

## **Contemporary Issues of Learner Uncertainty Avoidance: Educator Perceptions on Technology and the Absence of Textbooks in Higher Education**

*By: Robert S. Green  
Professor of Media Psychology and  
Cross Cultural Communications*

EU Business School, Switzerland  
June 2018

---

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of communications, sociology, and cross-cultural psychology studies deals with renowned Dutch researcher, Geert Hofstede's cultural dimension of *Uncertainty Avoidance*. Because human uncertainty levels tend to be highly dependent upon one's own culture and cultural upbringing, it is necessary to point out some of the dramatic and oftentimes overlooked parallels that exist between a person's educational background and his/her willingness to open up to new social experiences to confront change on both a professional and personal basis. Analyses of these factors are critical in order to meet the challenges of tomorrow's emerging industries, particularly in terms of employer needs, worker skillsets, and employee satisfaction. Failure to acknowledge and diagnose a concise rationale for people's avoidance of uncertain or unfamiliar sentiments and circumstances may threaten to significantly increase the probability of misunderstandings, disputes, and overall levels of worker inefficiency over time.

Uncertainty Avoidance can be clearly defined as a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity and is one of the five key qualities or dimensions measured by the researchers who developed the Hofstede cultural dimensions model to quantify cultural differences across international lines and better understand why some ideas and business practices work better in

some countries than in others. While this definition is widely accepted and carries a lot of weight among cultural researchers, it must be taken even further by observing several other steps involved with shaping human behavior, most notably, in relation to some of the indirect causes of high degrees of uncertainty through educative awareness and practices.

### **Evaluating Contemporary Education Practices**

Since technology has been the key driver progressing education in the developed world over the past three to four decades, there has been a tendency for many people to shy away from textbooks and alternative forms of 'tangible' literature, creating an illusion that these forms of knowledge acquisition are obsolete or no longer of use. Reinforcing this trend are buzzwords like 'innovation,' 'interaction,' and 'digital disruption', which have invaded the minds of several soft skills-oriented professionals, while TED Talks interviews have continued to proliferate and, at times, even saturate the modern classroom, being hailed by several media-savvy workers and educators alike as a key ingredient towards the development of more open-minded, aware learners. It is critical to note that, while indeed, TED Talks videos as tools, along with linguistic technology jargon can assist in improving certain communications skills, they are also a platform and practice that have ultimately invited repeated affirmation and language redundancy to run wild, specifically with regards to tech jargon (not to mention sports jargon as well).

The result has led to a wide array of learners entering the workforce who have simultaneously acquired very limited, yet identical, vocabulary, ideas, and knowledge resources, making it difficult to differentiate between the additional qualities and interests each learner has to offer that could attract employers and meet their needs. While

it is crucial to continue using digital technology to advance and evolve certain learning styles, it is equally important that both educators and students do not resolve to a consensus that textbooks and physical books are ultimately mundane and too boring to digest in the fast-paced, technologically-driven society of today. This mentality of thinking inadvertently condones greater attention deficiency, monotonous discourse, and downright laziness, which is, in effect, subliminally saying to students that if a task appears in any way too difficult (i.e. having to actually apply more effort instead of scavenging the internet in order to deeply research topics), they should be given a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card (from the board game Monopoly) and not worry about studying hard.

### **Classrooms as 'Creative Spaces'**

Additionally, there is a plethora of 'new' study environments several institutions have began employing, such as providing students with beanbags instead of chairs to sit on, accompanied by some rather childish games that are meant to provide a more 'interactive' learning experience. Although there can be some initial benefit in designing these 'creative spaces' and activities for learners, many times the practical lessons and methodologies utilized hardly scratch the surface of important content and knowledge surrounding whatever the topic being taught. The hard reality is that at some point however (most certainly upon completion of studies and entering the work force), students are inevitably confronted with having to demonstrate a higher degree of discipline, patience, and effort, characteristics that, in several cases, appear to be lacking in these *quasi-new* learning environments. While beanbags may have worked well for computer scientists at Xerox's PARC (Palo Alto Research Center) laboratories back in the 1970's and 80's (or even longer), one key detail several 'creative space advocates' forget to note is that those same workers also

happened to be some of the most renowned and experienced computer scientists in the world.

Naturally, the subject of textbooks and physical books is only one of many indirect factors affecting human levels of education acquisition, but how does it relate to uncertainty avoidance? To adequately understand this link, it is necessary to delve deeper into individual cultural roots. First and foremost, there is a need to understand how important reading is, was, or had been, on learner growth from 0-10 years of age and (moreover) from adolescence into adulthood. During these two stages, people and surroundings highly influence opinions and behaviors toward study habits as well as determine which subjects are deemed 'worthy' of learning about in accordance with a particular culture.

