

You've got mail!

Using email technology to enhance intercultural communication learning

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Abstract

As organizations become increasingly globalized and workforces increasingly culturally diverse, the use of "global virtual teams" is becoming more and more common. To be prepared to work in such a team, students need to develop skills in both intercultural communication and the use of modern computer technologies. This paper reports on a project that involved intercultural communication students in the U.S.A. and New Zealand corresponding through email. The aim was to enhance their intercultural communication learning with an experience of actually crossing cultural borders and of handling a popular computer technology to communicate in a virtual environment. Results and implications of the study are discussed.

Key words: global virtual teams, email correspondence, intercultural communication project, experiential learning

Recent advances in information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, have meant that geographical boundaries are becoming irrelevant. They no longer are barriers to communication the way they were even a few decades ago. Today, as Jandt (2001:493) comments, "offices on two continents can communicate as if they were on the same street." Facilities such as email, teleconferencing, instant messaging, and so on, enable people to do business and commerce without having to be presented physically. They work together in "virtual teams"—teams that "[conduct their] work almost entirely through electronic technology" (Grosse 2002:22). Virtual teams have become an "integral part of many organizations because of an increase in corporate restructuring, competition, and globalization" (Roebuck, Brock, & Moodie 2004:359). They mark "the new corporate reality—a centralized company with a decentralized employee base" and function despite members being separated by distance, multiple time zones, and sometimes differing national cultures (Alexander 2000:55). When virtual teams are internationally distributed, culturally diverse, and geographically dispersed, they become "global virtual teams" (Shachaf 2005:46).

As organizations become increasingly globalized and workforces increasingly multicultural (Driver 2003; Guirdham 1999), the use of global virtual teams is increasing (Gibbs 2001; Grosse 2002; Kaiser, Tullar, & McKowen 2000). As educators, we need to prepare our students for such work environments (Grosse 2002:22). However, "learning how to handle the technology and dealing with different cultures can pose the biggest challenges" (Grosse 2002:22-23). The project described in this article gave our students an opportunity to experience some of these challenges first-hand. The paper illustrates how a mediated collaborative assignment can help students acquire experience and skills both in intercultural communication and in computer-mediated communication.

To help our students "become adept at distanced interaction...and collaboration with dispersed team members" (Comeauz & Nixon 2000:34), an American colleague and I collaborated on a project that involved students of two intercultural communication classes, one in New Zealand and one in the U.S.A., corresponding through the use of email technology. The aim of the exercise was to provide students with experiential learning to complement their theoretical, classroom-based learning. Experiential learning has been documented as greatly beneficial to students. This is particularly true in the case of intercultural communication classes (e.g., Cheney 2001; Eblen, Mills, & Britton 2004). According to Cheney

(2001:91), "experiential methods are ideal for intercultural communication precisely because *culture is experienced*" (emphasis in the original).

The exercise was designed to provide experiential learning in two ways. First, it would enable students to actually cross cultural borders and put theory they had learnt in class into practice. While theory learning is valuable, real-life experience would afford the students opportunities to see the complexities of intercultural communication, to connect what they learn in class to what happens in the real world, and to question their own beliefs and assumptions when confronted with behavior and practices that may not fit their pre-existing ideas. Second, the exercise would allow students to operate in a "virtual team" and experience the trials and tribulations of using modern technology to communicate with people half way across the world to accomplish a common goal.

In this paper, I will first review some literature on the pedagogic use of technology. This will be followed by the description of the project. Then, I will present and discuss the findings, including student evaluations and major learning points that emerged from the project. Finally, I will outline the implications for intercultural communication teaching and learning and for future research.

COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY

Computer technology has become an integral part of life for a great number of people, both at home and at work. It is expected that "by 2010, 70 percent of the U.S. population will spend 10 times longer per day interacting virtually" (Emelo & Francis 2002:17). In the educational context, instructors in varied disciplines are quick to take advantage of the various technologies available to them. This is because computer-mediated technologies can "reach larger segments of their classes, stimulate discussions, create simulations, and strengthen their relationships with students" (Cohen 1994:31) and enable them to "transform a classroom...into a vast new educational space" (Cohen 1994:33).

Incorporating technology in teaching has been found to encourage student interaction and involvement (Absalom & Marden 2004; Boles 1999; Campbell 2004). Absalom and Marden (2004:421), for example, found that having their students engage in email exchanges "encourages the most reticent students to participate." Boles required student groups to use email to discuss and prepare group assignments as well as to contact the lecturer and found that email improved significantly both student-student and student-lecturer interaction. Campbell used a bulletin board as a tool to integrate international students, usually quiet in class, by bringing them out of their shells and empowering them to participate in group discussion.

