via the international student listserv, UAISN.
- Posters asking for volunteers at the International Centre and in Enterprise Square ESL classrooms.
- Posting a call for volunteers on Facebook, Twitter and my blog.
- Personal invitation by the researcher, ESL teachers and international student advisors.

Though most of the participants ended up being students, this was not a requirement.

All volunteers were directed to a web page with a pre-screening questionnaire (see "Appendix 1: Pre-screening form"). The questionnaire asked for contact information and availability, plus country of origin and status within the U of A community (e.g., undergraduate student, graduate student, ESL student, staff, etc.). I then contacted the participants to arrange a time for them to participate in a focus group.

Why focus groups?

As previously mentioned, due to the basing of the research in standpoint theory, either interviews or focus groups were to be the data collection method. The philosophical foundations of both interviews and focus groups rest in the interpretivist tradition, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 170). This tradition aims to understand social phenomena by extracting the uniqueness in situations rather than deducing generalisable laws (Putnam, 1983; cited in Miller, 2000, p. 56). Both would also be at home in Cresswell's (2003) constructivist "alternative knowledge claim" (p.6), wherein we find concepts of understanding, multiple participant meanings, and social and historical construction. Indeed, he asserts, "Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that participants can express their views" (p. 9). Focus groups suited Cresswell's (2003) advocacy/participatory framework, in which the agenda is political, collaborative, and about marginalized group empowerment (p. 9-11). These philosophical underpinnings were in line with the research being undertaken.

Focus groups, additionally, are economical. The opinions and experiences of multiple participants are collected in a single time period. Their flexible format allows for exploration of emergent issues. This they share with unstructured interviews. Because of the group dynamic, a focus group provides insight into complex behaviours and can be used to explore consensus or disagreement on issues (Evans, 2008 May 13, in-class lecture). Ervin (2000) demonstrated that focus groups could generate interest in or ownership of the research, which, since raising awareness of its web resources is an objective of the University of Alberta International office, this was of use to the research project—in fact, only one participant had previously visited the web page that was selected, and several participants thought what they had learned would be useful to them in the future. Also, participants expressed a desire to see the results of the research at the conclusion of the focus group.

Disadvantages of focus groups are that they may silence the voice of individuals with differing opinions and group dynamics may be a challenge to facilitate (Evans, 2008 May 13, in-class lecture). Due to issues of subtle bias and power imbalance, groups could have demonstrated a false sense of consensus (Ervin, 2000). One way that power imbalance could have manifested was in differing English abilities; i.e., those with lower abilities may have been silenced due to inability to comprehend or lack of confidence. However, a mix of English ability was desired for two reasons. From a standpoint theory perspective, the lower the English ability, the more representative of the most disadvantaged users. Also, because those with better communications skills could facilitate communication for those with less skill. Since the researcher was only able to assist in this manner for Japanese group, it was necessary in the three other cultures. Participant peer-assistance occurred in all but the Iranian group, in which all participants had advanced English ability.

Additionally, focus groups were more time-consuming than anticipated. Grounded theory and others' guidelines say that you should conduct as many focus groups with similar demographics until no new ideas or themes emerge (Rhine, 2009; Halcomb et al., 2006). For the research at hand, this meant conducting multiple groups with each culture—time consuming, indeed, and ultimately, not possible in the timelines of this project.

Power issues are a concern in focus groups. Especially for the research in question, cultural dynamics must be taken into consideration. Because interaction between group members was critical in focus group, a group that is composed of people with highly different characteristics will decrease the reliability and or the quality of the data (Parker & Tritter, 2006; Gill et al., 2008). For this research, groups needed to be homogenous in terms of culture

(Strickland, 1999) and in terms of religion (Winslow, Honein & Elzubeir, 2002) to avoid this. Also, since each group was examining samples of web content that had been tailored for its members' cultural communications preferences, the groups needed to be culturally homogenous.

Further, Davies (1999) identifies issues around age and sex in certain cultures. In cultures with high power distance, younger participants may hold back in the presence of elders, and in cultures with a dichotomy between the sexes, behaviours may change in mixed sex groups. However, these behaviours were likely tempered because the researcher's participants had lived in Canada, and likely "have adapted aspects of their traditional culture to those of their current environment" (Halcomb et al., 2006, p. 1002). Fortunately, due to recruitment methods outlined above, most participants knew at least one other person in the group (either me or another participant) and that seemed to temper any potential issues.

Another issue to examine is the ethical considerations. In the focus groups, consent was given at the beginning, but there was a risk that discussion might meander into areas of discomfort for the participant; there was no way of knowing this beforehand. University research ethics require that participants be able to withdraw consent at any time during the process. With a focus group, I might have had to discard the whole group because all participants have reacted to each other, and it could have proven difficult to extract the withdrawn participant.

A final issue to consider is that focus groups require a skilled hand at eliciting and guiding conversation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Gill et al., 2008). For the scope of this master's research, I conducted all the research herself. I have some experience conducting both interviews and focus groups for marketing and communications research, as well as years of experience living abroad and working with other cultures.

Ultimately, focus groups were also chosen for one final reason: by having multiple members of a culturally homogenous group participate together, I became the minority for a short period of time. What better way to understand the material being tested from a position of standpoint theory?

Preparation of test samples

Calculating readability

For the purpose of the research, the Flesch reading ease test and the Flesch-Kincaid grade levels were used in measuring readability of the chosen web content. These tools were chosen for two reasons. The first because as mentioned above in Readability, the Flesch-Kincaid readability test has been employed in the analysis of web content (Wilson, Baker, Brown-Syed & Gollup, 2000). The second reason was ease of access and use: Google Docs and Microsoft Word, in which the samples were prepared, both have the tests built in to the spelling and grammar-checking feature.

Flesch reading ease is calculated in the following manner ("Flesch-Kincaid readability test", 2010; My Byline Media, 2010; RFP Evaluation Centers, 2010):

$$RE = 206.835 - (1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$$

RE = Readability Ease

ASL = Average Sentence Length (i.e., the number of words divided by the number of sentences)

ASW = Average number of syllables per word (i.e., the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

The output, i.e., RE, is a number ranging from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the easier the text is to read. Scores between 90.0 and 100.0 are considered easily understandable by an average Grade 5 student, or 11- to 12-year olds. Scores between 60.0 and 70.0 are considered easily understood by Grade 8 or 9 students, or 13- to 15-year olds. Scores between 0.0 and 30.0 are considered easily understood by college graduates ("Flesch-Kincaid readability test", 2010; My Byline Media, 2010; RFP Evaluation Centers, 2010).

The Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level Formula translates the 0–100 score to an American grade level, making it easier for teachers, parents, librarians, and others to judge the readability level of various books and texts. It can also mean the number of years of education generally required to understand this text, relevant when the formula results in a number greater than 12. The grade level is calculated with the following formula:

FKRA = (0.39xASL) + (11.8xASW) – 15.59

FKRA = Flesch-Kincaid Reading Age

ASL = Average Sentence Length (i.e., the number of words divided by the number of sentences)

ASW = Average number of Syllables per Word (i.e., the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

The result is a number that corresponds with a grade level. For example, a score of 8.2 would indicate that the text is expected to be understandable by an average student in Grade 8 ("Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test", 2010).

For the research, FKRA 8 and FRE above 50 were chosen for a number of reasons. The first is that the University of Alberta uses the Canadian Press Style Guide for all its public relations-related communications, and CP guidelines state that writing at a Grade 8 level is optimum. Although FKRA 8 is higher than the functional literacy of the United States[6], the University of Alberta International's web audience comprises either current or prospective university students who, in order to study at the University of Alberta, require an above-average level of English literacy.

Two versions of a sample of web content were prepared for each of the listed cultures. The "Emergency Loans and Bursaries" page on the University of Alberta International website

[6] The only data readily obtained that could be converted to FKRA.

(2008) was used. Initial readability tests demonstrated that the content was at a Flesch-Kincaid Reading Age of Grade 12, so the material was first re-written in simple English—while ensuring that no change in original meaning resulted (with input from Achaibar, K., personal conversation, 1 June 2010). Then it was prepared for the web based on techniques by readability, public relations and web content experts (specifically: Taylor, 2009; Redish, 2007; Wiley, 2008; Bivins, 1999; Newsom & Haynes, 2005). This first version became the control version. The second version was modified from the control to align with the communication preferences of the culture. The text was made to align by altering tone, syntax and format (see Table 3). Each alteration corresponded to one of Hofstede's five dimensions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005):

- Power distance (PDI)
- Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV)
- Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS)
- Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)
- Long-term vs. short-term orientation (LTO)

Why Hofstede?

Out of the three intercultural communication theories examined, Hofstede was chosen for two reasons. First, it was the only one of the three where quantitative, ranked results for each country about each dimension were available. Second, it was the only theory that described how the dimensions related to changes in language structures, which was essential for the data manipulation.

Only Hofstede presented quantitative, ranked, aggregated results for most countries.[7] For Trompenaars, only individual question data was available, not aggregates. And, as demonstrated in the "Intercultural communication models Discussion" section above, the

[7] In the case of Iran, an LTO was not available in Hofstede, so Moghadam and Assar's data (2008. p. 375) was used.

correlations between questions supposedly pertaining to the same cultural difference were less than those between questions about different cultural differences. Also, Hall's anthropological approach is based in observation and phenomenological data gathering, and no quantitative data could be found. In order to make Table 1, the researcher had to scan pages of prose in four of his books to look for off-hand mentions of country names and what category Hall considered them to be in. Since quantitative data was required in order to determine where the countries chosen ranked in relation to one another, Hall's theory was dismissed as well.

Data manipulation

Additionally, in their research, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) observed how the five dimensions translate into language, education, society, and communication. These observations, along with the guidelines included in Table 2 (specifically, those of Zahedi, Van Pelt & Song, 2000; Main, 2002; Marcus, 2000; Tindal, 2003) were used to determine what modifications were made to the text. Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) research also informed where the four countries fell along each of the dimensions' continuums. For Iran, an LTO was not available in Hofstede, so Moghadam and Assar's data (2008. p. 375) was used. Table 4 illustrates each country's ranking for each dimension, as well as the appropriate manipulation from Table 3.

Each sample was controlled as much as possible for readability—returning to Dale & Chall (1949; cited in DuBay, 2004): readability is defined as success, where success with material comprises three things: (1) comprehension at (2) optimal speed and (3) interest in the content. The experiment controlled for readability in the following way:

- (1) Comprehension at (2) optimal speed was controlled by rewriting until all versions of the content were as close as possible to a Flesch-Kincaid Reading Age of grade 8 and a Flesch Reading Ease index above 50 points. Because in certain cases, style alterations indicated in the table above affected sentence and word length, thus affecting the

Flesch-Kincaid scores, it was impossible to maintain perfectly identical scores for each version. Therefore, an acceptable range was established.

- (3) Every participant received identical subject matter to control for interest in content. By comparing two versions of identical subject matter, interest or lack of interest in the subject would not affect results of preference of one to the other—a participant would be equally interested or uninterested in both versions. The content that was chosen was about emergency loans and bursaries, which may be material accessed by students in a possibly agitated emotional state.

Table 3: Hofstede's dimensions and text modifications
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Zahedi, Van Pelt & Song, 2000; Main, 2002; Marcus, 2000; Tindal, 2003)

Dimension	Modification
Power distance (PDI) The greater the culture's power distance, the more receptive it is to authority, thus a commanding tone. [8]	Tone of voice E.g., commanding language ("must") vs. recommending language ("should")
Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV) Collectivistic cultures prefer references to a group or no subject (especially first-person subject).[9]	Passive vs. Active sentence structure I.e., [Subject] [Verb] [Object] vs. [Object] [Verb] [Subject – often omitted]
Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS) More masculine cultures prefer a reporting style, whereas feminine cultures seek to build rapport.[10]	Report vs. Rapport E.g.: "the student" or "the institution" vs. "you" and "we"; also, use of language referring to face vs. emotions.
Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) High uncertainty avoidance values expertise and precision over ambiguity and levity. [11]	Appeal An accompanying image was chosen to convey either levity or expertise.
Time orientation (LTO) Short-term oriented cultures prefer quick, simple communication whereas long-term oriented cultures are more receptive to prose.[12]	Amount of micro-content "Micro-content" or "chunking" is a technique of web writing that makes material faster to scan using headings, bulleted lists, and short sentences and paragraphs, vs. prose.[13]

[8] Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 57.
[9] Ibid, p. 97.
[10] Ibid, p. 142.
[11] Ibid, p. 181.
[12] Ibid, p. 212.
[13] Wylie, 2008.

Table 4: Dimension rank and content adjustment for each test culture
(Derived from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Moghadam & Assar, 2008, p. 375)

Dimension	Ranking	Adjustment
	China	
PDI	High	▪ Commanding tone
IDV	Collectivistic	▪ Passive sentence structure
MAS	Masculine	▪ Report
UAI	Low	▪ Humour
LTO	Long	▪ Prose
	Germany	
PDI	Low	▪ Recommend
IDV	Individualistic	▪ Active
MAS	Masculine	▪ Report
UAI	Middle	▪ Blend of humour/expertise
LTO	Mid-Short	▪ Micro-content
	Iran	
PDI	Middle	▪ Blend of command/recommend
IDV	Middle	▪ Blend of passive/active
MAS	Middle - Feminine	▪ Rapport, not report
UAI	Mid-Low	▪ Humour
LTO	Middle[14]	▪ Blend of micro-content and prose
	Japan	
PDI	Mid-Low	▪ Recommend
IDV	Middle	▪ Blend of passive/active
MAS	Masculine	▪ Report, not rapport
UAI	High	▪ Expertise
LTO	Long	▪ Prose

The readability assessment for each sample is in Table 5. Below that, Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8 compare some of the manipulations for each sample. The full versions are in the appendix. For China, the sample country with the lowest IDV, passive sentences were used throughout. Japan, with a score in the middle, got a blend of passive and active sentences. Iran was the only

[14] Moghadam & Assar, 2008. p. 375.

group with a somewhat low MAS score. Rapport-building language was used (e.g., "bursaries may help if you have … [an] emergency.") As demonstrated by the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Reading Age grade level scores, passive sentences increase reading difficulty. In order to ensure that the overall documents had more similar scores, sentence and word length was shorter in other sections of the China and Japan versions.

