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Cross-Cultural Commerce: Speaking a Universal Language at the Dubai Mall

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Sprawled across an area larger than 50 soccer fields and anchored beside the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest man-made building, the Dubai Mall officially opened Nov. 4, 2008, in the United Arab Emirates. As the largest mall in the world, the Dubai Mall piques the curiosity of tourists around the globe. The complex houses 1,200 stores, an underwater zoo, a SEGA indoor theme park, an Olympic-size ice rink, a 22-screen Cineplex and the world's largest gold market.

Along with being a record-shattering marvel of tourism and retail, the Dubai Mall is also a place of opportunity for citizens of neighboring countries seeking employment – given they can overcome many language and cultural barriers.

Monica W. Tracey, Ph.D., associate professor of instructional technology and administrative and organizational studies in WSU's College of Education, developed an instructional process and model that enabled a diverse group of workers to learn the job duties required for the housekeeping mall staff with maximum efficiency. Her customized, multi-cultural instruction manuals

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Cross-cultural commerce

Speaking a universal language at the Dubai Mall

by Amy Oprean

successfully trained employees from Bangladesh, Nepal, India, the Philippines and many other surrounding countries – many of which didn't share a common language – and comprise a working process and model for cross-cultural instructional design.

"It was a very enriching experience for me,"
Tracey said, who ran her own instructional design
consulting company before entering the academic
community at Wayne State. "This region of the
world has the utmost respect for education and they
fully embraced the expertise that WSU brought to
the table. Given the three-month window we had
for the entire project, their support was critical."

Tracey spent a week assessing the requirements of the project and after a short trip back to the U.S., began a rapid prototyping process of designing instruction materials for both workers and supervisors. With a multi-cultural, multi-language learner in mind, she designed a series of processes utilizing colors, symbols and pictures that were then adapted to the different cleaning programs. "We knew learners would be relying heavily on visuals, so we designed the materials to emulate the visuals of the environment and the tools the workers would actually be using."

The words that did accompany the illustrations were in English and Hindi – the two most common languages among the trainees – in very simple, consistent sentence structures with an emphasis on teaching employees key words. "It was very important that our translators and graphic artists worked together, so that there was little ambiguity in the instructional materials," Tracey said.

To help navigate the customs of the multiple cultures involved in this project, Tracey relied on several international Wayne State students as "cultural experts" to quickly familiarize her with important customs. "Because United Arab Emirates is primarily an Islamic culture, the mall includes many prayer rooms which must be used by Muslims several times a day," she said. "These prayer rooms should only be cleaned by Muslim workers and female prayer rooms can only be cleaned by females. Knowing important cultural information like this allowed us to avoid possible errors in design that would have slowed the process."

Tracey's prototype was put into effect immediately, training the mall's first group of employees for its official opening. She continued to modify and improve her design for several more weeks, correcting problems of ambiguity in the instruction language or other inefficiencies as they became apparent. "This was a perfect example of 'design and development' research," Tracey said. "The model was developed in the field and continuously evaluated and improved while in use."

By the end of the project's run on Nov. 30, 2008, Tracey had trained 320 people. Of these, 82 percent passed the required instructional assessment. With the same instructions continuing to train new employees at the Dubai Mall today, she considers the project a resounding success. "We created a process and customized instruction that is being utilized by the largest mall in the world," she said. "We reduced cost by reducing manpower and trained more than 300 people who speak different languages how to perform their jobs."

About Dr. Monica Tracey:

Dr. Tracey received a B.S. in education from Central Michigan University, an M.A. in education and an education specialist certificate in instructional technology and a Ph.D. in instructional technology from Wayne State University. She joined WSU as a faculty member in 2007.

The work done by Tracey in Dubai serves as a model for efficient, cross-cultural instructional design with potential use in numerous work processes involving learners of different cultures and languages. With continued research validating this process, she hopes her model can be generalized to address the growing demand for instructional design for multi-cultural workforces. "Here in the U.S. and abroad, our workforce is changing," she said. "More than ever, we need to be able to design and deliver effective instruction for numerous cultures working together. The Dubai project was a starting point for applying the elements of instructional design, including effectiveness, efficiency and appeal for the benefit of the culturally diverse workforce around the world."

For more information, please visit: http://www2.coe.wayne.edu/aos/it/bio.php?id=43086