Computer technology also has a great capacity to enhance collaborative learning (e.g., Curtis & Lawson 1999; Eastman & Swift 2002; Li 2002). Collaboration "is the most important and basic form of human interaction, and the skills of collaborating successfully are the most important skills anyone needs to master" (Johnson & Johnson 1989, cited in Li 2002:504). Furthermore, "collaborative learning promotes higher achievement as well as personal and social development" (Li 2002:504). It is, therefore, becoming more common for instructors to design assignments and exercises that require students to work in a group with other students to complete a specific task. Many such assignments and exercises incorporate computer technologies, which have been found to be conducive to collaboration.

Curtis and Lawson (1999), for example, studied students' textual interactions through email messages and computer conferencing and found substantial evidence of collaboration. Likewise, Li (2002), in a study of interactivity based on 413 electronic messages generated by students in a computer-mediated communication project, found that students actively participated in collaborative learning. Eastman and Swift (2002) used electronic discussion boards and chat rooms to enhance their students' collaborative learning and increase group members' accountability.

It is clear from the literature reviewed thus far that the impact of computer technologies on teaching and learning goes beyond the classroom walls. As Cohen (1994:31), who used email and Internet protocols to augment business communication courses, states, "using computer-mediated technologies, instructors can develop activities outside the classroom to motivate and inform students." Tools such as email, chat rooms, computer conferencing, and so on, "offer contemporary students and faculty truly extraordinary potential for re-designing and expanding the learning environment" (Bazzoni 2000:101). Computer-mediated communication provides a framework for teaching and learning from a distance.

With its capability to transcend geographical boundaries, computer technology has a huge potential for intercultural communication education in that it can connect students in different countries and enable them to cross cultural borders without leaving their own homes. This presents an ideal opportunity for students to learn intercultural communication experientially, in a way that simulates the situation they might find themselves in in the future workforce. There are several examples of the application of technology linking students in globally diverse geographical locations in projects that involve learning collaboratively through sharing information or solving problems together.

The School Connectivity Project ("Students online" 2004), for instance, connected high school students in the U.S.A. and those in the Balkans. A student in that project reported that the experience made her "more aware of how she viewed other people" and another said that the project "is cool because it's widening our views of people so we aren't so narrow-minded" ("Students online" 2004:7). The Friends and Flags Project in Israel combined language instruction with technology to provide ninth-graders with "a meaningful social, cultural, and personal learning experience" (Friends and flags 2003:10). The original project, in which Israeli students actively applied their English reading and writing skills by communicating with students in 5 other countries through the Internet, has expanded to involve students and teachers in 45 countries.

Ma (1996) conducted a project where East Asian and North American university students engaged in communication using synchronous relay chat. Kaiser, Tullar, and McKowen (1999) incorporated Internet-based meetings in a joint class project where students in two American locations and one German location viewed digitized videos and participated in an electronic meeting leading to a group consensus. Hertel (2003) conducted a study to promote cultural learning in which American and Mexican students corresponded through email for a semester. Eblen, Mills, and Britton (2004) used email as the medium for students in a New Zealand university to interact with students in an American university and learn about each other's culture and intercultural communication theories. Elerick (n.d.) had American students and students in Thailand and Singapore participate in Internet-supported virtual exchanges. Zhu, Gareis, Bazzoni, and Rolland (2005) used computer-mediated communication to connect New Zealand students with those in the U.S.A. Teng (2005) describes a cross-cultural project that college students in Taiwan and the U.S.A. engaged in to gain intercultural communication skills and, for the Taiwanese students, to improve their English proficiency and achieve more confidence in communication. These studies have a common theme of creating opportunities for students to cross cultural bridges and develop intercultural communication competence. The project described in this article is another that capitalized on computer technology's capacity to connect globally dispersed students to enhance their learning.

THE PROJECT

In this section the project—participants, procedures, evaluation, and analysis—is described in detail.

Participants

A total of 73 communication students participated in the project, 40 in the U.S.A. and 33 in New Zealand. Out of the 73, 15 American and 10 New Zealand students were international students. Those in the American class came from Pakistan, India, Nepal, Japan, Vietnam, Germany, and Syria, and those in the New Zealand class came from China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, Sweden, and the Solomon Islands. The length of time most of these students had been in their host countries was 1-3 years. Three New Zealand students were part-Maori (Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand).

American participants were 2nd-year students in their Spring semester whereas New Zealand participants were 4th-year students in their Fall semester. Both classes were intercultural communication classes.

Procedures

Once the ethical approval was granted by both universities, the first step was to provide students with the overview of the exercise. To ensure that students from both countries have a shared understanding of the task involved, they were given a common set of assignment description and requirements, with slight variations—such as in the word limit for the report and in the grading system—to accommodate the different levels the students were at (i.e., 2nd- vs. 4th-year students).