Table 5: Readability scores for each test sample

Sample	FRE	FKRA
Original	38.58	12.00
Re-write	52.61	8.00
China	52.12	8.00
Germany	52.23	8.00
Iran	55.45	7.00
Japan	50.68	8.00

Table 6: "Emergency Bursaries" passage comparison

Version	Cultural dimensions	Sample Passage	FRE	FKRA
Original		Emergency bursaries are to cover verifiable emergencies, that is, the student is expected to demonstrate that there has been an unexpected essential expense or an unanticipated cut in funding.	5.2	12
Re-Write		Emergency bursaries pay for real emergencies. When applying, you must show that you have an unplanned, crucial expense or an unplanned cut in funding.	60.7	7.7
China	Low IDV High PDI High MAS	Only real emergencies are funded by emergency bursaries. Unplanned, crucial expenses or unplanned cut in funding must be shown when applying.	43.0	9.8
Germany	High IDV Low PDI High MAS	Emergency bursaries pay for real emergencies. When applying, you should show that you have an unplanned, crucial expense or an unplanned cut in funding.	60.7	7.7
Iran	High IDV Mid PDI Mid-low MAS	Emergency bursaries may help if you have a real financial emergency. When applying, you should show that you have an unplanned, crucial expense or an unplanned cut in funding.	60.8	8.3
Japan	Mid IDV Mid-low PDI High MAS	Only real emergencies are funded by emergency bursaries. When applying, you should show that you have an unplanned, crucial expenses or unplanned cut in funding.	52.0	9.1

Table 7: "How to Apply" section comparison

Version	Cultural dimensions	Sample Passage	FRE	FKRA
Original		**Application Procedures** If, after reviewing the above guidelines, you feel you qualify for financial assistance, please fill and print the online applications form, or you may visit the International Centre to request an application form. Students will need to submit a photocopy of their Study Permit, and photocopies of your sources of funding with their application. Students in their first year of study will be asked to submit copies of the proof of funds documents (bank statements, letters from funders, and letters from parents) used in applying for their most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit. Return the completed form and supporting documents to the Receptionist (172 HUB International) who will make an appointment for you to discuss your application with an International Student Services staff member.	29.0	12.0
Re-Write		**How to apply** ▪ Complete and print the online application form. If you do not have a printer, visit the International Centre to pick up the form. ▪ Submit the following to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB): o The completed form o A copy of your study permit o Copies of your sources of funding o (First-year students only) Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for your most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit: ▪ Bank statements ▪ Letters from funders ▪ Letters from parents ▪ The receptionist will make an appointment for you to meet with a staff member.	68.5	6.7
China	High LTO	**How to apply** The online application form must be completed and printed. Paper copies are available at the International Centre. The form must be submitted to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB). Copies of one's study permit and sources of funding must be included. Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for the most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit are required for first-year students who apply. This means bank statements, letters from funders, and letters from parents. An appointment will be made to meet with a staff member.	49.4	9.5
Germany	Low LTO	**How to apply** If you decide that you do need an emergency loan or bursary, please complete these simple steps: ▪ Complete and print the online application form. If you do not have a printer, visit the International Centre to pick up the form. ▪ Submit the following to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB): o The completed form o A copy of your study permit o Copies of your sources of funding o (First-year students only) Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for your most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit: ▪ Bank statements ▪ Letters from funders ▪ Letters from parents ▪ The receptionist will make an appointment for you to meet with a staff member.	68.5	6.7

Continued …

Version	Cultural dimensions	Sample Passage	FRE / FKRA
Iran	Low LTO	**How to apply** If you decide that you do need an emergency loan or bursary, then please complete these simple steps: ▪ Complete and print the online application form. If you do not have a printer, you can visit the International Centre to pick up the form. ▪ Submit the following to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB): o The completed form o A copy of your study permit o Copies of your sources of funding o (First-year students only) Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for your most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit: ▪ Bank statements ▪ Letters from funders ▪ Letters from parents ▪ The receptionist will make an appointment for you to meet with a staff member.	69.9 6.7
Japan	High LTO	The online application form should be completed and printed. Paper copies are available at the International Centre. The form should be submitted to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB). Copies of one's study permit and sources of funding should be included. Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for the most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit should be included for first-year students who apply. This means bank statements, letters from funders, and letters from parents. An appointment will be made to meet with a staff member.	49.0 9.6

Table 8: Image selection based on UAI score

Image		
Control	High UAI (expertise)	Low UAI (levity)
		
Control version	Germany, Japan	China, Iran

The manipulation for LTO was by far the most apparent at a glance. The short "sentences" created by a bulleted list increase reading ease scores and decrease reading age grade levels. A final example of manipulation was in the image accompanying each page of text (Table 8). Although Germany has a UAI score in the middle, the "expertise" photo was used so that two groups saw each photo.

Once the samples were prepared, they were shown to the focus groups. Data collection is described below.

Data collection

As per University of Alberta research ethics guidelines, participants in each focus group were informed about the broad purpose of the research and were asked to sign consent forms. The participants were not told about the cultural communications preferences aspect of the alteration so as not to bias the group responses. Instead, they were told that the researcher was interested in learning how comfortable international audiences are reading English-only content on University of Alberta websites, and that they would be shown two versions of the same page. Several ice-breaking questions were asked so that participants had time to relax and become comfortable with the focus-group structure and so that the moderator got an idea of the English speaking and listening comprehension levels of the group members.

Participants were shown each of the two versions on 11 x 17 paper. The control version was always labelled with ● and the culturally altered versions were labelled with one of ● (China), ● (Japan) or ● (Germany and Iran[15]).

Participants were asked to look at the two versions and to write down which (if either) they preferred. They did this on a five-point scale:

---

[15] The versions were different; only the dots were the same colour. This is because the researcher had only four colours of dot stickers. The four colours were assigned randomly to the versions just to distinguish one from the other.

- ● much more than ● /● /●.
- ● slightly more than ● /● /●.
- Neither ● nor ● /● /●.
- ● /● /● slightly more than ●.
- ● /● /● much more than ●.

They also were asked to write down some points about why they answered the way they did before sharing with the focus group. The moderator collected their answers. Collecting this information on paper provided individual perceptions about preference isolated from group dynamics.

Further discussion questions included:

- Who liked ● better? Why?
- Who liked ● /● /● better? Why?
- Even if you did prefer it, what didn't you like about [● or ● /● /●]?
- Even if you didn't prefer it, what did you like about [● or ● /● /●]?
- How does [● or ● /● /●] make you feel?

Participants then were invited to stick coloured dots corresponding to the two versions (i.e., [● and ● /● /●] on to flip chart paper prepared with a series of adjectives that could describe the tone of the text. There was no limit to the number of stickers that could be used, but each participant started with six of each colour. Where necessary, the moderator and the participants clarified the meaning of words through the use of dictionaries, simplified explanations and pantomimes, or translating for participants whose English level was lower. The words were as follows:

- brusque, hard
- soft
- rude
- polite
- cold
- warm
- unclear
- clear
- insincere
- sincere
- insensitive
- sensitive
- haughty, snobby
- humble
- commanding
- requesting
- friendly
- unfriendly
- aggressive
- passive
- straightforward, to the point
- long-winded, too long
- pushy, demanding
- wishy-washy

After the activity, any interesting results were discussed—for example, if opposite pairs (e.g., rude and polite) both had the same colour beside them, or if similar denotative but different connotative combinations (e.g., brusque and straightforward) had the same colour.

Next, the actual modifications were identified and discussed openly. In most cases, the participants had figured out the modifications for themselves by this point, but confirming what they had noticed made them feel more comfortable with their conclusions.

The final activity was to explore and expand on the accompanying image used. The moderator showed participants the third image in the series, and asked which, if any, they would prefer on the page to accompany the text of the web page. If none were preferred, the participants were asked to suggest what other image they would choose to accompany the text.

Results and analysis

Grounded theory

After the data was collected, a modification of grounded theory was used to analyze the data. Typically, grounded theory requires minimizing preconceptions by skipping the preliminary literature review (Urquhart, Lehmann & Myers, 2010; Rhine, 2009). In the case of this study, this step was not skipped. Also, grounded theory calls for a general research topic, but no predetermined research problem (Rhine, 2009), which was present in this study. However, like grounded theory, intensive group interviews and participant observation was used during the focus groups (Rhine, 2009). It was in the results and analysis that grounded theory was used extensively. The audio recordings were transcribed and coded in several ways in an attempt to spot patterns. When themes emerged, the data was recoded along the themes until further clusters were evident. Eventually, no new information could be extracted from the data (Urquhart, Lehmann & Myers, 2010; Rhine 2009).

Analysis

Upon examination and analysis of the collected data, four main themes emerged regarding if or why participants preferred one version to the other:

- Format (i.e., layout, length, long prose vs. point form)
- Readability/comprehension (i.e., perceived ease of understanding due to grammar, syntax and/or vocabulary)
- Tone
- Image

Also, throughout the discussion, opinions and insights into the process emerged and are worthy of note.

Data from the individual forms

The first set of results was obtained from the individual answer sheet: participants were asked to choose whether they preferred 🔴—the control re-write shown to all groups—or 🟡/🟢/🔵—the version altered according to the cultural dimensions. The results are in Table 9:

Table 9: Preference rating

Group	🔴 much more than 🟡/🟢/🔵	🔴 slightly more than 🟡/🟢/🔵	Neither 🔴 nor 🟡 🟢/🔵	🟡/🟢/🔵 slightly more than 🔴	🟡/🟢/🔵 much more than 🔴.
China (n=5)	100%	0	0	0	0
Germany (n=4)	25%	25%	0	50%	0
Iran (n=3)	0	33%	0	0	67%
Japan (n=8)	100%	0	0	0	0

As discussed in the methodology section, because the sample size is so small, the results in Table 9 have virtually no statistical significance. However, in the high LTO cultures of China and Japan, there is unanimous preference for 🔴, despite that version being in point form over the supposedly culturally appropriate use of prose.

Participants also wrote down why they had answered the way they did. Table 10 outlines their individual replies, grouped into the four themes of format, comprehension, tone and image.

Table 10: Preference reasons

	Preference		
	🔴 (control version)		🟡/🟢/🔵 (modified version)
China	▪ 🔴 uses point form. It's clear and easy to follow. It's visually effective. ▪ Bullet points make 🔴 clear, simple and brief. ▪ 🔴 uses point form, which is easier for audiences/ international students to read and to follow. ▪ 🔴 provides information straight to the point. I like the point form that has been used in this example. I feel it is more clear this way when I'm reading.	FORMAT	
	▪ 🔴 has less wording. It's brief and efficient. ▪ I am able to get information faster from 🔴 than 🟡.	READABILITY	
	▪ 🔴 uses command words sometimes to start a sentence; e.g., "Complete …" "Submit …" ▪ 🔴 uses "If you …, you may …" which is better than objective wording in 🟡 (i.e., "If money is needed … it may …") ▪ The wording of 🟡 sounds not too friendly/too official—not a great idea for students who are in an emergency. This page is to help, not to order.	TONE	
	▪ Bad picture for 🟡. Too shocking? Too intense/strong? ▪ First sight, I like 🔴 better. The picture on 🔴 makes more sense to portray being short of money.	IMAGE	

Continued …

		Preference	
		🔴 (control version)	🟡/🟢/🔵 (modified version)
Germany	FORMAT		▪ Prefer layout (the way the text wraps around the larger picture) in 🔵.
	READABILITY		
	TONE	▪ The language on 🔴 is less ambiguous – (“must” instead of “should”; etc.) ▪ Text differences minimal but slightly more to the point in 🔴.	▪ More human approach in terms of speaking in a realistic voice instead of sticking strictly to regulation; slightly better organized and thus less painful to read through. ▪ “Should” erects fewer barriers than “must”; therefore I keep reading and get the full information before giving up. ▪ Use of “must” in 🔴 is off-putting.
	IMAGE	▪ I prefer the photo on 🔴; the photo on 🔵 suggests an inquisitive bank manager situation. ▪ Photo is more to the point on 🔴.	
Iran	FORMAT		
	READABILITY		▪ I find the language used in 🔵 much simpler. The words used in 🔵 are much more common and easier.
	TONE	▪ Depending on how strict the whole bursary/loan is, either 🔴 or 🔵 could be best. 🔴 is more strict and straightforward. I have marked sections of 🔴 and 🔵 that I think are good with checkmarks. ▪ Sample 🔴 is better for a person in rush for a loan. A few changes to 🔴 could be made to make it better.	▪ 🔵 has a warm and friendly tone. Readers can actually get the feeling that somebody cares for their problems. ▪ In 🔵, the writer has tried to make sure that the reader gets the most out of the text. Expressions like “Remember!” could be useful, because the audience will communicate with the website more efficiently this way. ▪ In some cases, 🔴 is more monotonous and tedious. ▪ I like the way this text tries to engage with the emotional part of needing a loan. Using a funny picture or words such as “don’t panic” brings the content of the text out of something that is just written to give you some information on Emergency loans. By reading this text, you feel that the writer is actually caring about you! Also, using a question “Will a loan really solve your problem?” instead of just making a statement makes me really think about this. Does a loan really solve my problem? Anyway, in general I found this text more engaging.
	IMAGE		▪ The picture is funny.

Continued …

	Preference		
	🔴 (control version)		🟡/🟢/🔵 (modified version)
Japan	▪ 🔴 is much easier to read than 🟢. It's very clear and I can understand and read sentences at one glance. ▪ Even if 🔴 looks long and there is much information on one page, it's easy to understand and find the information that I'm looking for. ▪ I prefer 🔴 in light of it having more space, and using point form, and the headings are clearer. ▪ 🔴 is easy to understand for me because of the point form. I thought the bullets emphasise important sentences. 🟢 is just long sentences for me, so it was hard to find important sentences.	FORMAT	
	▪ 🔴 is more clear and understandable for me. In 🔴, there are points that we can see easily, and we can see run through the content and summarize quickly. In contrast, 🟢 is a little bit time-consuming to read and understand what we should do. That's why I think 🔴 is better than 🟢. ▪ 🔴 is much easier to understand because it explains in point-form. I'm not a native speaker of English, so it's easier for me to read short sentences, rather than long sentences. ▪ In the "how to apply" section, the procedures and options are clear. ▪ 🔴's words are easier than 🟢's. 🔴's sentences are longer; however, I can understand more easily what I should do if I have problems. I think point form is good to understand. 🔴's sentence structure are also easier than 🟢 because 🔴 always uses "you" as subject, so it is easier for me to understand the procedures. ▪ The thing that we really want to know is "Do I have rights to apply?" so 🔴 is easier to see it better than 🟢. Same as the procedures for how to apply and in what kind of cases can I apply for the emergency bursaries. ▪ It's easy to understand because there are point-form sentences in this paper. Also, it's very clear what this page wants to say. That's why I prefer 🔴.	READABILITY	▪ I prefer the first part of 🟢 because it's easy for me to understand.[16]
	▪ The subject is "you", so the reader pays more attention. We can feel more familiarity with this website.	TONE	▪
	▪ The picture in 🔴 shows me what the page is talking about exactly, compared to 🟢.	IMAGE	▪ I prefer 🟢's picture because the smiling person gives me a good impression.[17]

[16] No Japanese participants preferred 🟢. A participant who preferred 🔴 submitted this comment. It has been placed in this column for classification purposes.
[17] See previous note.

