

# Teaching Culture and Communication with Online Media

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## INTRODUCTION

As international online access grows, students are increasingly participating in a global community. Cultural groups, however, can have different perspectives on how to communicate online. For this reason, it is important that today's students learn how to address cultural communication expectations when interacting in cyberspace. This paper presents activities and resources instructors can use to familiarize students with the international nature of online discourse.

## BACKGROUND

While Internet use remains somewhat restricted to Western cultures, international online access is increasing with amazing speed. In fact, one recent statistic indicates the number of global Internet users grew from 563 million to 580 million in the last half of 2002 alone (Nielsen NetRatings, 2003).

In industrialized nations, Internet access and use is expanding at an impressive pace. According to one report, nearly 466 Swedes, 685 Brits, and 1,800 Germans open a new online brokerage account every day (Going for brokers, 2000). Additionally, some 60% of German adults, 54% of adults in the United Kingdom, and 43% of adults in France are now online (Measuring worldwide Net usage, 2004). In Japan, over 50% of the adult population are online, and the total number of Japanese Internet users increased by some 13.49 million in 2002 (AsiaBiz Tech, 2003).

The most astounding international growth, however, has been taking place in developing nations. In India, for example, government policies to increase online access have allowed the nation to become a leading location for software programming and information technology production (Kripalani & Engardio, 2003; When India wires up, 2000). Moreover, the number of Internet connections in India is projected to grow by as

much as 11-fold in the next 4 years (Pastore, 2004). In China, similar kinds of policies have allowed the number of Internet users to grow from 2.1 million in 1999 to nearly 60 million by the end of 2002, and the number of digital subscriber line (DSL) connections in China is also growing rapidly (Greenspan, 2003; Section IV survey results, 2003; Wired China, 2000).

In other regions, such as Africa, the United Nations and private companies have undertaken initiatives to increase online access across the continent (Kalia, 2001; Tapping in to Africa, 2000). These factors are perhaps the reason for which Africa's number of dial-up Internet connections has grown by some 20% in the past 2 years (Reuters, 2002). At the same time, Global Crossings Ltd. has completed a project that uses fiber optics to give, "multinational companies the ability to communicate with Latin America as efficiently as with any other region" (Tying Latin America together, 2001, p. 9). This development, combined with the world's lowest Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) costs, could lead to a rapid growth in Latin America's Internet usage in the future (11 trends to watch in 2004, 2004). Additionally, the number of individuals going online in Eastern Europe is expected to climb from 17% to 27% by 2006—a trend that could increase Internet-based outsourcing activities that are already expanding in this region (IDC Research, 2003; The new geography of the IT industry, 2003).

Increased access, however, does not necessarily mean increased acceptance or use of ideas. Rather, differing expectations can affect cross-cultural exchanges of information. Edward T. Hall (1981, 1983), for example, has noted cultural groups can have very different expectations of how one should behave in the same setting or context. Similarly, Geert Hofstede's (1997) research indicates that varying cultural expectations related to concepts such as status and the way in which persons identify and view themselves (e.g., as individuals or as part of a larger social group) can affect the ways in which individuals present and in-

interpret information. Additionally, researchers in visual communication and interface design have commented on how cultural expectations related to visual displays (e.g., image use, layout, and design) can differ markedly along cultural lines (del Galdo, 1996; Horton, 1993, 1994; Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998). For these reasons, differences in cultural communication expectations can inadvertently result in miscommunication or even offense in both conventional and online exchanges (Ma, 1996; St. Amant, 2004; Ulijn & Campbell, 1999).

As a result of these factors, a new kind of objective needs to be addressed in today's educational system. That objective is developing student understanding of how to communicate effectively with individuals from other cultures—especially via online media. To achieve this end, instructors can use a variety of activities involving Web-based resources. The purpose of this article is to overview such resources and activities and thus provide readers with a reference or a guide for helping students develop a competence in culture and online communication.

The resources and activities discussed in this article were selected based on their successful use in a variety of graduate and undergraduate classes taught at four different universities (the University of Minnesota, Mercer University, James Madison University, and Texas Tech University). Success, in this instance, was based on three key factors related to education.

1. Students were able to display a level of cultural communication competence they did not have before engaging in such activities. (This competence was assessed via a series of pre- and post-activity questions designed to evaluate student understanding of culture and communication issues.)
2. Students, themselves, claimed they greatly enjoyed the activity, that they had learned a great deal from the activity, and that they felt they could incorporate what they learned into future professional and personal experiences.
3. These activities were easily and successfully integrated into a range of courses as diverse as rhetorical theory, legal writing, online publications, and research methods.

Based on these factors, the author believes the following resources and activities can be used to develop student competence in culture and communication in

relation to a wide range of courses, disciplines, and levels (e.g., graduate and undergraduate).

## **MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE**

One way to help students develop a competence in culture and communication is to have them compare communication pieces from their own culture to those designed for audiences from another culture. In the past, such comparisons remained restricted to whatever international print materials an instructor could find. The World Wide Web has drastically changed this situation. Today, online media allow individuals to access materials or persons from almost every country on earth. Instructors now need to devise Web-based activities that can heighten student awareness of culture and communication expectations. The following activities can help instructors achieve this goal.

### **Language and Perspectives**

Developing a competence in culture and communication requires individuals to be familiar with opinions and ideas presented by members of other cultural groups. Language factors, however, can often hinder the review of such materials, for students might sometimes lack the linguistic proficiency needed to review materials written in a language other than their native tongue. As a result, these students are often cut off from important cultural perspectives that have been presented in other languages. Yet such perspectives are often essential to understanding the attitudes and behaviors of other cultural groups. Fortunately, online translation technologies can help individuals overcome some of these linguistic limitations.

The SYSTRAN Web site, located at <http://systran-soft.com>, is a free computer translation program that converts both passages of text and entire Web sites from one language into another. Before using this resource, individuals need to understand that the use of automated translation programs—often referred to as machine translation—is not perfect. Machine translation can make a variety of mistakes when translating items such as idioms or words with multiple meanings. For this reason, instructors should introduce the use of machine translation with an exercise that reveals the limitations of these systems. Such an exercise

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