7-1-2001

Communication Technology and Intercultural Education: A Report on Pedagogy

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Recent expansion of telecommunication technologies, especially the Internet, is rapidly diminishing the distance between cultures. Intercultural communication instructors now have an opportunity to use the new media technologies as innovative and interactive semiotic teaching tools (Berge and Collins 1995). In this article, we discuss ways in which communication technology can be used to augment and intensify students' intercultural communication learning experience with social and cultural codes (Jones and Jones 1994, 1998). Included in this analysis are descriptions of projects used in intercultural communication classes at two American (USA) universities, one a large state public university and the other a small private university. The projects on which we are reporting include: (1) a keypal project, (2) electronic discussion groups, and (3) the use of intercultural sites on
the Internet as a research tool (Herring 1996). For purposes of qualitative reliability, we include an analytic discussion of the weaknesses and strengths of each project. As a measure of qualitative validity, we cite typology examples of the students' own self-report evaluations of the contextual learning experience (Lanigan 1988).

In the spring of 1995 and fall of 1996, the Internet was integrated in an intercultural communication class at a large, Midwestern, state university (Althaus 1997; Archer 1997). A listserv electronic discussion group and an electronic correspondence project or "keypal" were introduced in the 1995 class. In 1996, the course was also delivered online through a course homepage and the web bulletin board system was used as an electronic discussion medium, instead of the electronic mail format. The following discussion describes each exercise and analyzes its pros and cons as a pedagogical instrument.

1. The Keypal Project

The so-called "keypal" project was initiated so that the students, with the help of computer speed and low or no telecommunication cost, could write to interested persons from other cultures, learn of other cultures, and possibly establish friendship via Internet.

The instructor asked students to find at least one keypal from the Internet to establish ongoing correspondence (four weeks minimum). The objectives of the assignment were mainly to seek "first-hand" cultural information, as well as to form an interpersonal/intercultural relationship with a person from another culture through the use of electronic mail. At the end of the semester, students wrote a paper on their experience of engaging in the project. The outcomes of the project were not as successful as the instructor had hoped. Based on students' evaluations of their experience, the problems were both technical and conceptual.

2. Keypal Pros and Cons

The main obstacles the students expressed as the reasons why their experience was not so successful were computer access and time...
commitment of the corresponding keypals. Problems concerning computer access were repeated by many students as a main barrier. Some even felt that they were hurt academically because of the assignment. As one said, "not everyone has access to connected computers and the labs are always busy".

Time became an issue when the e-mail partner does not have the capability to e-mail from home or find time to correspond regularly. Many students voiced this difficulty and sometimes felt "guilty" when pressing their partner for answers when he/she did not answer the e-mail for a while. One student wrote, "I think time had played a major part in interaction. I made time because it was my project and he (her e-mail partner) was struggling to make time for my project".

A few students commented that the electronic penpal project might sound good conceptually but was impractical, and at times frustrating or even unethical. One student wrote, "As for the analysis of our interaction, I was stressed most of the time. I wanted more out of the communication process than what my partner could give".

Another student had to abruptly and the correspondence with her e-mail partner because the latter thought he was exploited to fulfill her class assignment. He wrote:

Frankly speaking, I won't gain anything by answering your questions (even though they are certainly interesting). So why am I answering your questions? It is because you say that you could become one of my pen pals. I'd like to keep in touch with you even after you finish your paper. The Internet is a wonderful for receiving information from people all over the world, but I've found it hard to establish good human relationship on the Internet.

His e-mail response to her demonstrates that the use of a keypal as a cultural source of information for a class project may not be as conceptually or ethically sound as it seems. Further, communication via computer (or now as often called CMC, i.e., computer-mediated communication) may not be a viable medium from which to form an interpersonal relationship. As one student put it:
I felt as if the screen prevented me from concentrating. I felt as if I was always in a hurry. The conveniences provided by the computer were an handicap: you sit down, you click, a message appears, you read it very quickly because you only think of one thing to answer and you forget the message.

Despite above-mentioned problems, several students did gain something from the keypal project. Some said that the innovative assignment "enlivened" the learning process and learning about another culture through e-mail has motivated them to learn more about people from other cultures. It also allows them to practice their communication skills, especially writing skills. Communicating with individuals from other cultures also allowed them to learn that not everybody thinks the same or adhere to cultural norms or rules in the same degree. One student was surprised when her Japanese e-mail partner told her directly what he thought and at times was abrupt with her. She wrote:

His candor surprised me based on what I know of the Japanese culture. I know that Japanese people are very conscientious about saying something that will offend people. Also, since he is from the high-context culture, I assumed that he'd be less direct.