Theme 1: Format

Format, which included the long prose vs. point form, emerged as a reason for preferring one version to another. The format theme also included length and layout.

Of the modifications, the LTO modification of micro-content/chunking vs. prose sentences and paragraphs was the most obvious to Chinese and Japanese participants at a glance. As mentioned above, Chinese and Japanese participants all preferred ●, despite that version being in point form over the supposedly culturally appropriate use of prose. For Germany and Iran, where both versions used micro-content/chunking, the preference of one over the other is much less decisive. During both the German and Iranian focus groups, though, the moderator showed the Chinese and Japanese versions to the participants towards the end of the focus group. Upon seeing the long prose versions, The Iranian participants exclaimed, "Who would like that?" and "I would never read that." One of the German participants asked, "Why would we want to make it … hard for [Chinese people] to understand?" The German and Iranian participants could not see any merit in a prose-and-paragraph manipulation for web content. Additionally, in the Chinese and Japanese groups, the preference decision was made very quickly (based on moderator observation of the participants completing their forms)—in one case, before the moderator had even finished explaining the activity:

> China participant 1: First glance, I was looking at this; right away I [checked] [●].
>
> Moderator: Yeah, I saw that. (laughter)

Here are some additional excerpts from the Chinese focus group discussion about how format affected their preference choice:

> China participant 1: Like I said, if I look at ●, it's very clear what I'm going to do … this, this, this. Follow the directions. ●, especially how to apply, it's lots of words … [it makes me think] "I don't want to read that, I want to call somebody and talk to them."

> China participant 2: I just want everything to be clear, if you are [an] international student, like me, … English [is] not that good; we don't really want to read long sentences, we want something to be very clear. Show me each step to follow. So [●] is much better.
>
> ------------------------
>
> China participant 3: The point form is what I'm looking for because makes [it] easier for international students to read … instead of having to read all information. You might miss important points [in the ● version]. [●'s format] makes reading faster. In emergency, [●] will be more help.
>
> Moderator: You're talking about how the content might be read, right? Emergency bursaries—"I'm out of money; I'm upset." If we were talking about fun activity that students or staff participate in, would that change? Let's imagine different content with same style of writing.
>
> China participant 4: I would still go with bullet points.
>
> Moderator: Still go with bullet points?
>
> China participant 4: Yeah. Where. What. When. Who. How. That style [is] good for me.
>
> China participant 5: I would still prefer point form because it's easy. Normally, people are always short of time. They just have points, they can pick up the thing they want read right away instead [of having to] go through [the] whole article, they just ignore it.

The Japanese participants also had much to say about the format being one of the reasons they preferred the control version (●) to the Japanese version (●).

> Japan participant 1: I think ● one has many short sentences so [it's] easy to understand for international students. I'm not native [English speaker], so if I wanted to look for something, some information, they're easy to find the information that I want.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Japan participant 2: I agree with [participant 1] … ● because ● is easy to understand because of the black dots. And I think ● is just long sentence for me so it was hard to find important sentence.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Japan participant 4: I think people whose first language is not English, when they read [●], they can understand just one time, and maybe they must re-read [●]. But when we read [●], it's easy to understand because there is a list. We understand "What should I do next?" because of the procedure. We don't have to re-read; we can just see this list.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Japan participant 5: My feelings, when I look at [●], I like the presentation. It's more easy to understand what I have to do. And [●] is like reading newspapers. Both [are] the same level, but I can't read [●].

It could be argued, then, that 100% of participants prefer the use of micro-content, chunking and point form for English-only web content, regardless of their cultural communication preferences. Web writing research certainly agrees with this (for example: Nielsen, 2000; Wiley, 2008; Redish, 2007). As mentioned in the "Content" section (p. 23), we scan online; reading speed is slower and comprehension lower. It is important to remember, though, that the participants were not looking at online, electronic samples. They were working from paper and still exhibited a clear preference for point form.

There were a few instances where longer, prose sentences were preferred to point form, but only pertaining to specific passages. In the Chinese group, one participant felt that the bulleted list used to outline the eligibility was unnecessary, because the prose version seemed more succinct. One participant in the Japanese focus group echoed this as well. Another Chinese participant felt that the use of the bulleted list in such circumstances was contrived and that it "made me feel like you are talking to a stupid person." Table 11 shows the passage and variations:

Table 11: "Eligibility" passage comparison

● **(control version)**	● **(Chinese version)**	● **(Japanese version)**
Who is eligible To apply, you must meet all these criteria: ▪ Be an international student ▪ Be registered at the University of Alberta ▪ Have a valid study permit	**Eligibility** Applications will be accepted from international students with a valid study permit and who are registered at the University of Alberta.	**Eligibility** International students with a valid study permit and who are registered at the University of Alberta may be eligible to apply.

A Chinese and a Japanese participant both mentioned in their respective focus groups that ● was too long. It is true that the page is longer due to the white space generated by the micro-content, chunking and bulleted lists. In the Chinese group, though, another participant disagreed: "I didn't think this is too long. If it's shown on a computer, you probably can scroll down. It doesn't look so bad to me." The Japanese participant stated that even though ● was longer, it was still easier to read. Whether this was a result of being able to see the entire web page on the 11x17 paper cannot really be stated. However, the fact that it was mentioned in two separate groups is worth noting. Short pages and less text are certainly encouraged in the web writing guides consulted for this project (Taylor, 2009; Redish, 2007; Wiley, 2008; Bivins, 1999; Newsom & Haynes, 2005), and the research seems to point to this for international audiences as well.

In the German focus group, another format-related reason for preference had to do with line length, which was artificially shortened where the text wrapped around the picture (see Figure 23). The photographs were fixed at a width of 250 pixels at 72 DPI on the sample web pages, but because the "expertise" picture was portrait-shaped, it extended further down the page, causing more lines to wrap and shorten. Here is the discussion around the layout:

> Germany participant 1: I find better. The layout for is smaller, so it looks nicer at the end [gestures at picture to show how the picture is longer and the line length shorter]. Here [points to], the lines are very long.
>
> Moderator: Because this [ ] picture is longer?
>
> Germany participant 1: Yes. I think for me, it's better.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Germany participant 2: I like the format of the photo better.
>
> Moderator: You like the photo on ?
>
> Germany participant 2: I like the one, but I like the format of the photo better on one.
>
> Germany participant 1: I think the one, the photo is [a] better [subject]. But the is better, the format, yes.

It became evident that the German participants preferred both the space that the portrait photo filled as well as the shorter lines it generated. This latter preference holds with graphic design rules (Lidwell, Holden & Butler, 2003; Spiekermann & Ginger, 1993; Strizver, 2006; White, 2003) and research (Dyson & Kipping, 1998) on line length for both print and screen. According to the sources, optimum line length between 35 and 70 characters, or about 10 to 12 words. The line length that results from the placement of the photograph in the test samples is approximately 60 characters, or nine to 13 words. When the photograph runs out, the line length increases to 80 to 90 characters.

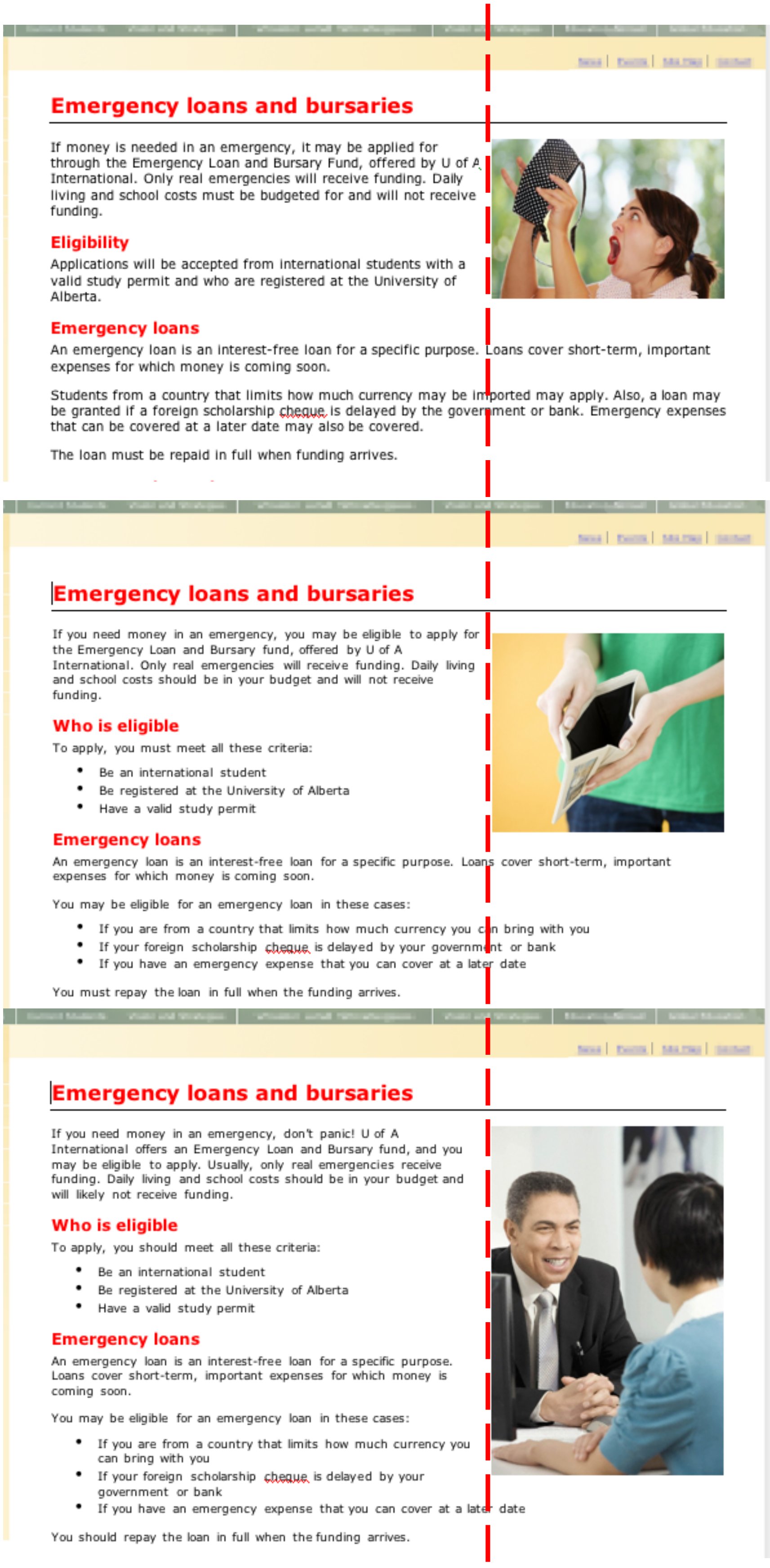


Figure 23: Three samples showing the first three sections of text. Notice how the height of the photographs affects where the text stops wrapping; "expertise" causes shorter line length all the way down.

Theme 2: Readability and comprehension

Another reason for choosing a preference was perceived readability of the selections, or participants feeling that they had better comprehended the text. Readability was closely related to format—that is to say, participants identified the point-form version as being easier to understand simply because it was in point form. This was most prevalent in the Japan group and can be seen in many of the Japanese participant quotes in the previous section. Here's another:

> Japan participant 3: Yeah, when I read ● first, I felt a little bit [bored]. I cannot understand all at one sight. I can understand ●; it's very easy to understand at one sight. But ● is a little bit boring.

Some Japanese and Chinese participants felt that they could more easily comprehend ● due to the very short "sentence" length, referring to the short line items in the bulleted lists.

Actually though, in some cases, the point form caused participants to misunderstand the section in "How to Apply" that itemized the things that must be included in the application. A couple of students in the Japan group and one in the China group thought it was a list of options or choices of what to include, rather than a list of all things to include. Since comprehension was not being tested, it is not possible to say in the context of this research what comprehension levels actually were, however.

Other themes that emerged were around the use of the passive sentence structure and how it affects comprehension (China, Japan and Germany), word choice, vocabulary and the importance of defining difficult but essential words (all groups), and the sections' order (China). Each of these is detailed below.

Active vs. passive sentence structure The use of active sentences (as in the Germany and control versions entirely and partially in Iran and Japan) was generally thought to improve readability. Sometimes, this came out in the first part of the focus group, having been noticed by the participants in their initial assessment of the samples; other times, it came out in the latter part when the moderator explicitly pointed out the difference.

> Japan participant 4: The 🔴 one, I prefer, everything is point of view is from "you." … It is more paid attention by reader.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Moderator: What do you think about the difference—the use of direct versus indirect? Does direct make it easier or more difficult to understand?
>
> Several Japan participants in unison: easier.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Moderator: The difference between 🔴 and 🟡 is that 🔴 uses active sentence structure. 🟡 uses passive sentence structure. What that means is 🔴 has subject, verb, object. 🟡 has object, verb, and sometimes a subject … "The dog bit the man" vs. "the mean was bitten by the dog." How do you think that affects your opinion? First of all did you notice that?
>
> China participant 1: I circled it.
>
> Moderator: You circled it? … How do you think that lends to what you chose up there [in the sticker activity]? Does it relate [to what you chose]? For example, so you both picked "unclear." So what is one of the reasons you said it was unclear?
>
> China participant 1: The first paragraph I don't really understand. Sort of, I think like, break sentence, like here: "Emergency money may be applied for." It seems like the sentence is missing something. For what? I don't really understand. And also here: "… for." What's the rest? It's unclear.
>
> China participant 2: I agree, the [🔴] structure is more simple for people like us. Here it's just the other way. There are a couple sentences, like he said, not as clear.