It would be difficult for one to argue that contemporary communications technology has not provided a great deal of benefits. The issue here though is to what degree parental guidance, combined with key opinion leaders, influence students from disparate cultures to resolve to one of three categories:

1. That reading textbooks and other physical books are useful and important in the pursuit of a universally higher level of education
2. That reading textbooks and other physical books are obsolete and no longer of importance in student learning evolution (particularly because of the internet and modern digital mobile devices).
3. That there is a neutral reaction to the subject of books as essential or unessential tools, simply because active reading had never been a topic of emphasis during a learner's upbringing.

Since the primary issue of uncertainty avoidance would, in most cases, not be very high in the first category, the main emphasis here focuses on the second and third ones. With category two, an important question to consider would involve the literacy rate of a country or region where a learner originates. A second parameter may also include household income levels for a learner's family, or those of the closest opinion leaders to that learner. It should also be noted that learners coming from less wealth are not necessarily the only ones who should immediately be associated with the second category, as many learners may also have come from lineages where their families' financial situations originated or were passed down through ascription (or an immediate inheritance of a long tradition of family business ideals unrelated to any utilitarian '*need*' for reading books). In many cases, if the parents or opinion leaders of a student were themselves never inspired by academic discourse, empirical research, or reading in general, there is a high probability that the same urge is nonexistent in their children or *apprentices*.

Becoming aware of these two factors undoubtedly allows for a more transparent image of how a particular student might treat what is nowadays considered by some to be the '*old fashioned*' concept of learning. In the case of the third, or neutral, category, even if bookshelves, dens, or studies may have been present in homes during a learner's environmental upbringing, they may have merely served as more of a decorative addition to the homestead as opposed to a treasured hub of references. Whatever the scenario that might have existed however in arriving at a belief reminiscent of categories two or three, the mere lack of being around books and/or being urged to nurture reading skills more than likely leads to a dissuasion and, hence, avoidance of any interest in a learner changing his/her perception. Furthermore, from an educator perspective, there is no sense

in passing judgment on learners today who are reluctant or disinterested in reading physical books and studying from them either, since it is natural for those with higher levels of uncertainty avoidance to steer clear of what could be unfamiliar grounds, for one reason or another.

### **Implications Governing the Speed of Technological Adoption**

It goes without saying that the advancement of mobile and wearable technologies has brought with it shorter attention spans among many users. And, understandably, the bombardment of socio-economic needs to constantly improve systems and processes while maximizing greater output efficiency has been the core driver of professional growth strategies and human brain development thus far in this century. As a result, *digital natives* who come from fortunate enough circumstances to have grown up with the internet and smart phones throughout their entire lives are increasingly less apt to acknowledge the importance of discovering complementary skillsets that would allow them to interpret these technologies for what they actually are intended to be; tools, very powerful tools, though only a partition of multiple knowledge resources that contrive our total human intellectual capabilities.

Since other forms of knowledge acquisition apart from using computers have been undermined, it is easier for a lot of educators to bypass teaching methodologies of the past in exchange for a 'quick fix' format that does not take into account the benefits and lessons prior generations had the luxury of receiving (even if those lessons were not painless!) such as the ability to learn how to lure oneself into a subject (by means of a book) and adopt patience and poise instead of speedy results. There is a realization that systems are oftentimes built much more efficiently from the start when thought processes have been cultivated with adequate time and precision. Doing so inevitably

requires levels of self-discipline that are increasingly absent in the world of ultra-fast product lifecycles, news feeds, and updates. Nevertheless, if educators are not expressing the importance of learning to encourage reading skills and the practice of a healthy balance of digital and physical resources, it is no wonder that students, likewise, do not share similar sentiments. Even with technology as great as it is, it oftentimes comes down to a great teacher who wields the power to empower learners to strive hardest and avoid becoming *zombified* by the nonstop reliance of computer technologies alone. Robots can be commoditized, but not people.

### **Clearing The Fog of Uncertainty Avoidance to Help Great Minds Flourish**

As societies continue to become more multi-culturally aware worldwide, there is no better time than the present to acknowledge that, while there are undoubtedly several who display high levels of uncertainty towards the ease-of-use and adoption of modern technological devices for their career advancements (either resulting from *technophobia*, cultural upbringing, or otherwise), there is equally (or even more so in the developed world) an astounding number of people whom, upon overcoming their uncertainty of engaging in indirect, alternate knowledge routes less visible today, would do themselves a favor to connect with (or revisit) great novels and textbooks in order to pick up the torch where other great writers, researchers, and experts in their fields of knowledge left off (prior to and after the PC, enterprise, and mobile generation eras). Combined with the great modern digital tools at their disposal as well, learners may further enrich their own personal and professional growth, each as an individual with his or her own set of unique talents and attributes made more transparent for employers and the rest of humanity possibly struggling to escape the suffocation of digital overdose.