

# Chapter VIII

## Researching Online

### Intercultural Dialog in Business: Using Established Methods to Create New Tools

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#### ABSTRACT

*Within a single business day, technical communicators may be challenged to work with colleagues located in a variety of nations. In such interactions, they use several kinds of communication technologies and must constantly adjust in order to effectively communicate with colleagues from other cultures. This is the realm of online intercultural dialog (OID), or online textual conversation between interlocutors from different cultures. Preparing individuals to work effectively within such contexts, however, is no easy task. This chapter will discuss the importance of doing research on such situations, present a methodology for gathering evidence based on widely accepted practices in technical communication, and show how the results of the research can be applied to business and academic practices worldwide.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Within a single business day, technical communicators may be challenged to work with colleagues in the UK, France, Germany, India, Canada, New Zealand, the U.S., and Australia. They may use many types of technology as they work with these colleagues from all over the world, and the use of online interaction technology is increasing. Technical communicators find that they must adjust in

order to effectively communicate with colleagues from other cultures, and they must do so within the parameters of advanced technology. While they can easily go to a Web site, take a seminar, or read one of hundreds of texts for intercultural face-to-face tips, how does the technology itself affect the intercultural communication? Much research has been done into the rhetoric of face-to-face communication and into intercultural communication, but little has been done at the

intersection of online and intercultural, particularly regarding dialogic communication.

Online intercultural dialog (OID) is online textual conversation between interlocutors of different cultures which can take place synchronously or asynchronously; this type of interaction supports much of the business communication that takes place globally. Research is needed that helps us better understand these online intercultural dialogs. Do interlocutors of different cultures perceive online communication differently in virtual office contexts? Where do misunderstandings most often occur? What causes breakdowns? Ulijn's (1996) research indicates that people continue to screen the effectiveness of communication based on the norms of native culture. Business people have long been prepared for the constantly evolving etiquette of communicating interculturally in face-to-face situations, but how should business people be prepared for the "netiquette" of communicating interculturally online?

In order to better prepare people for global online communication, evidence is needed which can guide effective training. This chapter will discuss the importance of doing such research, present a methodology for gathering evidence based on widely accepted practices in technical communication, and show how the results of the research can be applied to business and academic practices worldwide. Research using these methods will most importantly seek to discover how specific characteristics of online dialog affect intercultural understanding in the virtual offices which OIDs support.

## **DEFINING ONLINE INTERCULTURAL DIALOG**

In his work, St.Amant has foregrounded the need to study this type of communication. The definition of online intercultural dialog (OID) is largely based on St.Amant's (2004) definition of intercultural online interactions as:

*... direct online contact between individuals from different cultures. This interaction can be immediate/synchronous—such as an online chat—or it can be time delayed/asynchronous—such as an e-mail. The key factor, however, is that individuals are interacting directly with one another in a two-way/back and forth/give and take communication relationship.* (pp. 321-322)

This definition and label can be further refined by identifying the communication as text based. For example, real-time video connections would present a different context altogether. On the other hand, while OIDs are text based, visual rhetoric (e.g., emoticons and the arrangement of the text) is an intrinsic part of the message. Because "dialog" is more specific to conducting conversation and exchanging words than "interaction," "online intercultural dialog" more specifically identifies this type of communication.

Studying online intercultural dialog presents a unique challenge—particularly studying this type of communication in business settings. The greatest part of intercultural communication research has been done regarding face-to-face communication, and there is nothing to indicate that once taken online, the characteristics of intercultural communication remain the same. While one can probably assume that participants in OIDs will seek to create a context in which they can communicate and will call upon familiar face-to-face cues as a starting point, these cues vary with culture, and we do not know how they have evolved online. For example, ethos plays a significant role in face-to-face and online communication. "[I]t is only through ethos that other presentation factors become effective" (St.Amant, 2004, p. 318). St.Amant further identifies two levels of credibility: attention and acceptance. A communication must be credible both in order to draw consideration in the first place and at a deeper level in order to be accepted. However, ethos conditions are neither random nor uniform—they are context dependent. In particular, ethos con-

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