Passive sentence structures are harder to understand. This shows up in the Flesch Reading Ease scores for the passive passages because the structure often makes the sentence, as well as the words, longer, both of which lower reading ease. Additionally, the contrived nature of turning *all* the sentences in the Chinese sample led to some awkward grammar constructions where sentences ended with prepositions—the awkward "for" mentioned by China participant 1. However, another Chinese participant said that the passive sentence structure made the content "more clear … compared to point form" if it were to be read as printed (i.e., not web) material.

Vocabulary At least one participant in every group flagged the words "eligible" and "eligibility" as difficult vocabulary words. Another that was singled out as difficult was "bursary."

> German participant 3: What I find interesting, it's for English-second-language people, the page; it uses words that are not easy to understand for English-second-language people. Sometimes more descriptive, for eligibility is a word; [turns to participant 1] do you know what that means? It's maybe a word—again, students that come to study here—there is probably some level of English skill [that] is required.

One Japanese participant had the suggestion to define the words on the web page:

> Japanese participant 7: Just my opinion, I just ask you what's the meaning of bursary. Some people know that, but some people don't know. Some people don't know the meaning; if possible you should write down the meaning. Just if possible. You should, I think. And eligible. I don't know the meaning of this word actually.

In the Iranian focus group, the participants found the rapport-building language of their low-MAS version solved the issue of the difficult vocabulary words:

> Iran participant 1: Another thing is that the words that are used in ● are much more common. They're easy to understand. Let me see if I have a specific one. Ummm… I had a very specific one… anyways the words written here [in ●] are more common, so a student that is new and not that advanced in English can understand it better. It's not "What is this text saying? What are these words? What do they mean?" … I found the vocabulary … it's pretty easy for me; I know what eligible means, but look at these two sentences [Table 12]. This one says "You maybe eligible for blah blah blah blah," this one says "If you find yourself in one of these situations." This is more like, I would find myself in that situation, it's relating to me. I'm like "OK, if I find myself in this situation." This is what one person might start thinking; "OK, what is eligible? What does it mean to be eligible for something?" They are saying the same thing but [●] is much easier to understand.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Iran participant 2: [●] seems more easier because of the structure of the sentences.
>
> Iran participant 1: Yeah, it uses more common words, it's something that you use in daily life. Like I wouldn't talk to you and say "yeah I'm eligible for this." I would say "I can apply for this, right?" (laughter)

Table 12: "You may be eligible …" passage

● **(control version)**	● **(Iran version)**
You may be eligible for an emergency loan in these cases: ▪ If you are from a country that limits how much currency you can bring with you ▪ If your foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by your government or bank ▪ If you have an emergency expense that you can cover at a later date	If you find yourself in one of these situations, you may be eligible for an emergency loan: ▪ If you are from a country that limits how much currency you can bring with you ▪ If your foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by your government or bank ▪ If you have an emergency expense that you can cover at a later date

In addition, two Iranian participants explicitly said that rapport-building language made it easier to understand the text, although one said it didn't make any difference.

Organization of the sections One final readability theme was around the organization of the sections. One Chinese participant suggested that the definitions be placed first:

> China participant 5: I don't like the order.
>
> Moderator: You don't like the order? Why not?
>
> China participant 5: Yeah. Definition first. Like what's emergency loans, what's emergency bursary. Then eligibility above how to apply. For this one, when you go there, first you see what emergency loan, how they phrase, and what's emergency loan. If not qualify to this, you won't probably know. So "its not for me" that's what I thought. If you think you're one of this, and then you probably go down and see who is eligible for this and you would qualify for this. Then you will see how to apply. That's the normal website. I would prefer that order instead of who's qualify first.

Defining or paraphrasing key words seems to have been important to the participants, and a prominent placement for these definitions might build comfort for EFL audiences. Because this is the web, perhaps more sophisticated technical solutions like JavaScript pop-up definitions on hover or hyperlinking jump-marks could work. That way, pages would seem shorter, which, as we saw in the format theme, is better.

Theme 3: Tone

The tone of the text was another reason participants chose one version over the other, appearing on the individual sheets and in the first part of the focus group discussions. Tone was a more predominant reason for making a decision regarding preference in the Iranian and German groups, possibly because both their respective samples used chunking, micro-content and point form, so they had to scrutinize the text more carefully to select a preference. However, tone came out in all groups as a factor in the initial discussion:

> China: [●] has a lot of command words, that's how I call it. Like "complete this and that," "meet this and that" to start a sentence, that's a more efficient way to do things.

> China: [●'s] wording is more friendly and gentle. For students in emergency, it's much warmer. Introduce program instead of intense or strong order from government or officials.

Germany 1 [preferring 🔴]: The 🔴 one is a little more to the point.

Germany 2 [preferring 🔴]: I like the 🔴 one better because it's less ambiguous.

Germany 3 [preferring 🔵]: On the text side, is where it makes a difference for me. I hate to be told what to do, so the "must" every second paragraph puts a barrier up for me where I stop reading.

Germany 4 [preferring 🔵]: I have a problem with the word "must," too. That's one of the only reasons I said I find 🔵 better.

Iran 2 [preferring 🔵]: First, I guess [🔵] has been written in much more friendly and casual manner. It can communicate much more efficiently with the target audience, which are students. Because students that are actually redirected to this page are probably in some sort of financial problems and by reading this, they get a feeling that the writer has actually cared for them. Somebody is actually feeling responsible to solve their problems … in some parts, [🔴] is a little more monotonous and tedious …

Iran 1[preferring 🔵]: I agree … I found it much more friendly. It was, I could understand someone is there caring for me if I have a financial situation. This page is not just written for information, there is someone actually that is trying to help me. Like "don't panic!" at the very beginning. When I see that sentence I'm like "phew; OK."

Japan: I feel more familiar with [🔴].

For several participants, subject matter was more important than their cultural preferences at driving tone (and format). Some people made their decision on preference based on the appropriateness of the tone to the content. When the tone didn't match the content, it became a point of critique for many people:

Iran [preferring 🔴]: This is more friendly, [🔵] is more friendly than [🔴], [🔴] is more strict. It all depends on how strict you want the whole thing to be. Do you want the people to think that "well, I can apply for an emergency loan because they're friendly I can get it easily. And I don't have to pay it back." Or do you want them to pay it back? Because if you want them to pay it, make it appear that, "well you have to pay it back, "then [🔴] is better, which I'm more in favour of because it has to be strict. We don't want—I don't think the university wants everyone to apply for emergency loan just thinking that "they're friendly and I'll apply for it." [🔵] had some good things, like I like the picture in [blue] better. And the part that the "remember" which [the other participants] pointed out, that's very good. I like it even [better] if it's in bold. That's a good thing. Basically, I like [🔴] better because it was strict.

Moderator: Would I be correct in saying you liked [🔴] because the tone is more appropriate to the content?

Iran: Yeah.

Moderator: What if we weren't talking emergency loans and bursaries

Iran: Well … [🔵] would be better.

Japan: Also the content is about emergency loan so if student really need help, the time they wanted to read this page, maybe they feel not good. Maybe if the page is looks like , more feel bad.

Germany [preferred]: I said organization is better. For instance, at the bottom there it says "how to apply," there is brief human, personal-oriented sentence that says "if you decide that you need emergency loan or bursary, please complete the simple steps." It's better than putting up the first rule right there saying "if you don't have that, then just see ya later" (laughter). [A student whose] mom died in Japan, she would read the "must" [red] version and say, "Oh god, I have so much on my mind, this is never going to go through." And there [] she maybe has feeling of hope of "let's talk to these guys at least, there's a chance."

Germany [preferring]: I would [add] the openness and willingness to accommodate students in need [on].

China [preferred]: Yes. [] sounds more cold. Attitude is more like "stay far away." Talking about the issue. Legal document.

Moderator: So it sort of distances—

China: Yes … the reader to whoever wrote the website. People who look at this probably looking for help. When they read website, feel … attitude is not really helpful.

Two of the Iranian participants felt that the use of the low-PDI manipulation might affect clarity of meaning for Persian speakers with a lower English ability:

Iran: There could be some misunderstandings, where it says "it's a good idea," some may think that "so, it's not necessary." In some cultures, I know that, in North American, "it's a good idea" … is a polite friendly must. For example, in Persian, it's not necessarily that. I understand this because I am familiar with English, but many people in Persia, they could [misunderstand] here. If you translate this word-by-word in Persian and say "it's a good idea" it means that it's not necessary, there are other options.

The idea that perceiving tone correctly was linked to English comprehension level also emerged in the Japanese group. There, participants agreed that tone was not important because they couldn't understand the samples well enough to perceive it:

Japan: I think no one feel like aggressive from just webpage.

…

Moderator: How does it make you feel?

Japan: Feeling not necessarily, we already know the information, I think we don't care about it … demanding, passive, aggressive, or friendly, we just know what's the information, so we don't need to care about it I think.

Moderator: Does everybody agree with [participant] there?

> All: (nodding, affirmative noises)
>
> Japan: looks like it's a little commanding, but we don't care usually
>
> Moderator: Because it's information?
>
> Japan: Yeah, this is just—English—this is our second language—we can't read such a deeper meaning.

This might have had to do with these particular Japanese participants' level of English ability in relation to other participants. Of all the participants recruited, the Japanese participants had the lowest TOEFL equivalencies.

Later in the focus group, the sticker activity delved deeply into tone, labelling the samples with a selection of adjectives that had positive or negative connotations (e.g., straightforward vs. brusque; polite vs. soft vs. passive vs. wishy-washy; etc.) (Table 13).

Table 13: Sticker activity results

	China	Germany	Iran	Japan
●	▪ Soft ▪ rude ▪ warm ▪ polite (3) ▪ cold ▪ sincere (3) ▪ clear (3) ▪ insensitive ▪ aggressive ▪ friendly (3) ▪ commanding ▪ requesting ▪ straightforward; to the point (5)	▪ brusque, hard (2) ▪ cold ▪ clear (4) ▪ insensitive (2) ▪ requesting (2) ▪ commanding (2) ▪ unfriendly (2) ▪ straightforward; to the point (3) ▪ pushy, demanding (2)	▪ cold ▪ clear (3) ▪ insensitive (2) ▪ passive (2) ▪ commanding ▪ straightforward; to the point (2)	▪ clear (7) ▪ sincere (4) ▪ friendly (6) ▪ aggressive (4) ▪ straightforward; to the point (6) ▪ long-winded, too long ▪ pushy, demanding (4)
● ● ●	▪ brusque, hard (2) ▪ cold (3) ▪ soft ▪ unclear (4) ▪ insensitive (3) ▪ passive ▪ aggressive ▪ commanding ▪ humble	▪ soft (2) ▪ warm ▪ unclear (4) ▪ sensitive (2) ▪ humble ▪ friendly (2) ▪ passive (3) ▪ long-winded, too long ▪ wishy-washy (3)	▪ soft ▪ clear (3) ▪ polite (2) ▪ passive ▪ warm (2) ▪ friendly ▪ sensitive (2) ▪ straightforward; to the point ▪ engaging (supplied; 2) ▪ more comprehensible (supplied; 2)	▪ brusque, hard (3) ▪ rude ▪ cold (4) ▪ unclear (6) ▪ humble (2) ▪ commanding ▪ requesting (3) ▪ unfriendly (4) ▪ passive (4)

After the participants finished sticking up their stickers, the moderator probed for the rationale behind any particularly contrary or otherwise interesting results.

In the Chinese group, participants' opinions about tone were not always congruent with their preferred version, which was an interesting discovery. Remember that the Chinese participants were unanimous in their preference of ●, the control version. In spite of this, they picked what could be construed as negative words—rude, cold, insensitive, aggressive and commanding—to describe the tone. The participant who selected "rude" and "cold" had this to say:

> China: I just noticed, like you [another participant] said, use "you must." It's kind of rude; it's cold, like they didn't care about me if I read this. It's commanding, like "you must do this." Which I don't like.

So, the participant had noticed the word choice during the course of the discussion, but not at the time of the individual decision. The participant went on to state that the passive construction of yellow was more polite:

> China: Yeah, just don't want to refer to specific person like "you." I don't want to refer to a person … if you see "you should" or "you must," I would prefer to use "must be" or "should be."
>
> Moderator: I see, ok. Don't use the subject.
>
> China: Yeah.

For the participant who chose "insensitive" the rationale was the lack of rapport-building language:

> China: I marked both insensitive. Its good to keep it short and straightforward, but also will be better if somehow/somewhere, they say "we're sorry," or feel bad that you have certain—but they say, "The fund is used only for real emergencies." Have something before. I don't know if that's going to be any better to be more sensitive. Its says "Emergency bursaries have been granted for travel in result of death in the immediate family." A lot of state the fact. They could add in some personal, [kind words about the death of a relative] … maybe, I'm not sure that would help. Make it more sensitive.

Interestingly, the Chinese MAS ranking is very high, which contra-indicates the use of rapport-building language. It seems again to be a matter of the tone being appropriate to the content rather than the tone matching the audience's cultural dimensions.

The Japanese group also had unanimous preference for , yet there were a total of eight votes for “aggressive” and “pushy.” Probing revealed the following:

Japan 1: No I think aggressive mean, for Japanese is good meaning, not negative

Japan 2: Aggressive means looks like make me good.

Japan 3: Aggressive is kind of we wanted to do—how can I explain?

Moderator: I think we would say, the better word then is assertive.

Japan 1: Assertive?

Moderator: Assertive, in English—

Japan 1: Assertive, yeah yeah.

Moderator: Aggressive has a bit of a negative meaning. If its more like assertive, that means to put your needs forward, but not in a pushy way.

Japan 1: Assertive is more appropriate then.

…

Moderator: I just want to be clear though, the people who chose pushy and demanding. Is it a bad thing?

Japan: As she said, it is because the one- the sentence is being from ‘YOU must blah blah’

Moderator: Oh.

Japan: “Must blah blah” or “if YOU” something

Moderator: All right. Direct then.

Japan: I don’t think its negative.

Maybe a little? (Participant nods.) Ok. Just a little too direct. I know that, I remember from studying Japanese language: it’s very not direct; it’s very indirect.