The next step was to connect the students of the two classes. Once the list of students in each class was finalized, students were randomly assigned a partner from the other country. Because of the difference in class size, some students from the New Zealand class were partnered with two students from the American class. New Zealand students were then asked to begin the project by contacting their partners by email. The email technology was chosen as it "provides students with an excellent opportunity for real, authentic communication" (Vinagre 2005:371). It "encourages collaborative efforts," "infuses a feeling of team spirit," and "is the key to the effective utilization of the Internet" (Cohen, 1994:82). As well, it is "one of the most commonly used channels for communication among dispersed heterogeneous team members" (DeSantis, Wright, & Jung 2001, cited in Shachaf 2005:50) and is the most attractive of communication channel choices for virtual teams (Grosse 2002). It is estimated that virtual teams use email for 75-80 percent of their communication (Grosse 2002). Furthermore, an email exchange is a student-centered activity, as students must play an active role in the learning process (Lea 1997, cited in Hertel 2003). Email is also the medium that all students in both classes had access to.

Students then corresponded for five weeks. During this period, they were expected to work towards building trust and forming a relationship with the email partner, to find information about the partner's culture, and to analyze case studies together. They were advised to spend the first few email exchanges engaging in "small talk" to get to know each other on a personal level (Roebuck et al. 2004) before getting into the task-based part of the exercise. This period would also help them to "learn to appreciate and value their differences as well as the characteristics they share" — the first step in building trust and relationship (Brown & Thomson 2000:54). According to Roebuck et al. (2004), a relationship of trust is essential for the success of teams.

To help students in their quest for the partner's cultural background, they were given a list of 30 questions to use as a guide (see Appendix 1). Students were then given three intercultural communication case studies from which they and their partner were to select two to analyze (see Appendix 2). The case studies were vehicles for the discussion of concepts in intercultural communication that had been covered in class.

The two instructors corresponded with each other and monitored the exercise all through the 5-week period, checking the progress of the correspondence, making sure that students were on task, and addressing problems that occurred. They also held class discussions in which their respective students shared experiences and learning points and management issues arising from the exercise were raised.

Evaluation

At the conclusion of the project, students in both classes wrote a report, individually, in which they (1) described some aspects of the partner's culture, (2) discussed their analysis of the case studies, including convergences and divergences between the partners in ideas, approaches, and rationales, and (3) reflected on their experience, commented on and evaluated the project as a tool for intercultural communication learning, and provided suggestions for fine tuning the assignment for possible future use. The last part of the report was aimed to help the instructors assess the merit of the project. The assignment was worth 25% of the students' total course assessment.

To ensure that students felt completely free to express their opinions about the project, we also administered an anonymous questionnaire survey at the end of the project. The questionnaire contained 28 questions relating to the students' experience of the various aspects of the exercise and the overall evaluation of the project.

Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were collated and percentages calculated. Responses to open questions in the survey and data from student reports were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify themes based on three criteria: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence refers to the same thread of meaning, in different words, coming up in different parts of the text being analyzed. Repetition refers to the same word, phrase, or sentence, representing an idea or concept, occurring in multiple places. Forcefulness refers to the emphasis given to a particular idea to show its importance or the intensity of the speaker/writer's feeling.

Thematic analysis is helpful in discovering not only themes that emerge within each participant's data but also themes that are common across participants (Zorn & Ruccio, 1998).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I will present and discuss the students' perception of their learning experience in general, their view of the exercise as a tool for intercultural communication learning, some main learning points that emerged, and issues relating to the use of email as the medium of communication.

Learning Experience in General

The majority of students who completed the questionnaire (n=58) found the exercise interesting (82%), worthwhile (79%), and fun (74%). They enjoyed the project (80%) and were glad that they participated in it (83%). The questionnaire results were substantiated by comments in their reports, some of which are given below:

Overall, this was a very enjoyable project. Emailing a person from another culture made for a much more interesting and enjoyable assignment than the majority of assignments we are required to do [in other courses].

The assignment was nothing like I had ever done before. It was unusual and therefore really interesting to do.

Overall, I found this project to be very interesting and a valuable experience...it was more interesting than a typical research paper.

Because it was so much fun, I am sure I have learnt more than I would have otherwise and am very pleased.

The majority of students reported that they did learn a lot from participating in the project. The extremely positive experience is in line with the view of students in other exchange projects documented in the literature (e.g., Eblen, Mills, & Britton 2004; Hertel 2003; Zhu et al. 2005).

It is worth noting that one of the problems that are normally associated with this type of project is that the relationship between the partners is, in a sense, a forced one, or at least a relationship of circumstance. That is, the students do not initiate the correspondence spontaneously themselves but are required to communicate as part of a course assignment. The danger is that they might go through the exercise mechanically and not engage personally. In this project, however, the students' comments provide strong evidence that for the majority of students, this was not the case. Students did seem to connect with their partners on a personal level. For example, 81 percent of the students who completed the questionnaire survey said that it was good to know a student in another country, and almost half (46%) even indicated that they would continue emailing each other after the assignment had been completed. Comments in the open-ended section of the questionnaire support these responses. Asked what they liked about the project, many cited gaining a friend, having a chance to talk to or get to know someone from another part of the world, learning a culture from a real person (as opposed to from books or movies), and sharing someone else's life and experience. These sentiments were further reinforced by similar remarks in their written reports:

I am glad I have made my first friend in New Zealand.