3. The Computer Conferencing and Electronic Discussion Group

The main objective of this assignment is to allow students to continue to extend their class discussion beyond 150 minutes per week. It was also hoped, but not disclosed to students, that students would practice their intercultural skills and/or knowledge while engaging in the online discussion of which of the topics could be controversial at times.

In 1995, the instructor set up a local computer listserv newsgroup participated by students enrolled in the intercultural communication course and some invited guests (students who took the class before). The communication exchanges were made via electronic mail. The following year, the format of the electronic discussion group
was changed into a bulletin board system (SSS) integrated in the then newly-developed course homepage for an undergraduate intercultural communication class (http://www.siu.edu/~ekachai/301.html). The discussion was made via a web browser, using a shareware BBS program. Students were to post regularly, totaling at least ten postings by the end of the semester.

4. Computer Conferencing Pros and Cons

Similar to the problems encountered in the keypal project, the main obstacles of this online assignment were computer access and time. Students found that posting to the BBS and reading other's messages were too time consuming. Further, students who were not computer or web literate found themselves at a disadvantage. A student wrote about her problem:

I only have access to a computer during my midnight shift at work. And am not usually able to get to a computer during lab hours, so it made it very difficult for me when my boss decided to eliminate Netscape, and replace it with Internet Explorer. The only problem with this is that during the time in between, which lasted several weeks, I had no access to the web at all. I got a taste for what some students must feel who don't have easy access to the Internet on a regular basis. I feel that the required postings were a bit extreme, maybe requiring one every 2-3 weeks would be easier for these students. And many students need more than just a few sessions in the computer lab before they feel comfortable and competent with the system.

Another student voiced a similar concern:

Sometimes I had a problem getting on a computer because I don't have a computer at home and neither does my roommate. Therefore, I couldn't really do anything when I was at home. However, overall, I'm so glad that we had a homepage for this class.

However, most students agreed that, despite the lack of computer availability, the online discussion was very useful in helping them learn their classmates' views and opinions which might not be expressed or not expressed clearly in class. One student wrote:
I found the chat-line to be extremely useful and truly enjoyable. I particularly liked reading what other people had to say. The on-line practice test for the midterm was very beneficial.

Another student agreed:

Chat line was very interesting because you could know about other people's experiences, what they read/saw/heard about something, and what they think about them. However, it was very helpful to catch up with the class and get more opportunities to hear other peoples' opinions.

Besides being a "virtual" forum for class discussion, the chat line or BBS was a good tool for the instructor to assess class exercises or how the class was going. Many students were quick to express their opinions and their feedback. For example, one wrote:

I really enjoyed the in class exercise we did in class today with the lemon and the pear. Although some of the ideas we discuss in class seem rather obvious, sometimes we all tend to lose perspective. This exercise helped me to refocus the fact that although we are different, in some ways: we are the same, and vice-versa. Sometimes I get frustrated with others or confused or anxious because they don't see things the way I do. What I reminded myself of today, is that that is what makes life so interesting. To hear everyone's ideas, opinions, values, and beliefs are what make this university, and even broader, this country so wonderful.

Another student not only commented on the exercise, but also made a suggestion:

I think the lemon and pear exercise was extremely relevant to our discussion. It showed just how many different perceptions there are of a similar item. It was fun to watch how various people answered the criteria question. I think it would have been much more interesting if there would have been more fruit to choose from when we had to find "our" fruit. That would have made it n00re challenging. This was indeed one of the better exercises we have done in class.
Keypals and discussion groups are two avenues instructors may now take when introducing electronic media in the intercultural course. In addition, the Internet may also be used as a research tool, augmenting students' intercultural resources.

5. Intercultural Research Sites

Starting in the spring of 1996 through the spring of 1997, the Internet was integrated in the intercultural communication class at a small, private, Midwestern university. Intercultural sites were implemented as a research tool and their data were used in a variety of projects throughout the semester. The Internet was introduced as a way of balancing the homogeneity of the campus population and to expose the students to a wider array of cultural experiences.

