Chapter 32

Computer Mediated Cross–Cultural Communication:
Creating Cultural Exchange through Articulated Studies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a case of Internet-mediated collaboration between writing classes in the U.S. and in Oman. In the chapter, the authors examine the challenges they experiences including differences in time, culture, academic preparation, language skills, and technological capabilities and literacies. The authors also discuss how such challenges let do their rethinking pedagogical practices and uses of technology and through the structure of institutional affiliation agreements.

INTRODUCTION

Before the development of web-based learning technologies, cross-cultural academic exchanges in higher education were severely constrained by time and resources. For example, the typical international exchange – the semester study abroad – would send students across the globe to learn while immersed in a different culture. These exchanges could take a single semester or even two and it could encompass sixteen to thirty-two weeks of regular semester study or involve a four to ten week summer session. Such experiences, however, can be quite expensive, and for some students – especially self-supporting students and students with families of their own – participation in such programs can be difficult if not impossible. Some students simply cannot afford to pay the tuition associated with these study abroad programs, and because of ever shrinking budgets at colleges and universities, financial aid is not always available

to help them cover such costs. Other students cannot afford to take the time off and sacrifice the income they might make from work, and still others cannot spend that much time away from their responsibilities and dependents at home. Yet, the value of providing access for students to other cultures, especially through structured, reflective learning experiences, to improve cultural sensitivity and meaningful global citizenship is great and certainly worth the effort (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Boehm & Aniola-Jedrzejek, 2006; Pedersen, 2010). This chapter examines how educational institutions can use online media to provide students with viable and cost- and time-effective options for engaging with individuals in other cultures in a way that provides for meaningful educational experiences.

A CONTEXT FOR CONSIDERATION

Like other institutions, the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) in the U.S. and the Modern College of Business and Science (MCBS) in Oman, have been experiencing rising budget cuts, and these cuts have threatened opportunities for cultural exchanges. As a result, we – an UMSL English professor and an MCBS Dean and Writing Professor – looked for a collaborative solution. We wanted to find a way to make cultural exchanges less expensive and more accessible. Within this context, an online writing class in which students could gain first-hand experience interacting with people from another culture seemed quite obvious to us. Cross-cultural communication in educational settings, however, was not one of our specialties. Thus, we had limited knowledge of its literature. We did, however, have a great deal of experience with writing instruction, and one of us had experience in online education in writing classes. For these reasons, we decided to plunge ahead with a plan to collaborate on something that would be interesting and beneficial for our students in the U.S. and Oman, as well as provide them with an

inexpensive and convenient option to engage with individuals from other cultures.

Traditional semester study abroad formats are prescribed in part by the distance between institutions and the related travel time, expense, and convenience associated with traveling to a different land. Because of these factors, a U.S. student studying an academic subject in Italy might as well stay in Italy for an entire semester and take advantage of cultural experiences outside the classroom because. Otherwise, it would be too expensive, too time-consuming, and too inconvenient to send the student abroad for only a week here and/or a week there. If, however, the constraint of distance and its related costs were removed, other possibilities for different cross-cultural experiences could open up.

Within this context, online learning technologies and practices offer faculty opportunities to create learning experiences that can take place in the traditional formats of a semester or an academic year – or within a *fraction* of a semester, such as within a few weeks or days, or at several times at strategic points during a semester. The costs associated with such experiences, moreover, could be minimal. An online option means that students would not have to engage each other on a continuous 24/7 basis, but could instead interact at select times. Such interactions could be synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the learning strategies needed to produce the desired learning outcomes. These options mean that students who have full-time jobs or have dependents could meaningfully experience other cultures and still earn their livings and pick up their children from school.

Granted, such situations are not necessarily perfect. Online cultural exchanges cannot replicate face-to-face study abroad experiences where total immersion in the culture and place provides unique thickness and depth. Computer-mediated educational experiences can, however, be rich and valuable in their own ways (Rivera & Rice, 2002; Mentzer, Cryan, Teclehaimanot, 2007; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). In fact, according

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