I actually found the project quite exciting, and really enjoyed forming a friendship with X.

Because of this project, not only have I gained valuable knowledge, I have also gained a friend.

Some of the more positive aspects of this assignment were that we were able to meet new people and make new friends.

I enjoyed [the assignment] very much and am due to keep communicating with X in the future.

It is clear, therefore, that rather than treating it merely as a purely academic exercise, students were enthusiastic about the correspondence and felt personally connected with their email partners. Personal involvement is an important element in producing the best learning (Legge, Wilkens, & Prosser 1999).

A Tool for Intercultural Communication Learning

The majority of students surveyed (81%) believed that the project was a good way to learn intercultural communication. In particular, they liked its hands-on, experiential approach (82%). The following comment was typical: "I enjoyed getting first-hand intercultural experience, rather than merely learning theory from textbooks." Students also felt that the exercise complemented their book learning by providing extra information, real-life examples, and opportunities to apply theories, as the following comments from students' reports suggest:

[The assignment] has taught me many interesting things that are not covered in regular textbooks... It has given depth to the textbooks and lectures by providing real-life examples.

I found this assignment to be both an interesting and effective way of learning about the theory and concepts behind intercultural communication...It has been one of the most creative and enjoyable ways of learning about theory I have encountered.

Making the theory "practical" certainly aided my understanding of key concepts and I am very grateful for this.

I think that it was a valuable experience being able to link the theories we have studied with real-life examples, thus enhancing our learning.

It enabled me to develop my knowledge of the concepts and theories that have been discussed in class and in Jandt [the textbook], and learn to apply them to everyday situations in which intercultural communication occurs.

In terms of exploring the culture of another person, students felt that the email correspondence was "an excellent tool" and more effective than traditional methods:

I found this project to be very interesting and learnt a lot about the American culture. I feel that I probably learnt a lot more from this assignment than I could have from reading a book or doing research on the American culture.

It was very informative and great to learn about another culture besides reading from a book or watching a video.

Seventy percent of the students believed that the assignment should be used in future classes. One student said:

I think that this project was an important lesson that everyone should experience. Rather than just reading about a culture or country in the book, why not interact with someone from that country? An experience like this is more memorable than what I ever read in a textbook.

Another summed up his feeling about the intercultural communication experience more succinctly: "It is an experience that everyone should have at least once in their college career."

Some Intercultural Communication Learning Points

Students believed that the exercise was "a good opportunity to practice being effective intercultural communicators." In this section, I elaborate on some specific aspects of learning experience that will be helpful for students towards developing their intercultural communication competence.

Cultural Awareness

One of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence is cultural awareness—knowledge of the culture of the person one is communicating with (Chen & Starosta 1998; Gudykunst & Kim 2003). Such awareness includes knowledge of social values, customs, norms and systems (Chen & Starosta 1998). Overall, two-thirds of the students said that they knew more about the partner's culture at the conclusion of the project than when they started. A student said: "I found this exercise with X rewarding as it decreased my own ignorance of other individuals' cultures and religions."

However, more American students than New Zealand felt that way (86% vs 47%). The difference is not surprising, as it is likely that New Zealand students knew more about American culture to start with than American students knew about New Zealand culture. It is reasonable to assume that with the ubiquity of American television programs, movies, news, consumer products, and so on, globally, New Zealand students would already be quite familiar with the American culture. On the other hand, New Zealand, a small island country in the Pacific Ocean, would be comparatively less well known in the U.S.A. Consequently, New Zealand students who partnered with international students in the American class felt that they learnt more about their partners' cultures than those who partnered with American students did. However, although some New Zealand students may have felt somewhat short-changed in this respect, a positive outcome is that it led to a lively class discussion of American culture as represented by the media and popular culture, which covered issues such as stereotypes, cultural imperialism, and culture and commercialism.

The email project also sparked enthusiasm about culture learning in students who would otherwise have had no interest. A student declared: "I am intrigued and I am very interested to explore Syrian history very soon." Another admitted: "Being able to hear from a different culture has made me look at the world with more of an interest and curiosity." Students seemed motivated to seek knowledge about other cultures and become more culturally aware, an important step towards becoming better intercultural communicators (Gudykunst & Kim 2003).