Students were introduced to the Internet aspect of the course on the first night of class. Their assignment was to find a country on a web site named Lonely Planet (http://www.lonelyplanet.com) and to compose a 3 to 5 minute speech on three interesting areas found in the Lonely Planet information. Speeches began the second night of class. Internet was used early in the course to emphasize its importance as an intercultural resource.

A hands-on introduction to the Internet and Netscape was given by the instructor during the second half of the first night of class. Those students already familiar with Internet were allowed to leave. In all three semesters, over half of the class remained the entire time. A handout, tailored to the university's system was given to reassure those still reticent about Internet assignments. Most students left the first class feeling competent in their Lonely Planet abilities. Most students were very appreciative for instructions on using the Internet. One student wrote:

On a more personal level, I did not know how to use the WWW when I first had to do the Internet resource list. When I did that assignment, I just felt like the WWW was a foreign object to me because it did not make any sense. However, for this assignment, I was able to browse throughout the many searches on the net, and I understood how to find the
information that could help me. I am very pleased with the outcomes of this search.

Beyond the Lonely Planet speeches, students used their Internet research skills to augment an ongoing intercultural assignment. Each student was found a "cultural informant" that they met with about once a week. In conjunction with these meetings, the students gathered information from the library and the Internet on their informant's culture. Several assignments were used as check points throughout the semester. These included: an Internet Source List, listing each site they had found with a one sentence description of the information it contains; an Internet Critique Paper, used to emphasize the need for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Internet information; an Annotated Bibliography of all materials gathered, including at least three Internet sources, and a Final Paper in the informant's culture, including at least three Internet sources.

6. Research Sites Pros and Cons

Difficulties were experienced by both students and instructor in the implementation of Internet research assignments. For the instructor, issues arose involving: technical failure in the computer classroom, additional class time for Internet instruction, difficulty managing, assessing and verifying the bulk of new sources, and complications with source citations in written work. For the students, the complications centered mostly on issues of time and information usability. Ethical considerations arose for both instructor and students.

Incorporating the Internet technology into the standard college classroom required additional time and effort on the instructor's part. If the instructor is proficient in computing skills he or she is at an advantage. If not, as in this case, patience is mandatory. For this project, difficulties with computer classrooms limited the hands-on aspects of the Internet instruction. For those students fortunate enough to sit at a fully functioning terminal, the instruction went as planned. For many, it did not. Terminals malfunctioning, system overloads and other technical failings added unavoidable stress and complications to the Internet instruction all three semesters. The Internet instruction itself needed to be scheduled into an already full
semester's plan. However, from the feedback gathered, the time spent was well spent. Students who were still intimidated by computers, and especially the Internet, gained confidence with patient, step-by-step instruction.

Handling the bulk of this new information presented another challenge. The Internet resource lists gathered 4 to 5 weeks into the semester yielded five hundred different sites. Categorizing and managing this unwieldy information became virtually impossible. Checking the accuracy and authenticity of the information was time consuming. Source citations for written documents became problematic too. Neither APA (American Psychological Association, USA) nor MLA (Modern language Association, USA) style manuals have been able to keep up with the rapid changes in the Internet. We relied on the campus writing center to provide us with the up-to-date citation styles. Internet sources often provide minimal bibliographic information on authors or even dates, making documentation cumbersome.

For students, the issue of time and wasted effort was a recurring theme. The various search engines available in the Internet have limited abilities for refined searches. Several students shared their frustrations with the huge amount of information.

My biggest complaint about using the Web to look up information is the amount of time it takes to search through the pages and pages of information. I feel as if I am running in circles and running in to the same things over and over. The amount of information collected in relation to the amount of time it takes to collect it makes me feel very frustrated at times.

Another student wrote:

For each attempted address I spent an average of 15.2 minutes at the site. In comparing my experience on the Internet to my experience at the local public library, I would say that hour for hour, one can retrieve a lot more information in the library.

Technical malfunctions add to the time factor as well. One student reported, "Usually once or twice during my search my computer
freezes up and the only solution is to reboot and start the search over".

One student, having done research on the Internet itself, began to understand the inherent problems with a system as large as the Internet. He states:

This information that I have gathered regarding the incredible increase in the amount of information and first time users has definitely affected my experience using the Internet. It has helped me understand better why there are so many pauses, delays, and even sudden crashes.