Japan: Yes

Japan: Yes. Yeah

I’ll put that maybe it’s a little bad. A little too direct. Ok. One thing that is different between and is that is more direct; has some indirect sentences. There’s a bit of a mix. Some sentences are direct, some are indirect … what do you think about the difference—the use of direct versus indirect? Does direct make it easier or more difficult to understand?

Japan [several]: Easier.

In the Germany group, because participants were equally divided on preference, there was not a lot of surprises in the stickers. However, despite preference, they were united in their labelling of as “clear” and as “unclear”. This, they decided, was due to the use of “must” in and “should” and related phrases in . Even though the use those words were one of the reasons the two participants who preferred chose that way (and the reason that the other two chose 🔴), they all agreed that "must" made for clarity and "should" rendered the text somewhat ambiguous:

> Germany 1: I guess a number of "shoulds" are appropriate even though I like 🔴 better. Not in all sentences, but maybe in some.
>
> Moderator: The opposite of that, on the one that you did like, is there anything you didn't like?
>
> Germany 2: I guess it goes the other way for me, agreeing on this, if there is strict rule, there is no way around it. Please give it to me right now. You don't need to waste my time to get me to hold a line and talk to you, and meet you and whatever if there's no way I can get money to fly home. You know what I mean? Or, if I can't get money if I'm not here at least two years. If there's a strict rule, where there are no exceptions, no matter if it's the cousin of the mayor, or me, the nobody … then let me know. That's not clear. Reading 🔵, you don't know that. Here [🔴], you're fairly sure these are strict rules because of the "must" and so on.

The Iranian participants differed from the other groups in that they actually supplied their own words to the activity. All groups were given a blank sheet and markers in addition to the supplied words, but only the Iranian participants took advantage of it. They added (and then voted for) "engaging" and "more comprehensible," both applied to 🔵. The participant who preferred 🔴 did not vote for these words.[18]

The importance of tone may be tied to language skill—it did seem correlated. The Japanese group, which had the lowest level of English proficiency overall, preferred the control version to their own because the format and the short, direct sentences improved their comprehension. And, the Chinese participant with the lowest level of English literacy was the one who had a change of mind halfway through. It could be that the initial decision was based on ease of comprehension, and then when the tone was pointed out, it became rude.

Also, what Zahedi et al (2001) called individual factors may also have been why tone preferences emerged for this particular content: several participants noted the emotional instability or discomfort that would likely accompany the need for an emergency loan or bursary.

[18] Of all the groups, the Iranian participants cooperated most on the activity, even though they didn't all agree on their preference. Perhaps it was the low MAS score coming through.

Though results are far from conclusive, it may be safe to suggest that if organizations were required to satisfice on web content tone, matching the tone to the content and demonstrating empathy for the audience would be best.

Theme 4: Image

The images that accompanied the control and modified versions figured prominently in the initial discussion about preference. However, when participants cited the image as a reason for preference, the moderator followed up with a probe, asking if their opinion would change if the images were reversed, absent or different altogether. In all cases, preference choices didn't change—the image was never the *only* reason for choosing a preference.

Towards the end of the focus group, participants were shown whichever image they had not yet seen, so all groups saw all three images. In addition to a discussion about the image appropriateness, an up-down vote was taken. The results are tabulated in Table 14, and comments from the discussion are in Table 15.

Table 14: Image preference up-down vote results

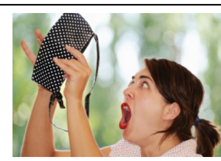
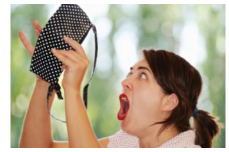
				Abstention*/ No preference†/ Dislike for all‡
Group	Control	Germany, Japan	China, Iran	
China (n=5)	0%	0%	0%	100% (†40% ‡60%)
Germany (n=4)	25%	0%	75%	
Iran (n=3)	33%	0%	33%	*33%
Japan (n=8)	25%	75%	0%	
Total votes (%)	**21%**	**19%**	**27%**	**33%**

Table 15: Compiled comments/discussion about image

			
Group	**Control version**	**Germany, Japan**	**China, Iran**
China	▪ Better, more gentle ▪ More peaceful; makes more sense ▪ More appropriate when we're showing people [who've] run out of money. ▪ "Not really tied to the title. It should show [an] emergency."	▪ "This is more like you go to the bank. Talk to the teller." ▪ Matches red text better—"If you put [it on] the red, it may create a feeling [of] 'someone here will help you' that would be pretty nice." ▪ "Just by looking at this picture, if you take out the content, you don't know what it's for. If it's for consulting, or [something else]".	▪ "I don't think [it] makes too much sense. When I see this picture, I see lady looking for her keys" ▪ "The yellow is not really appropriate for this case because it make[s] a funny joke." ▪ "That picture [doesn't] show any international [people]. ▪ "It's really impressive paragraph [on yellow], then suddenly … it's an awkward [juxta]position." ▪ Intense dislike for this picture
Germany	▪ More topical ▪ Neutral, maybe slightly negative undertone of "I have to reveal my financial situation; I have to declare bankruptcy." ▪ Clichéd ▪ Better metaphor	▪ May reassure a "scared international student without money." ▪ Not a realistic scenario—"bank manager-type of person … might be off-putting …" ▪ Has a human touch but "bankish" ▪ "I hate this one. It makes me cringe … fake smile and defensive attitude and a tie"	▪ Great ▪ Really good ▪ "Looks like a dental exam" ▪ "Looks shocked" ▪ "Too over-the-top for me" ▪ Lipstick is too red—"looks like a vampire" ▪ Best metaphor for the page ▪ May not be appropriate to the content/context of the page
Iran	▪ "I [would] just past by" ▪ The colours are too cool; needs a red/warm tone ▪ Natural background would be better ▪ Very passive—"it doesn't engage your emotions and thoughts"	▪ "It's a fake laugh … look at this guy!" ▪ "I don't like the way he's smiling at all" ▪ "If I would look at this photo, I wouldn't understand it's for an emergency loan. Like what is it doing with this?" ▪ "It's like a car dealer actually sell you a car: 'wow, that's someone I can really get some money out of'"	▪ "Catch my attention at the very beginning. I love the humour." ▪ "This girl to me seems stupid." ▪ "She's wearing pink. I don't like pink."
Japan	▪ "I could understand what they want to talk [about on] this page." ▪ "This picture makes me sad. No money. No smiling face."	▪ More friendly ▪ "Smiling person give us good impression" ▪ "The first time I look [at] the web [page], the picture is more pay attention." ▪ "There is a student here, so I feel familiar with this one."	▪ (Lots of laughter) ▪ "I feel this situation- she looks choked and its not so good thing. Not bad, this picture seems to be bad situation" ▪ "Looks funny, but not necessary … people come this webpage to know how to apply this emergency loans"—meaning not clear—"maybe this people just surprised, or no money, like bug is inside wallet, whatever." ▪ Exaggerates the meaning

Since all the Chinese participants either abstained or disliked all the images, the moderator probed for alternatives. These were suggested:

- "Something show emergency. Sad face."
- "Ambulance running over your wallet."
- "A loan cheque. A cheque."

Once participant said that pictures should coordinate with the colour scheme of the page; another suggested that all images should be captioned.

Additionally, in the Chinese focus group, some of the participants felt that a flowchart, diagram or interactive form/checklist, or even a video would be nice:

> China: If there is no restriction, put a introduction video in where you put the image. Emergency is harder to express with [a still] image.
>
> ------------------------
>
> China: even a questionnaire after this page. Eligibility test. You have a small questionnaire. Do you have this? Check. Check check. Next. Check. Check check. Next. Yes, you are eligible. Something like that, it may help.
>
> ------------------------
>
> China: for me, English is like another language, so if I read often, I may forgot half of them, so I need a diagram to help me memorize what I need to do.

There appears to be little clarity regarding image. There was little positive correlation between UAI score and image preference (again, working with a statistically insignificant sample size), except for Japan, where 75% preferred the image corresponding to Japanese UAI score. In fact, in two cases (China and Germany) there was a perfect negative correlation. Image preference seems driven not by cultural dimensions, but by individual preferences (e.g., one participant said "She's wearing pink. I don't like pink.").

However, perhaps a few possible conclusions could be extracted if put in context with two areas of web image research: usability and accessibility.

Jakob Nielsen's eye tracking studies in usability research have shown that for North American audiences, images on web pages are often ignored (Nielsen, 2007, Usability Week seminar handouts), or, well after headings, subheadings, bullets, links and highlighted key words have been scanned, images are only then glanced at for additional information (Wylie, 2008, lecture notes). However, about half the participants overall reported to looking at the picture first, and of those, several said it was to provide a clue about what the text was about; therefore, as an aid to comprehension:

> Japan: If the person can't understand well, just look at the picture.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Japan: I could understand what they want to talk [about on] this page [because of the image].

Admittedly, eyes move so rapidly that people may not be aware where they have actually looked first. So, this anecdotal evidence would have to be confirmed with eye tracking studies in further research.

Web accessibility research is typically associated with providing access for people with a disability or disadvantage (e.g., visual impairment or a illiteracy). At the risk of political incorrectness, non-native English-speaking cultures are comprised within this category, because to some extent they may be illiterate in English. Remember the discussion of universal design. Accessible information, according to Allen (2005), insures that materials, activities, or goals are attainable by individuals who may have differences "in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, *understand English*, attend, organize, engage and remember" (p.1; emphasis added). This is called making content "perceivable", and is accomplished generally by providing alternate ways of accessing the same content (W3C, 2008). For example, images can be described by placing text in the ALT field in the HTML code so that people with a visual impairment can "hear" the content of the image. Videos can have transcripts or closed captions for people who cannot hear. And literal images, audio or video, and charts, diagrams or other data visualizations can be provided for people with difficulty reading or understanding text, whether that is due to a learning disability or simply not knowing a non-native language well enough. The Chinese participants were very insightful though: “It’s hard to use [an] image to express the idea [of an emergency].” Not all concepts can easily be described with images. Also, creating rich media is resource-intensive. So, organizations would have to weigh the return on investment. Perhaps multiple pictures that convey several styles, customs and variations is the solution that satisfices.

Clever things from clever people: participant insights

One of the most rewarding parts of focus group research is the insights that are unexpected, and these groups did not disappoint. One such insight was voiced in several groups in different variations—that of the relationship to how the page made them feel and what impression that gave them of the organization or the program:

> Japan: I feel kindness from University when I read ●.

> Japan: To read the whole sentence [in green] is driving me mad. Only things we want to know “do I have right to apply this emergency loans/bursaries?” also about proceeding about how to apply, this is the kind of things we want to know that. We don’t want to read any other sentences. If I read [green], I will stop maybe to apply I think.

> Iran: I guess if there is just one place in the whole website that should be most warmer, friendly, is this part. If you are you talking about the case of ethics, do not cheat; do not copy your friend’s stuff. On this stuff, you can be as strict as you want, but this is the place that students with problems go to take refuge. If you are going to be strict here too, where are you going to be nice to the students? (laughter)

> Japan: If I read ● before come here, I would lose my confidence about English. I would anxious after the foreign-Canadian life. I would imagine, people who are trying to apply this form can read easily. I couldn’t read it well, so it means I would lose my confidence about my English I think.

> Moderator: How does ● make you feel?
>
> Germany: I want to run away.

> Iran: If I know at the very beginning, because I have applied for emergency bursaries, and the website is not like [blue] … When I went through [the existing] website, I was not that eager to apply. I wouldn’t find it that easy to go through. It was very hard for me to start that process. I just talked to someone, and someone convinced me to talk to a lady there and when she talked to me I found “OK, I can do this,” so I went for an interview and that convinced me to [apply].

> Iran: I'm not sure if anybody is going to get [red]. Some law might have obliged them to include this in the website, I'm not sure. There are a bunch of conditions. [blue] is much better. If I read [red], the first thing I'm going to do is call my friends and ask them "has anybody ever gotten this?"

This could have considerable ramifications for organizations using the web to build their business to recruit, to sell or to persuade.

According to some participants, if websites are important to building business, it seems that organizations also need to be clear of the purpose of each and every page on a website. Clarity of purpose helps web builders craft pages to meet that purpose:

> Germany 1: I would have some overall PR statement 'look at how good we are' and –
>
> Germany 2: I think that depends a bit on the purpose of this page. Is it a marketing page that is supposed to sell the idea? Is it a marketing page the draws people in? Strictly a rule, this is the process. That's not quite clear from the page because it has components of both.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Iran: I think the idea here is to try to convince students to apply even if they think they make it. Because you're trying to help the students who are in need. Most of the student do not know about this, so it's just a matter of getting attention and trying to convince students who are nervous and in hard situation to apply.
>
> ------------------------
>
> Iran: Yep, [the tone] all depends on how you want the person to react, right?

It also appeared that, contrary to what Marshall McLuhan said[19], the medium might not be the whole message. Participants seemed to sense (or want to sense) the people behind the pages. One German participant summed this up very well:

> I would have liked for author of copy to go in further. To be even more personal, more on the human side, less on legal-speak side. From my experience, that s where things are going and that's where people gravitate towards in popularity. That they want to be respected as human beings instead of … filing systems, or robots, or whatever. What people assume is that very often, speaking from people to machine as a web to the people. But it is people to people. The machines don't care what you write in between. It's people to people.

[19] In *The Medium is the Massage*, 1967 (Bantam Books/Random House).

Discussion

Issues with methodology

Recruitment

Due to difficulties in recruitment, sample sizes were much too small. Since researchers should conduct as many focus groups with similar demographics until no new ideas or themes emerge (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, Digiacomo, Phillips & Davidson, 2007), it would have been better to have at least 20 participants in a minimum of three focus groups.

Content modification

The control version was not really a control version at all. "Control" implies neutrality, which impossible to achieve, given that the sample was written in English, by a Canadian with her own cultural dimensions. This should have been apparent given the theoretical axiology espoused in the methodology. The version should have been written to match Canada's cultural dimensions. Those would be as follows (Table 16):

Table 16: Canada's cultural dimensions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005)

Dimension	Ranking	Adjustment
	Canada	
PDI	Low	▪ Requesting tone
IDV	Individualistic	▪ Active sentences
MAS	Middle	▪ Blend of report and rapport-building
UAI	Low	▪ Humour
LTO	Short	▪ Point-form/micro-content

This would have changed the sample in the following way:

- Use of a more requesting tone (e.g., "should" rather than "must")
- Incorporation of more rapport-building language
- Use of the humorous photograph

There would have been no change to the sentence structure and use of point form. This would have rendered the version virtually identical to Germany's version, though (Table 17). However, since the German group was divided in their preference of versions, it is unlikely that this change would have had much effect on the results. From a value-conscious perspective, though, it is unfortunate that it was called a "control" version.