Although both New Zealand and the U.S.A. are categorized as individualist societies, many student dyads were mixed (individualist-collectivist), as many students were from collectivist cultural backgrounds. A part-Maori student informed her partner at the outset: "I am part-Maori; but I have been brought up with a European culture. However, if you have any questions about the Maori culture, I will be able to fill you in." Another student, also part-Maori, warned her American partner: "My cultural perceptions will be somewhat different to other 'mainstream' New Zealand perceptions, being an infusion of European New Zealand culture as well as my Maori heritage." It is understandable as well that international students would feel more comfortable talking about their own cultures. Consequently, the learning that took place was not focused only on individualist, "mainstream" (European) American or New Zealand culture. A student, for example, said; "I learnt a great deal about India and collectivist cultures." Similarly, another student stated: "Through my experience in communicating with X [from Syria], I have come to know much more about collectivist cultures. I have found it intriguing how much cultures can care for each other as a people and as human beings."

Examination of the email transcripts and reports also reveals that discussions by mixed dyads tended to follow a somewhat different pattern from those by dyads of mainstream cultures. In terms of finding out about each other's culture, the mixed dyads tended to discuss in more depth topics such as religion (especially Islam, Confucian, and Shinto), role of women, arranged marriages, important ceremonies and festivities, and relationship between older and younger members of society. Another topic that students in these dyads found interesting to discuss in depth was the acculturation experience of the non-mainstream partner. Dyads consisting only of members from mainstream cultures, on the other hand, tended to focus their in-depth discussion more on the concepts of patriotism; freedom(s); independence; and direct, open, and honest style of communication. In terms of analyzing case studies, mixed dyads tended to be able to discuss concepts such as face and face saving, harmony, group vs. individuals, and power distance in more depth than the other dyads.

It therefore appears that the composition of the dyad, in terms of individualism/collectivism, had a somewhat differential effect on students' learning. Class discussions, however, gave students opportunities to "compare notes" and share experiences so that students could maximize their learning.

Self-Awareness, Ethnocentrism, and Empathy

Not only did students learn about their partner's culture through the correspondence, they reported that they also learnt a lot about their own culture. As one student put it, "I learnt a lot about the American culture through communicating with X, but I learnt even more about my own culture as I started to analyze issues I previously would not have as I saw no need to do so."

It was clear from their comments that the students did not expect the development of this "self-awareness" (Chen & Starosta 1998) to be one of the benefits of the exercise, and they were pleasantly surprised by it. It seems that the exercise did encourage the students to scrutinize their own beliefs and values. That is, they engaged in "distancing"—a process whereby learners, through interacting with and answering questions from foreign partners, reflect on and become more aware of their own culture (O'Dowd 2003). Students in O'Dowd's (2003) Spanish-English email exchange project reported undergoing a similar process. The self-awareness outcome is also supported by Teng's (2005) study of email discussion project between Taiwanese and American students. Understanding of intercultural communication *should* include reflection on one's own culture (Cheney 2001). According to Chen and Starosta (1998), the resultant self-awareness—the understanding of ourselves as cultural beings—is an important component of being an effective intercultural communicator.

Students' self-awareness included the recognition of their own ethnocentrism. In discussing case studies with their partners, students saw first-hand ethnocentrism at work and came to understand how it could be a barrier to intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta 1998; Gudykunst & Kim 2003; Jandt 2001). Hearing the partner's different views, however, enabled students to look at issues from alternative perspectives and to critically re-evaluate their own ideas. As students engaged in their communication, they increasingly became willing to confront their ethnocentrism and analyze its origin and influence. One student commented: "Personally, email corresponding made me feel more sensitive to the other person's point of view, because I automatically tried to compare my opinion with her and to find reasons why there were differences." Awareness of alternative perspectives is one component of "being mindful," which is one of the skills necessary to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural encounters (Gudykunst & Kim 2003).

The heightened self-knowledge and the awareness of their own ethnocentrism came hand in hand with an increased open-mindedness. A student, for example, stated: "Not only have I learnt a tremendous amount about New Zealand, and intercultural communication, but also I feel that I have become a more open and understanding person." Moreover, it seems that through self-awareness, the ability to understand alternative points of view, and open-mindedness, students developed empathy with their partners, as the following comment shows: "I have learnt to appreciate the culture of others and especially the difficulty people from different cultures face when moving to new countries." Empathy is one of the skills necessary to be a good intercultural communicator (Chen & Starosta 1998; Gudykunst & Kim 2003). It is "a central characteristic of competent and effective intercultural communication" (Broom 1991, cited in Samorvar & Porter 2001:286) and "the bedrock of intercultural communication" (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper, & Blake 1999:106). It is also one of the eight categories of communication behavior in the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) developed by Koster and Olebe (cited in Lustig & Koster 2003).