Connected to the time issue is the problem of accuracy and usefulness for information. The Internet Critique assignment was given primarily to sensitize students to the amount of incorrect information found on the Internet. As one student put it, "the Internet could be considered a mixture of the Wall Street Journal with the National Enquirer". Another student, studying Greece, relayed this story:

I visited another site to print a poem, allegedly in Greek, for my Greek informant to translate. She looked at the characters on the page and mentioned a few languages she is vaguely familiar with, but confirmed that it was not Greek.

Students can refine their overall research skills by testing Internet information accuracy. One student demonstrated her thoroughness when she wrote:

Unlike the previous site that was maintained and updated by many people, this site is maintained only by one man, David Gatewood. The site contains no documentation as to who provides access to it or to its copyright date. It only has a disclaimer that says that all opinions and errors are his alone.

Of less concern, but still stealing research time, are the sites that are too specific to be of much use. One student researching Denmark listed the "Danish Meat Research Institute" as the least useful site.

Issues of ethics and hidden agendas were pointed out by my both the instructor and the students. While preparing the initial Internet
instructions, the instructor found that Lonely Planet, for all its usefulness as an introductory assignment, covers only one country, South Africa, out of all the countries in the African continent. Students became aware of presentational biases from the sites attracting tourist, as well as others. One student wrote:

The problem with searching for information about Barbados on the web is that Barbados is a tourism haven and so much of the information on the Internet is aimed at tourists. Many give little or no information on the culture, history, or people.

Another student became of aware that tourism is not the only biased point-of-view presented.

I felt that the information I gathered from this site was more on target than the Tourist site, which made the country sound like a paradise; and the Peace Corps site, which made it sound like the country was ready to self-destruct at any moment. As with all things, one must consider the source and their motives for portraying Guatemala as they did.

Another stated, "many site creators' are trying to self you something, and caution must prevail". In this case, what can be seen as a negative aspect of the Internet, turns out to be a positive tool for teaching critical thinking skills. Having students evaluate what they read, and pushing them towards questions of bias and point-of-view, became an additional benefit of using the Internet as a research tool.

The students also became aware of the timeliness of information, an issue not quite as pertinent with traditional print media. I found that students demanded more recent information and considered pages only a month or two old to be outdated. One student wrote:

There are many things that make this site one of the better ones. To begin with it is updated twice a week. This lets the surfer know that the information that they are reading is as current as possible.

What seems most captivating about the Internet information is its ability to provide insight into the flavor and style of a culture. One
student wrote, "not only did the site give examples and pictures of the areas or objects, but also gave written reports about what exactly was in the picture." Another student wrote:

I was intrigued by the words that described the country. I was excited when I read of some of their festivals, but when I saw the pictures available on this page, I was taken in by it all. I thought that maybe the picture just came from a really good day, so I asked my informant about it. When she said yes it really was that beautiful, I was sold on this page.

One student independently found pen-pals from Japan who answered questions her informant could not. She wrote:

This one is so much fun to visit I really recommend it to everyone who is studying about the Japan culture. I have learned so much from my people and their lives, interests, and hobbies. You can write as often as you want, sometimes it takes a little longer for them to reply-depending on the person. Other than that this site is an excellent form of communication and a great resource on Japan.

Clearly not all the reaction to Internet research is negative. In fact, balancing the notion that time is a common compliant for most any research, the overall benefits of Internet research are evident. Most students agree that the information found on the Internet is a unique and helpful addition to intercultural research. One student wrote, "I have really enjoyed searching the Internet sites for my topic as well as finding other interesting places to visit." The value and scope of Internet research becomes apparent as students explore all their options. One student remarked:

After using the World Wide Web I realize how useful the system is and I will be using it more often for all of my projects. I hope to become more familiar with the system every time I use it so that I could use it even after graduation.

6. Conclusion

Overall, both authors find the challenges of using the Internet in the Intercultural classroom well worth it. Through implementation of
keypal projects, discussion groups, and Internet research options, both instructors are expanding their students' intercultural understandings and broadening the scope of interaction via computer-mediated technology.

Hopefully, future intercultural courses using computer technology can adjust and accommodate the problems of students' time, computer access, computer literacy, and interpersonal ethics. The technological world is constantly expanding and our cultural distance ever decreasing. It is crucial that educators address both aspects in their teaching of intercultural communication. Students must be aware of the many implications and the major impact computer technology has in the world community today.

References