Table 17: Cultural dimensions of Canada and Germany compared

Dimension	Canada	Germany
PDI	Low	Low
IDV	Individualistic	Individualistic
MAS	Middle (slight trend to masculine)	Masculine
UAI	Low	Middle
LTO	Short	Mid-Short

Additionally, Iran's version did not use enough prose to correspond with their middle ranking on LTO, nor did it have enough of a blend of passive and active sentences to correspond with the middle ranking on the IDV. This was an oversight that should be retested.

I actually preferred the version written for Iran in the test sample to all the others—perhaps because the tested Iranian version corresponded most closely to Canada's cultural dimensions.

The comments by participants in the German group about the relative clarity of the text brought on by the use of "musts" and "shoulds" highlighted the issue that wholesale changes to content make it somewhat artificial (e.g., changing all "musts" to "shoulds" regardless of the reality of the situation):

> Germany [preferring 🔴]: Being an administrator, I like the 🔴 one better because it's less ambiguous. It gives clear indication: "you must." "Should" is open to interpretation; this is throughout the text. The 🔴 one is unambiguous: "you will not receive funding." In the 🔵 one: "you will likely not receive funding." In the next paragraph, "you must meet all the criteria," in the 🔵, "you should meet all the criteria." That's nice but it's not helpful in any administrative situation because it leaves room open for endless discussion and interpretation.

As the participant points out, if the text were written to better reflect the actuality—where eligibility factors, which are definitive, are clearly laid out, but likelihood of funding, which varies, is written to show its fluidity—and more empathetic language (as preferred by participants in all groups) were used, the resulting version would end up being as outlined in Table 18.

Table 18: "Cultural" dimensions of best-case rewrite of content

Dimension		Manipulation
PDI	Middle	▪ Blend of command and recommend
IDV	Individualistic	▪ Active sentences
MAS	Feminine	▪ Rapport
UAI	Middle	▪ Blend of humour and expertise
LTO	Short	▪ Point form/micro-content

Regarding the image manipulation, choosing an image to modify for UAI rankings might have not been the best representation of a UAI manipulation; however, it would have been extremely hard to differentiate between text modifications for MAS and UAI as they were quite similar. An entire study could be done on images for websites, and might be useful, given that anecdotal evidence pointed to the use of photographs and images for clues as to content with the EFL audience. Eye-tracking research would be a useful thing to do in this context, as well as further testing as to what types of images would work best on websites.

Focus groups

In keeping with grounded theory, the focus groups should have been video-recorded. Though I was aware that only audio recordings were being made, and made every effort to clarify in words when participants used ambiguous terms like "this one" or "that one"—

> Moderator: All right. Thanks. So, to clarify, you guys agree that the women with the purse is the best image. Because when I go back to listen to my recordings, "I agree that this is the best one" won't tell me what I need to know. (laughter)

—there are a few places in the transcripts where participants must have been pointing at specific sections of a document and this is not recorded. I was mostly able to recall or deduce to what they were referring, but it was not always possible to do so. As a result, some data was lost, resulting in an inability to extract all possible data.

Directions for future research

In addition to retesting a revised Iranian version and eye-tracking image-use research for EFL audiences, increasing the sample size is the next logical step. Perhaps the possibility of automating the procedure online and making a survey that could be taken by hundreds of people worldwide could be examined. This could be undertaken after further focus groups are conducted, based on any further trends that emerge. The focus groups did generate lots of good discussion and insights. Also, one thing left unexamined is whether universality in wireframe design is desirable, why it is happening, and what are the challenges to that.

Conclusion

Creating websites for international consumption is a very complex process. This project endeavoured to discover ways to build websites to increase their receptivity to international or local multicultural audiences. It demonstrated that wireframes can be standardized for internationalization; there is no longer a need for multiple site designs for different countries or cultures. So, web designers can be relatively confident that layouts could be applied universally, even in the creation of multiple, localized sites. The additional research sought to answer whether web content could be internationalized as well. While we are unable to answer definitively, this project has provided some direction with regards to readability and format, tone, image, and general communication:

Formatting for readability

1. Content creators must write plainly, using easy English. A Flesch Reading Ease score over 50, and even over 60, should be the goal, and since FRE and FKRA tests are readily available in common software (Microsoft Word and Google Docs), they should be run on all content going online. Remember universal design principles: writing in plain, simple English will ensure that the greatest number of individuals can achieve the goals of understanding the content, not just the EFL audiences.
2. Keep text as short as possible. EFL audiences will be less overwhelmed the fewer words they have to read, and native skimmers will appreciate the brevity.
3. Be sure that advanced vocabulary is defined or replaced with simpler explanations. Using JavaScript or hyperlinking can accomplish this without lengthening the appearance of the content, and it can be skipped over by native readers who can make do without the definition.
4. Use point form. If a bulleted list will not work (e.g., where there are only one or two points), break up content with headings and short (i.e., one-sentence) paragraphs. Highlight key phrases using bold, and never underline anything but hyperlinks on a web page.
5. Keep line length between 50 and 70 characters, either with columns or through the inclusion of images and wrapping.

Tone

6. Tone should match the content of the text if it cannot match all the cultural preferences of multiple target audiences.
7. If changing tone for culture, be clear when you must be (e.g., keep “musts” that must be “musts” as “musts”); avoid awkward, artificial constructions for the sake of making a culturally appropriate sentence (e.g., passive constructions that force a sentence to end with a

preposition) as the gains in cultural appropriateness are entirely lost by the reduction in comprehension and readability.

Image

8. Use multiple, literal photographs throughout the text if possible. Use rich media whenever possible. The more illustrations used, the more cultures, preferences, and interpretations can be covered. Also, the more accessible content is, the greater the success of comprehension.

General

9. Remember objective cultural differences such as ways of formatting time, dates, currency, and numbers. Hyperlink to a master page, where the conventions your site uses are explained and converted if necessary.
10. Remember your audience. Even though the content is written and mediated by a computer screen, web communication is still people talking to people. Make the content behave like it is. If content creators respect and empathize with their audience and write with them in mind, the humanity will come out in the writing.

Websites can be rendered more internationalized, but to do so with content will only ever be a *satisficing* solution. Organizations must decide for themselves how best to improve web usability and enjoyment for their growing multicultural audiences—but they have to do something. Ignoring the growing diversity of the web would be foolhardy, as more and more of the world gets online to join the over 1.5 billion—that's 1,500,000,000—on the World Wide Web.

References

Allen, T. H. (2005). Universal design for learning: One for all. News and Notes. 35, 1-21.

Badre, A.N. (2000). The effects of cross cultural interface design orientation on World Wide Web user performance. *Graphics Visualization and Usability Center; Project no. C-50-679*. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/1853/9598.

Bianchi, R. (1998). Companies' web site use: A comparative analysis between Italy and USA. *Engineering and Technology Management, 1998. Pioneering New Technologies: Management Issues and Challenges in the Third Millennium. IEMC '98 Proceedings*. 523-528.

Bivins, T.H. (1999). *Public Relations Writing: the Essentials of Style and Format*, 4th edition. Linconlwood, IL: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group.

Bourges-Waldegg, P. & Scrivener, S.A.R. (1998). Meaning, the central issue in cross-cultural HCI design. *Interacting with Computers 9*, 287-309.

Campbell, K. (2004). *E-ffective Writing for E-Learning Environments*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Campbell, K. (2006). *User-Centred Design EXT 597 Course Handbook January 2006* [PDF].

Chavan, A.L. (2007). Smart strategies for creating culture friendly products and interfaces. In Aykin, N. (Ed.), *Usability and Internationalization, HCI and Culture: Second International Conference on Usability and Internationalization, UI-HCII 2007*. 27-32.

Chong, M. (2004). Designing the user experience for international web users. *Cultural Ergonomics: Advances in Human Performance and Cognitive Engineering Research, 4*, 281-316.

Cresswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cyr, D. & Trevor-Smith, H. (2004). Localization of web design: an empirical comparison of German, Japanese, and United States web site characteristics. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology, 55*(13), 1199-1208.

Davies, R. (1999). Focus groups in Asia. *Orient Pacific Century*. Retrieved June 7, 2008 from http://www.orientpacific.com/focusgroups.htm.

Doak, C.C., Doak, L.G. & Root, J.H. (1996). Teaching patients with low literacy skills. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company.

DuBay, W.H. (2004). The principles of readability. Retrieved June 7, 2008 from *National Adult Literacy Database of Canada* at www.nald.ca/fulltext/readab/cover.htm.

Dyson, M.C. & Kipping, G.J. (1998). The effects of line length and method of movement on patters of reading from screen. *Visible Language, 32*(2). 150-181.

Ervin, A. M. (2000). Applied Anthropology: Tools and Perspectives for Contemporary Practice. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Facebook. (2009). Facebook | Welcome. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from http://www.facebook.com.

Flesch–Kincaid readability test. (2010, July 11). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17 July 2010, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Flesch%E2%80%93Kincaid_readability_test&oldid=372927638.

Fons Trompenaars. (2009, June 9). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 26 June 2009 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fons_Trompenaars.

Geffen, D., Wilson, L., Bender, M., Hashimoto, R. (Producers) & Burton, T. (Director). (1988). *Beetlejuice*. USA: Warner Bros.

Gill, P. Stewart, K., Treasure, E. & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal*, 204, 291 – 295.

Gorman, G.E. (2006). Of Orrefors and Noritake: or, has Geert Hofstede something to say about web site design? *Online Information Review, 30*(4), 337-340.

Gould, E.W. (2006). Results of a study on cultural values and e-commerce design for Malaysia and the United States. *2006 IEEE International Professional Communication Conference*. 1-4.

Gould, E.W., Zalcaria, N. & Yusof, S.A.M. (2000). Applying culture to web site design: A comparison of Malaysian and US web sites. *Professional Communication Conference, 2000. Proceedings of 2000 Joint IEEE International and 18th Annual Conference on Computer Documentation (IPCC/SIGDOC 2000)*, 161-171.

Gruber, J. (30 March 2010). Leaked screenshots of Microsoft Office for Mac 2011. In *Daring Fireball*. Retrieved 31 July 2010 from http://daringfireball.net/linked/2010/03/30/office-mac.

Halcomb, E.J., Gholizadeh, L., Digiacomo, M., Phillips, J. & Davidson, P.M. (2007). Literature review: Considerations in undertaking focus group research with culturally and linguistically diverse groups. *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 16, 1000–1011.

Hall, E.T. (1966). *The Hidden Dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.

Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hall, E.T. (1983). *The Dance of Life*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.

Hall, E.T. & Hall, M.R. (1990). *Understanding Cultural Differences*. Maine: Inercultural Press, Inc.

Hall, E.T. (1998). The power of hidden differences. In Bennett, M.J. (Ed.), *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*. Boston, MA: Intercultural Press.

Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hofner Saphiere, D., Kappler Mikk, B. & Ibrahim DeVries, B. (2005). *Communication Highwire: Leveraging the Power of Diverse Communication Styles*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Hofstede, G. (1996). Riding the waves of commerce: A test of Trompenaars "model" of national culture differences. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20(2). 189-198.

Hofstede, G. & Hofstede, G.J. (2005). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, second edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Impact Information. (2008). *Working with Plain Language* [PowerPoint presentation]. Retrieved from http://www.impact-information.com/Resources/plainlanguage.ppt.

Internet Archive. (2009a). MPH. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from The Wayback Machine: http://web.archive.org/web/20000118174300/http://www.mph.com.my/.

Internet Archive. (2009b). Yale University. Retrieved 29 June 2009 from The Wayback Machine: http://web.archive.org/web/19970503103804/http://www.yale.edu/.

iStockPhoto.com (2010). Money troubles. Retrieved 1 July 2010 from http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-8538351-money-troubles.php.

Journeyer. (2009). Daily: June 28, 2009 [comment #105]. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from Sidepodcast: http://www.sidepodcast.com/2009/06/28/daily-28th-june-2009/#comment-373415.

Juric, R., Kim, I & Kuljis, J. Cross cultural web design: an experiences of developing UK and Korean cultural markers. *ITI 2003: Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on Information Technology Interfaces*. 309-313.

Kim, I & Kuljis, J. (2007).Cultural manifestations on website design. *ITI 2007 29th International Conference on Information Technology Interfaces*. 251-256.

Krug, S. (2006). *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability, 2nd ed*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.

Li, H., Sun, X. & Zhang, K. (2007). Culture-centered design: Cultural factors in interface usability and usability tests. *Eighths ACIS International Conference on Software Engineering, Artificial Intelligence, Networking, and Parallel/Distributed Computing*, 1084-1088.

Lidwell, W., Holden, K. & Butler, J. (2003). *Universal Principles of Design*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers, Inc.

Lindlof, T.R. & Taylor, B.C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Littlejohn, S. & Foss, K. (2005). *Theories of human communication*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Main, L. (2002). *Building websites for a multinational audience*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Marcus, A. & Gould, E.W. (2000). Cultural dimensions and global web user-interface design: What? So what? Now what? Retrieved from AM+A: http://www.amanda.com/resources/hfweb2000/hfweb00.marcus.html.

McSweeney, B. (2002). Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: A triumph of faith—a failure of analysis. *Human Relations, 55*(1). 89-118.

Miller, K.I. (2000). Common ground from the post-positivist perspective: From "straw person" argument to collaborative coexistence. In S.R. Corman & M.S. Poole (Eds.) *Perspectives on organizational communication: Finding the common ground* (pp. 46-67). New York: Guilford.

Miniwatts Marketing Group. (2009a). Top 20 countries with the highest number of Internet users. Retrieved 26 June 2009 from Internet World Stats: http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm.

Miniwatts Marketing Group. (2009b). Internet world users by language: Top 10 languages. Retrieved 26 June 2009 from Internet World Stats: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm.

Miniwatts marketing Group. (2009c). Malaysia: Internet Usage Stats and Marketing Report. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from Internet World Stats: http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/my.htm.