Assumptions and Stereotypes

Assumptions and stereotypes were topics that kept recurring in discussions and students' reports. New Zealand participants, in particular, were aware that they had formed certain stereotypes of Americans, as the following comment by a New Zealand student to her American partner shows: "I watch too much television, much of it American, so I've probably got loads of awful stereotypes about what American people are like." The fact that both countries are categorised as individualist also led students to assume that the cultures would be similar. During the correspondence, however, students found some of their stereotypes and the assumption of similarity—two of the barriers to effective intercultural communication identified by scholars (e.g., Barna 1997; Jandt 2001)—challenged. A student provided a typical comment: "I had assumed Americans to be much the same as us but subtle differences between our cultures became much more apparent as the exercise progressed."

Students, however, were willing to confront their preconceived notions. The student who provided the first quote in the preceding paragraph told her American email partner, "I hope that through our

correspondence I can get a real idea of what it's all about over there." Another said in her report:

Rather than view this as a negative thing, I tried to use these stereotypes to gain further insight into the culture. I was constantly conscious of the fact that I had many preconceived notions, and throughout communication I attempted to confirm or refute these ideas.

Another stated: "X and I 'talked' for a long time about how we each fit into the stereotypical view of an American or a New Zealander."

The ability to recognize their stereotypes and assumptions and the willingness to question and revise them indicate students' "openness to new information" (Langer 1989, cited in Gudykunst & Kim 2003). Such openness is another component of "being mindful," a skill necessary in managing anxiety and uncertainty in an intercultural encounter and in developing intercultural competence (Gudykunst & Kim 2003).

Self-Disclosure

Another topic that struck students as especially enlightening and significant is self-disclosure. New Zealand students in particular were "blown away", to use a student's description, by both the breadth and the depth of disclosure by their mainstream-American partners. When the project started, the New Zealand class had touched briefly, and generally, on the topic of self-disclosure—"the human tendency to reveal personal information about oneself and to explain one's inner experiences and private thoughts" (Lustig & Koester 2003:284). Students had learnt about the differences in disclosure between, for example, high-context and low-context cultures and collectivist and individualist cultures. They had read that different cultures within the same broad grouping (e.g., high- and low-context) may differ in their patterns of disclosure (Chen & Starosta 1998; Gudykunst & Kim 1992; Lustig & Koester 2003; Samovar & Porter 2001). Although students of both countries were not told to watch out for this particular aspect of their relationship with the partners, what they experienced was very valuable in terms of providing them with concrete, first-hand examples of what would otherwise have been just another theoretical construct. It was also another topic for lively in-class discussion.

A level of self-disclosure is necessary in forming relationship and developing trust. While both New Zealand and American students did disclose aspects of themselves to each other in their emails, they nevertheless observed the difference between the two groups. The New Zealand students were struck by the amount of disclosure their American partners were willing to make, both in terms of the depth of disclosure (degree of "personalness") and the breadth (range of topics of disclosure), especially early in the correspondence. They were surprised at how free their American partners felt to self-disclose, including information that they considered to be rather "intimate" or "personal." The American students, on the other hand, felt that their New Zealand partners were somewhat "reserved," willing to disclose only comparatively "general" or "basic" information about themselves.

The observation supports claims made in the literature that Americans, particularly European Americans, tend to self-disclose more than people in many other cultures, especially in initial encounters (Gudykunst & Kim 1992; Lustig & Koester 2003) and that "the preferred interpersonal style in the United States is one in which large portions of information about the self are made available to others" (Barnlund 1975, cited in Gudykunst & Kim 1992:200-201). The project showed the students that although the U.S.A. and New Zealand are both categorized as individualist cultures, members of the two cultures do vary in their self-disclosure patterns.

The majority of New Zealanders are descendents of British settlers. The fact that, generally, they still identify strongly with British culture may help explain the difference. According to Jourard's (1961, cited in Lustig & Koester 2003) finding, European Americans disclose more than the British. An American student, however, felt that the openness shown by the American students was due to the medium used: "Email communication has something of a fascinating 'one-tends-to-divulge' quality that is absent in all other forms of communication I have encountered." Another made the following note: "In the future, if I am ever in a similar situation I will be sure to take self-disclosure into consideration."

Use of the E-mail Medium

One of the objectives of the project was for students to explore the use of email as a medium of communication for global virtual teams. Overall, students found the email technology to both enhance and hinder communication with their partners. The obvious advantage the students agreed on was that email overcame the tyranny of distance. They acknowledged that without this technology, the project would not have been possible in the first place. In their reports, students marveled at the fact that they could communicate with someone on the other side of the world for five weeks in a way that would not be possible with traditional means such as letters or the telephone. Another advantage of email pointed out by students was the convenience of being able to send messages any time, day or night, whether or not the person at the other end was there. The communicators did not have to communicate in real time, which could be difficult when they were in drastically different time zones.

As Warf, Vincent, and Purcell (1999:141), in their article about teams of geography students from the USA, the United Kingdom, and Ireland collaborating on a joint project solely via the World Wide Web, point out, "all technologies have inherent limits that can inhibit the interactions of groups despite benign intentions at the outset of a project." Students in our project also experienced limiting aspects of the technology used.

The asynchronous nature of email, together with time differences, posed some problems for the students. The questionnaire survey shows that only half of the students who responded stated that they replied promptly to their partners' emails, and only 42 percent said that their partners replied promptly. Both instructors also got emails from some of their students complaining about the tardiness of the replies. In addition, because writing is a time-consuming activity, some students tended to put off replying, resulting in an even longer waiting time for the corresponding partners. The problem was compounded further by the fact that some students did not have a computer at home and so were not able to check their emails everyday. The inability to discuss issues in real time or clarify messages in a timely fashion also led to problems such as cross signals, misunderstandings, delay in the question-answer sequence, and what a student called "selective communication" — neglecting to address certain details or to answer some questions asked in an email. These problems added to the students' frustration.

The time lag means that compared with face-to-face interaction, responses are not immediate, and this can be a source of frustration. While it is convenient to be able to communicate at a time that suited the communicator and not to be tied to the presence or otherwise of the other person, the lack of immediacy can make people feel no urgency to reply to messages sent to them. In our exercise, some students were frustrated at having to wait, sometimes for days, for the replies from their partners. The feeling is similar to that experienced by students in Nicol, Minty, and Sinclair's (2003:274) study, who reported that "the time lag meant that you had to make more of an effort to respond."

In addition to the time factor, a major drawback of the email technology as perceived by students was the lack of non-verbal cues. While the role of non-verbal communication is often taken for granted in our usual, everyday life, participating in this project served to bring the topic to the fore for the students, who perceived the lack of non-verbal cues as a shortcoming of the technology and a barrier to communication. Many found the inability to see the partners and their body language and physical attributes restrictive:

Non-verbal communication is essential to effectively get to know someone, and this cannot be achieved through the Internet.

Not being face to face also meant you can't prompt the partner to answer your question.

Without elements such as the non-verbal parts of culture, a thorough understanding is unattainable.

Students also pointed out that the lack of non-verbal aspects of communication meant that interpretation of messages might be less accurate than it might have been had it been face to face. A student said: "The only difficulty I feel was not being able to know what X really meant to portray; part of the message is missing when the only communication is through text."

Overall, about a quarter of the students said that corresponding with their partners through email was frustrating.

The feeling that their communication was not as effective as it could have been is in line with Bruning's (1992, cited in Flaherty, Pearce, & Rubin 1998:253) assertion that "CMC [computer-mediated communication] can make communication more difficult." Students also agreed with Curtis and Lawson (1999:7) that "text-only interactions can lead to misunderstandings due to the limited information capacity of the medium compared with the relative richness of the vocal and non-verbal interactions of face-to-face learning environment." The frustration the students experienced supports Cheny's (2001) claim that lack of face-to-face interaction is one of three challenges for virtual teams.

The non-immediacy of responses and the lack of non-verbal cues in a communication situation mean that "social presence" — "the feeling that other actors are jointly involved in communicative interaction" (Short, Williams, & Christie 1976, cited in Papacharissi & Rubin 2000) is likely to be limited. According to Short et al., this drawback is inherent in the email medium. Comments by students in our project suggest that they did experience this limited social presence during their correspondence, although some did use electronic paralanguage such as emoticons to modify their interactions and create higher social presence (Garramone, Harris, & Anderson, cited in Papacharissi & Rubin 2000). With the exercise, students confirmed Flaherty, Pearce, and Rubin's (1998) conclusion that Internet communication such as communication through email is not a functional alternative of face-to-face communication.

Realizing the constraints of the email medium, some students suggested that future projects could be complemented by other media. For example, telephone communication could be used in exceptional circumstances such as when there had been at least three days without communication from the partner or when one party continually failed to answer a question. Or, communication through an instant message program could be made in some correspondence sessions to highlight the importance of real-time information and its advantages over the time delay of email.

Despite the drawbacks, students felt that the email experience overall was positive, as the following comments show:

The email aspect of the assignment was very good. I think most students are fairly proficient at using email, but the area of intercultural communication via email is a new subject that should be studied more.

The use of email as a means of communication was a new experience that made me fully aware of the links to [other aspects of] the communication process we take for granted, such as the non-verbal indications of emotions.

LIMITATIONS

Although the project was overall a success, as discussed above, a few limitations existed. First, the project was based on only a limited timeframe. As a number of students pointed out, an opportunity to correspond longer may have affected some of the outcomes reported. They believed that they would have learnt more than they did about the partner's culture and done a better job of analyzing the cases. Some students suggested that reducing the number of case studies to be analyzed to only one might help alleviate the problem.

Second, the knowledge of the other culture that resulted from the exercise was based on only one (or, in a few cases, two) individual, which would restrict its usefulness. Had the students corresponded with multiple partners (of the same culture) instead of just one, they may have had a slightly different picture of the culture, one that might better reflect the reality. The students, however, were well aware of the limitation and had no illusions about either the representativeness or the generalizability of the information they gained from their solo partner.