Moghadam, A.H. & Assar, P. (2008). The Relationship Between National Culture and E-Adoption: A Case Study of Iran. American Journal of Applied Sciences 5 (4): 369-377.

Moraghebeh.com. مراقب | ندای آزادی, ندای ایران. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from http://moraghebeh.com/.

MPH. (2009). MPHonline.com: Where the bookstore comes to you. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from MPHonline: http://www.mph.com.my/welcome/welcome.cfm.

My Byline Media. (2010). The Flesch Reading Ease Readability Formula. In *Readability Formulas.com*. Retrieved 18 July 2010 from http://www.readabilityformulas.com/flesch-reading-ease-readability-formula.php.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1993). Adult literacy in America. Retrieved 17 July 2010 from http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/Report2/rep15-01.htm.

Newsom, D. & Haynes, J. (2005). *Public Relations Writing: Form and Style*, 7th edition. Toronto: Thomson Wadsworth.

Nielsen, J. (2000). *Designing Web Usability*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders.

Nielsen, J. & Loranger, H. (2006). *Prioritizing Web Usability*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.

Parker, A. & Tritter, J. (2006 April). Focus group method and methodology: current practice and recent debate. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 29(1), 23-37.

Plucinski, K.J., Olsavsky, J. & Hall, L. (2009 December). Readability of introductory financial and managerial accounting textbooks. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal 13*(4). Retrieved 21 August 2010 from http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Readability+of+introductory+financial+and+managerial+accounting...-a0219062898.

Potter, L.R. (2001). The communication plan: The heart of strategic communication (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: International Association of Business Communicators.

Readability. (2008). In *Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved June 7, 2008 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Readability#In_writing.

Redish, J.(G.). (2007). *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann.

RenRen. (2010). 人人网 人人-登首. Retrieved 31 July 2010 from http://renren.com/.

RFP Evaluation Centers. (2010). Flesch Reading Ease Readability Score. In *Professional RFP Letters*. Retrieved 18 July 2010 from http://rfptemplates.technologyevaluation.com/readability-scores/flesch-reading-ease-readability-score.html.

Rhine, J. (2009). What is grounded theory? In *Grounded Theory Institute*. Retrieved 21 August 2010 from http://www.groundedtheory.com/what-is-gt.aspx.

Satisficing. (2010, July 29). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 31 July 2010, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Satisficing&oldid=376076542.

Sears, A., Jacko, J.A. & Dubach, E.M. (2000). International aspects of World Wide Web usability and the role of high-end graphical enhancements. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, 12*(2), 241-261.

Smith, P.B., Dugan, S. & Trompenaars, F. (1996). National culture and the values of organizational employees: A dimensional analysis across 43 nations. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *27*(2). 231-264.

Soendastreet. (2009). Soenda Street—create your account. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from Soenda Street: http://soendastreet.com/.

Spiekermann, E. & Ginger, E.M. (1993). *Stop Stealing Sheep & Find Out How Type Works*. Indianapolis, IN: Adobe Press, Inc.

Spool, J. (1996). Branding and usability. Retrieved 23 January 2009 from User Interface Engineering: http://www.uie.com/articles/branding_usability.

Strickland, C.J. (1999). Conducting focus groups cross-culturally: Experiences with Pacific Northwest Indian people. *Public Health Nursing*, 16, 190-197.

Strizver, I. (2006). *Type Rules! The Designer's Guide to Professional Typography*, second edition. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

Taylor, J. (2009). Eight Step Editing, Revised Edition. Jim Taylor: Okanagan Centre, BC.

Tindal, R. (2003). Ten keys to increasing your web site's international impact. *CW Online*. Retrieved from International Association of Business Communicators: http://www.iabc.com/cw/private/cwb/2003/0603/10keys.htm [access restricted to members].

Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. (1997). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, 2nd ed. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Universal design. (2010, August 17). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 16:28, August 22, 2010, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Universal_design&oldid=379368130

Universiti Utara Malaysia. (2009). Welcome to UUM—Official Website. Retrieved 27 June 2009 from http://www.uum.edu.my/.

University of Alberta International (2008). Emergency loans and bursaries. Retrieved 30 May 2010 from http://www.international.ualberta.ca/current/loans.cfm.

University of Alberta International (2008). Emergency loans and bursaries. Retrieved 30 May 2010 from http://www.international.ualberta.ca/current/loans.cfm.

Urquhart, C., Lehmann, H. & Myers, M.D. (2010). Putting the "theory" back into grounded theory: Guidelines for grounded theory studies in information systems. *Information Systems Journal 20*(4). 357-381.

US Census Bureau. (1999). Computer use in the United States: October 1997 [PDF]. Retrieved 28 June 2009 from US Census Bureau—Computer Use and Ownership: http://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/p20-522.pdf.

Veer (2010a). Friendly customer service. Retrieved 1 July 2010 from http://www.veer.com/products/CUP0017638_Friendly-customer-service.

Veer (2010b). Woman holding open empty wallet. Retrieved 1 July 2010 from http://www.veer.com/products/AYP1208373_Woman-holding-open-empty-wallet.

VKontakte. (2009). VKontakte | Welcome! Retrieved 27 June 2009 from http://vkontakte.ru/.

Wegner, M & Girasek, D. (2003). How readable are child safety seat installation instructions? *Pediatrics*, 111. 588-591.

Weiss, B.D. & Coyne, C. (1997). Communicating with patients who cannot read. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 337(4). 272-274.

Welch, P. (Ed.) (1995). *Strategies for Teaching Universal Design*. Boston: adaptive environments Center.

White, A.W. (2002). *The Elements of Graphic Design*. New York: Allworth Press.

Wilson, F.L., Baker, L.M., Brown-Syed, C. & Gollup, C. (2000). Analysis of the readability and cultural sensitivity of information on the national cancer institute web site: CancerNet™. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 27(9). 1403-1409.

Winslow, W.W., Honein, G. &Elzubeir, M.A. (2002). Seeking emirati women's voices: The use of focus groups with an Arab population. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12, 566-575.

World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). (2008). Percievable. In *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0*. Retrieved 21 August 2010 from http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/#perceivable.

Wylie, A. (2008, February 21). Small is big: How to get the word out on the Web with microcontent. PRSA Teleseminar.

Young, N. (2010 May). Dude, where's my universal translator? In *Spark* (114). Retrieved 31 July 2010 from http://www.cbc.ca/spark/2010/05/spark-114-may-23-25-2010/.

Zahedi, F., Van Pelt, William V. & Song, J. (2001). Conceptual framework for international web design. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 44*(2), 83-103.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Pre-screening form

English websites for EFL/ESL audiences

You are volunteering to help Nikki Van Dusen's research by joining a focus group to discuss English websites for international students whose first language is not English.

By submitting this form, you give permission for Nikki to contact you about participating in a focus group. Your contact information will remain private. Only Nikki will see it. It will be used only for the purpose of this research.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Campus Stain Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEASJ REB care of 780-492-2614.

*Required

Full Name *
Type your given name(s) first, then your family name.

Email *
Please use an email you check often. It does not need to be your U of A email.

Telephone number *

Nationality *

What is your first language? *
Your first language is the language you learned as a child and still speak.

At what level are you studying?
Note: you do not need to be a U of A student to participate.

- Undergraduate
- Graduate
- ESL
- Other:

Which days are you available in the mornings (from 10 AM to noon)? *
Check as many as you like.

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

Which days are you available in the early afternoon (from noon to 2 PM)? *
Check as many as you like.

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

Which days are you available in the late afternoon (from 2 to 4 PM)? *
Check as many as you like.

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

Which days are you available in the evening (from 6 to 8 PM)? *
Check as many as you like.

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

Submit

Appendix 2: Consent letter

Consent Form/ Information Letter: Participant

Nikki Van Dusen is doing this study for her Master of Arts in Communications and Technology at the University of Alberta. She wants to learn how hard or easy it is for you to read and understand web pages. What she finds will be used to make web pages better. You are being asked to participate in this study. You are a volunteer. That means you can choose to join or not.

If you choose to join this study, you will take part in a focus group with other volunteers. This will take about two hours. You will look at sample web pages. You will write down what you think. You may talk with others about what you think.

Nikki will not share what you say or write with anyone. She will not use your name in the final report. No one can link your name on this form with any anything you say or write in this study. Nikki will keep results for five years in a safe place. After 5 years, she will destroy the data.

A volunteer will help me by taking notes in the focus group. This person will not talk about you or any thing you say. The volunteer will agree in writing to follow the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Only Nikki will have access to the recordings. Nikki may quote you in the final report, but she will not use your name. She will only mention what country you are from.

You can quit this study at any time. You can choose to not answer any question for any reason. You do not have to explain why. If you do, Nikki will not include anything you have said or written in the study.

If you have a question, please contact:

Nikki Van Dusen, BA
University of Alberta Graduate Student
Tel: 780-993-6261
Email: vandusen@ualberta.ca

I have read and understand the above information. I am over the age of 18. I agree to join this study.

Participant's Name: (Please Print) ______________________________

Participant's Signature: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University Committee on Human Research Ethics at the University of Alberta.
For questions regarding participants' rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Director of the Office of Human Research Ethics at (780) 492-6828.

Appendix 3: Moderator's Guide

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Hits From Around the World

MODERATOR'S GUIDE

Opening Remarks

Thank you so much for being here today. My name is Nikki Van Dusen. I am completing my Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology.

I'm hoping that you can help me today by talking with us about your experiences and sharing some of your thoughts on reading English websites.

Keep in mind that we are here to share information, and there are no right or wrong answers.

Before we get started, I would like you to know a few things:

- Confidentiality – Everything that you say here will be kept strictly confidential. Nothing that you say will be identified to an individual person by name.
- Participation – You are all here voluntarily. If at any time during this session you no longer wish to participate, you may withdraw.
- Audio-taping/note-taking/viewing – This session will be audiotaped, and _______ is here to take notes. (This session will also be video-taped.)
- This session should take approximately two hours.

Ground-Rules:

There are a couple of rules I hope we can all agree to follow:

- First of all, everyone's opinion deserves to be heard, so please try not to interrupt anyone while they are talking.
- As this is being audio- (and video-) taped, it would be very helpful if you could speak at a volume similar to mine now, and try to speak as clearly as possible.
- You do not need to speak directly to me, feel free to respond to comments made by the people around you.

Are there any questions?

Let's get started!

Ice-breakers:

I'd like to start by asking each of you to introduce yourself by telling us your name and where on the Internet you like to spend time.

What is your favourite website? Why?

What is your least favourite website? Why?

Questions/procedure

Work alone

- Now I am going to show you two identical web pages. Only the text is different. Please take some time to look at both examples. On the paper, please write which one (if either) you like better. Also, please write why you feel this way. I will give you some time to do this quietly, then we will talk about it as a group.

Group discussion questions

- Okay, who liked 🔴 better? Why?
- Who liked [🟡 / 🟢 / 🔵] better? Why?
- What didn't you like about [🔴 or 🟡 / 🟢 / 🔵]?
- What did you like about [🔴 or 🟡 / 🟢 / 🔵]?
- How does [🔴 or 🟡 / 🟢 / 🔵] make you feel?
- Here is a list of words that you may use to describe the text. Let's pick some:
  - brusque, hard
  - soft
  - rude
  - polite
  - cold
  - warm
  - unclear
  - clear
  - insincere
  - sincere
  - insensitive
  - sensitive
  - haughty, snobby
  - humble
  - commanding
  - requesting
  - friendly
  - unfriendly
  - aggressive
  - passive
  - straightforward, to the point
  - long-winded, too long
  - pushy, demanding
  - wishy-washy
- Who is this web page talking to, do you think?
- One thing that is different between A & B is [tone/person/active vs. passive/list/etc.]. What do you think about this difference? Does it make it easier or more difficult to understand?

China

Dimension	Characteristic	Appropriate Manipulation
PD	High	command instead of recommend
I/C	Collectivistic	passive sentence structure
M/F	Masculine	report
UA	Low	humour and appeal
LTO	Long	prose

Germany		
Dimension	Characteristic	Appropriate Manipulation
PD	Low	recommend
I/C	Individualistic	active
M/F	Masculine	report
UA	Mid	blend of appeal/expertise
LTO	Mid-Short	point-form

Iran		
Dimension	Characteristic	Appropriate Manipulation
PD	Mid	blend of command/recommend
I/C	Middle	blend of passive/active
M/F	Middle - Feminine	rapport, not report
UA	Mid-Low	humour and appeal
LTO	Middle[1]	blend of bullets and prose

Japan		
Dimension	Characteristic	Appropriate Manipulation
PD	Mid-Low	recommend
I/C	Middle	blend of passive/active
M/F	Masculine	report, not rapport
UA	High	expertise
LTO	Long	prose

- You've seen two pictures already. I'm going to show you a third. Which would you prefer for this page?

Closing Remarks

- That is all the questions I have for you, so we are just about finished. What I've heard from you today is (summarize and recap the major themes of the group). Does anyone have anything else to add?
- Thank you very much for your time today. Your ideas have been valuable and will be used to help improve content for web pages.
- (Close, listen for additional comments.)

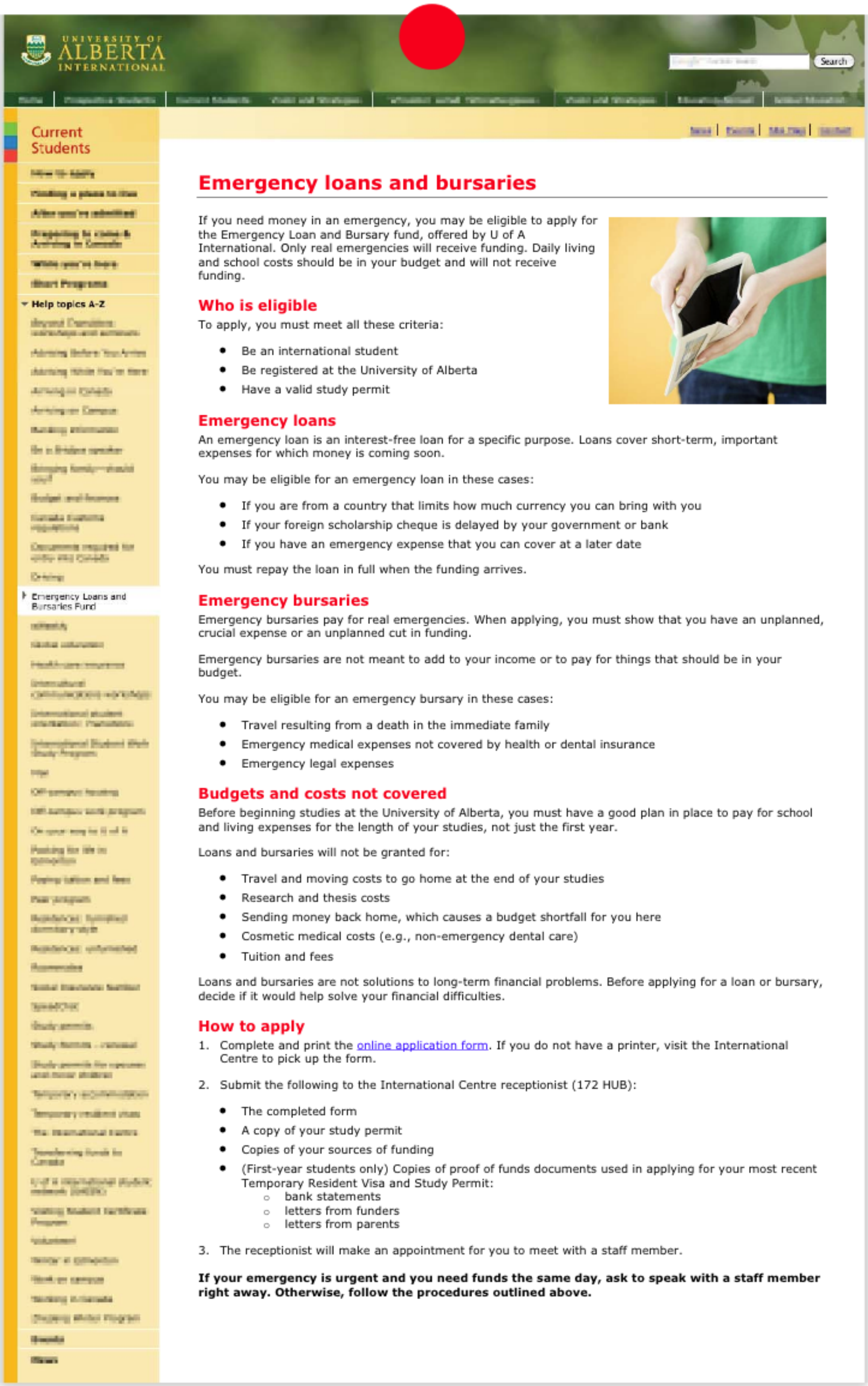
Wrap-up (moderator and observer/recorder)

- Meet to review and complete notes; evaluate success

[1] (Moghadam & Assar, 2008. p. 375)

Appendix 4: Web page samples

Control



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA INTERNATIONAL

Search

Current Students

Help topics A-Z

Emergency Loans and Bursaries Fund

Emergency loans and bursaries

If you need money in an emergency, you may be eligible to apply for the Emergency Loan and Bursary fund, offered by U of A International. Only real emergencies will receive funding. Daily living and school costs should be in your budget and will not receive funding.

Who is eligible

To apply, you must meet all these criteria:

- Be an international student
- Be registered at the University of Alberta
- Have a valid study permit

Emergency loans

An emergency loan is an interest-free loan for a specific purpose. Loans cover short-term, important expenses for which money is coming soon.

You may be eligible for an emergency loan in these cases:

- If you are from a country that limits how much currency you can bring with you
- If your foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by your government or bank
- If you have an emergency expense that you can cover at a later date

You must repay the loan in full when the funding arrives.

Emergency bursaries

Emergency bursaries pay for real emergencies. When applying, you must show that you have an unplanned, crucial expense or an unplanned cut in funding.

Emergency bursaries are not meant to add to your income or to pay for things that should be in your budget.

You may be eligible for an emergency bursary in these cases:

- Travel resulting from a death in the immediate family
- Emergency medical expenses not covered by health or dental insurance
- Emergency legal expenses

Budgets and costs not covered

Before beginning studies at the University of Alberta, you must have a good plan in place to pay for school and living expenses for the length of your studies, not just the first year.

Loans and bursaries will not be granted for:

- Travel and moving costs to go home at the end of your studies
- Research and thesis costs
- Sending money back home, which causes a budget shortfall for you here
- Cosmetic medical costs (e.g., non-emergency dental care)
- Tuition and fees

Loans and bursaries are not solutions to long-term financial problems. Before applying for a loan or bursary, decide if it would help solve your financial difficulties.

How to apply

1. Complete and print the online application form. If you do not have a printer, visit the International Centre to pick up the form.
2. Submit the following to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB):
   - The completed form
   - A copy of your study permit
   - Copies of your sources of funding
   - (First-year students only) Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for your most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit:
     - bank statements
     - letters from funders
     - letters from parents
3. The receptionist will make an appointment for you to meet with a staff member.

If your emergency is urgent and you need funds the same day, ask to speak with a staff member right away. Otherwise, follow the procedures outlined above.

China

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA INTERNATIONAL

Search

Current Students

Help topics A-Z

Emergency Loans and Bursaries Fund

Emergency loans and bursaries

If money is needed in an emergency, it may be applied for through the Emergency Loan and Bursary Fund, offered by U of A International. Only real emergencies will receive funding. Daily living and school costs must be budgeted for and will not receive funding.

Eligibility

Applications will be accepted from international students with a valid study permit and who are registered at the University of Alberta.

Emergency loans

An emergency loan is an interest-free loan for a specific purpose. Loans cover short-term, important expenses for which money is coming soon.

Students from a country that limits how much currency may be imported may apply. Also, a loan may be granted if a foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by the government or bank. Emergency expenses that can be covered at a later date may also be covered.

The loan must be repaid in full when funding arrives.

Emergency bursaries

Only real emergencies are funded by emergency bursaries. Unplanned, crucial expenses or unplanned cut in funding must be shown when applying.

Emergency bursaries are not for increasing income. They are not for paying for things that should be budgeted for.

Emergency bursaries may be granted for travel resulting from a death in the immediate family. They may also be granted for emergency medical expenses not covered by health or dental insurance or for emergency legal expenses.

Budgets and costs not covered

Before studies begin at the University of Alberta, a good plan must be in place to pay for school and living expenses for the length of studies, not just the first year.

Loans and bursaries will not be granted for travel costs to go home after graduation. Research and thesis costs are not covered. Money sent home causing a budget shortfall in Canada is also not eligible. Cosmetic medical costs (e.g., non-emergency dental care) are not covered. Neither tuition nor fees are eligible.

Loans and bursaries are not solutions to long-term financial problems. Before applying, a decision whether financial difficulties would be solved by a loan or bursary needs to be made.

How to apply

The online application form must be completed and printed. Paper copies are available at the International Centre.

The form must be submitted to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB). Copies of one's study permit and sources of funding must be included.

Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for the most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit are required for first-year students who apply. This means bank statements, letters from funders, and letters from parents.

An appointment will be made to meet with a staff member.

In urgent emergencies that require funds the same day, asking to speak to a staff member is permitted. Otherwise, the procedures outlined above must be followed.

Germany

Emergency loans and bursaries

If you need money in an emergency, don't panic! U of A International offers an Emergency Loan and Bursary fund, and you may be eligible to apply. Usually, only real emergencies receive funding. Daily living and school costs should be in your budget and will likely not receive funding.

Who is eligible

To apply, you should meet all these criteria:

- Be an international student
- Be registered at the University of Alberta
- Have a valid study permit

Emergency loans

An emergency loan is an interest-free loan for a specific purpose. Loans cover short-term, important expenses for which money is coming soon.

You may be eligible for an emergency loan in these cases:

- If you are from a country that limits how much currency you can bring with you
- If your foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by your government or bank
- If you have an emergency expense that you can cover at a later date

You should repay the loan in full when the funding arrives.

Emergency bursaries

Emergency bursaries pay for real emergencies. When applying, you should show that you have an unplanned, crucial expense or an unplanned cut in funding.

Emergency bursaries are not meant to add to your income or to pay for things that should be in your budget.

You may be eligible for an emergency bursary in these cases:

- Travel resulting from a death in the immediate family
- Emergency medical expenses not covered by health or dental insurance
- Emergency legal expenses

Budgets and costs not covered

Before beginning studies at the University of Alberta, you should have a good plan in place to pay for school and living expenses for the length of your studies, not just the first year.

Loans and bursaries will likely not be granted for:

- Travel and moving costs to go home at the end of your studies
- Research and thesis costs
- Sending money back home, which causes a budget shortfall for you here
- Cosmetic medical costs (e.g., non-emergency dental care)
- Tuition and fees

Loans and bursaries are not solutions to long-term financial problems. Before applying for a loan or bursary, decide if it would help solve your financial difficulties.

How to apply

If you decide that you do need an emergency loan or bursary, please complete these simple steps:

1. Complete and print the online application form. If you do not have a printer, visit the International Centre to pick up the form.
2. Submit the following to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB):
   - The completed form
   - A copy of your study permit
   - Copies of your sources of funding
   - (First-year students only) Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for your most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit:
     - bank statements
     - letters from funders
     - letters from parents
3. The receptionist will make an appointment for you to meet with a staff member.

If your emergency is urgent and you need funds the same day, ask to speak with a staff member right away. Otherwise, follow the procedures outlined above.

Iran

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA INTERNATIONAL

Search

Current Students

Help topics A-Z

Emergency Loans and Bursaries Fund

Emergency loans and bursaries

If you need money in an emergency, don't panic! You may be eligible to apply for the Emergency Loan and Bursary fund, offered by U of A International. Only real emergencies will receive funding, though. Daily living and school costs should be in your budget and will not receive funding.

Who is eligible

If you ...

- Are an international student
- Are registered at the University of Alberta
- Have a valid study permit

... then you are eligible to apply!

Emergency loans

An emergency loan is an interest-free loan for a specific purpose. Loans cover short-term, important expenses for which money is coming soon.

If you find yourself in one of these situations, you may be eligible for an emergency loan:

- If you are from a country that limits how much currency you can bring with you
- If your foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by your government or bank
- If you have an emergency expense that you can cover at a later date

Remember: When funding arrives, the loan must be repaid in full.

Emergency bursaries

Emergency bursaries may help if you have a real financial emergency. When applying, you should show that you have an unplanned, crucial expense or an unplanned cut in funding.

Emergency bursaries are not meant to add to your income or to pay for things that should be in your budget.

Here are a few examples of when bursaries could be granted:

- Travel resulting from a death in the immediate family
- Emergency medical expenses not covered by health or dental insurance
- Emergency legal expenses

Budgets and costs not covered

Before beginning studies at the University of Alberta, it's a good idea to have a plan in place to pay for school and living expenses for the length of your studies, not just the first year.

You can't get a loan or bursary for:

- Travel and moving costs to go home at the end of your studies
- Research and thesis costs
- Sending money back home, which causes a budget shortfall for you here
- Cosmetic medical costs (e.g., non-emergency dental care)
- Tuition and fees

Loans and bursaries are not solutions to long-term financial problems. Before applying, you should think carefully at your financial issues. Will a loan or bursary really solve your financial difficulties?

How to apply

If you decide that you do need an emergency loan or bursary, then please complete these simple steps:

1. Complete and print the online application form. If you do not have a printer, you can visit the International Centre to pick up the form.
2. Submit the following to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB):
   - The completed form
   - A copy of your study permit
   - Copies of your sources of funding
   - (First-year students only) Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for your most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit:
     - bank statements
     - letters from funders
     - letters from parents
3. The receptionist will make an appointment for you to meet with a staff member.

If your emergency is urgent and you need funds the same day, ask to speak with a staff member right away. Otherwise, follow the procedures outlined above.

Japan

Emergency loans and bursaries

If money is needed in an emergency, U of A International offers an Emergency Loan and Bursary Fund. Only real emergencies will likely receive funding. Daily living and school costs should be budgeted for and will likely not receive funding.

Eligibility

International students with a valid study permit and who are registered at the University of Alberta may be eligible to apply.

Emergency loans

An emergency loan is an interest-free loan for a specific purpose. Loans cover short-term, important expenses for which money is coming soon.

Students from a country that limits how much currency may be imported may apply. Also, a loan may be granted if a foreign scholarship cheque is delayed by the government or bank. Emergency expenses that can be covered at a later date may also be covered.

The loan should be repaid in full when funding arrives.

Emergency bursaries

Only real emergencies are funded by emergency bursaries. When applying, you should show that you have an unplanned, crucial expenses or unplanned cut in funding.

Emergency bursaries should not be used to increase income. They should not be used to pay for things that should be budgeted for.

Emergency bursaries may be granted for travel resulting from a death in the immediate family. They may also be granted for emergency medical expenses not covered by health or dental insurance or for emergency legal expenses.

Budgets and costs not covered

Before studies begin at the University of Alberta, a good plan should be in place to pay for school and living expenses for the length of studies, not just the first year.

Loans and bursaries will not be granted for travel costs to go home after graduation. Research and thesis costs are not covered. Money sent home causing a budget shortfall in Canada is also not eligible. Cosmetic medical costs (e.g., non-emergency dental care) are not covered. Neither tuition nor fees are eligible.

Loans and bursaries are not solutions to long-term financial problems. Before applying, a decision whether financial difficulties would be solved by a loan or bursary should be made.

How to apply

The online application form should be completed and printed. Paper copies are available at the International Centre.

The form should be submitted to the International Centre receptionist (172 HUB). Copies of one's study permit and sources of funding should be included.

Copies of proof of funds documents used in applying for the most recent Temporary Resident Visa and Study Permit should be included for first-year students who apply. This means bank statements, letters from funders, and letters from parents.

An appointment will be made to meet with a staff member.

In urgent emergencies that require funds the same day, asking to speak to a staff member is permitted. Otherwise, the procedures outlined above should be followed.

Appendix 5: Work-alone questionnaire

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Focus Group Answer Sheet

DATE:

Procedure

You will see two identical web pages. Only the text is different.

Please look at both examples.

Which do you prefer?
Check one:

- ☐ ● much more than ●.
- ☐ ● slightly more than ●.
- ☐ Neither ● nor ●.
- ☐ ● slightly more than ●.
- ☐ ● much more than ●.

Why?