Finally, in relation to the logistics of the email correspondence, we (the instructors) did not have in place from the beginning a detailed-enough procedure to guide and regulate students' interaction. This resulted in issues such as slow responses and insufficient information. In hindsight, an explicit and tightly structured procedure for discourse, addressing such things as the timeliness and the volume of emails, that students were required to follow would have been helpful in ensuring productive on-line interchanges (Warren & Rada 1998).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY AND RESEARCH

The project has implications for the teaching and learning of intercultural communication. The overwhelmingly positive evaluation indicates that this type of project has a lot of merit and supports claims by other researchers regarding benefits of using email for cross-cultural communication (e.g., Eblen et al. 2004; O'Dowd 2003; Teng 2005; Zhu et al. 2005). The students themselves recommended that the exercise be kept as part of the syllabus so that future students could benefit from the enhanced learning as they did. Actually knowing and interacting with someone from another culture, albeit in cyberspace, complements students' textbook learning and enriches their intercultural experience.

The on-line environment of the project illustrates how information and communication technologies can facilitate intercultural communication and contributes to student understanding of how such technologies have come to play a significant role in the process of globalization. On the other hand, as we have seen, the virtual experience also highlights the difficulties and limitations relating to the use of these technologies. The exercise, therefore, fulfils the dual aim of getting students to cross cultural borders and giving them practical experience in using computer-mediated communication to work in a virtual team. In the words of a student, "this has been a worthy exercise in teaching the advantages and limitations of using an electronic medium to communicate with people from another culture. It has made me aware of what is required for effective communication."

There are also implications for research. Our project made use of only one medium—email. Future research could look at the possibility of incorporating other computer-mediated technologies as well, especially synchronous ones such as chat rooms. Students in our project suggested that real-time communication channels be available when necessary. Similarly, students in Curtis and Lawson's (1999) project demonstrated a need to also use synchronous communication. A project incorporating both synchronic and asynchronous technologies can yield interesting and useful information about communication in our increasingly digital world.

As mentioned earlier, our short timeframe was one of the limitations of the project. According to Walther (1992), as computer-mediated communication develops over time, communicators adapt the way they "talk" and display their texts to enhance immediacy and to manage relationships. The short timeframe of the project meant that it was not possible for us to look at these issues. Further research could explore such "adaptation" with studies with longer timeframes.

Finally, this project relied on students' self-reports as to increase in knowledge of the partner's culture or improvement in intercultural communication learning and did not include objective assessment of these gains. Future research could incorporate measures to provide evidence to support students' claims.

CONCLUSION

The article has described how two classes of intercultural communication students, on the opposite side of the world, were brought together digitally with the dual aim of augmenting their theoretical, classroom-based learning with practical experience of actually crossing cultural borders and of providing them with an experience of working in a virtual team using the email technology to communicate.

The overall success of the project indicates that there is a place for this type of exercise in the syllabus. The project makes the class more interesting and the learning exciting and fun, as students can relate concepts and theories learnt in lectures to their experience. Furthermore, the exercise clearly has relevance to the "real world" of work in the technology age. The hands-on, experiential approach of the project means students can find out for themselves the trials and tribulations of global teams as well as the wonders and problems of modern communication technologies, an experience that will help prepare them for the future in the world that is increasingly intercultural and digital.

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APPENDIX 1

List of 30 questions

1. How do people greet one another? How do they leave one another? What does any variation from the usual greeting or leave-taking signify?
2. What are the special privileges of age and sex?
3. If you are invited to dinner, should you arrive early, on time, or late? If late, how late?
4. How do people organise their daily activities? What is the normal meal and rest schedule?
5. What are the favourite leisure and recreational activities of adults? Of teenagers?
6. On what occasions would you present (or accept) gifts from people in the country? What kind of gifts would you exchange?
7. Do some flowers have a particular significance?
8. Who are the prominent people in the political, athletic, religious, and artistic affairs of your country?
9. Who are the country's national heroes and heroines?
10. What are the most common forms of marriage ceremonies and celebrations?
11. What is the typical process for someone finding a marriage partner?
12. What is the attitude toward gambling?
13. What is the attitude toward drinking?
14. Is education free? Compulsory?
15. In schools, are children segregated by race? Caste? Class? Sex?
16. What kinds of schools are considered best?
17. How are children disciplined at school?

18. How are children disciplined at home?
19. How does this society observe children's coming of age?
20. Are children usually present at social occasions? At ceremonial occasions? If they are not present, how are they cared for in the absence of their parents?
21. What is the status of women?
22. What is the predominant religion? Is it a state religion? Have you read any of its writings?
23. What are the most important religious observances and ceremonies? How do people participate in them?
24. What are the important holidays and how is each observed?
25. Who has the right of way in traffic?
26. Is military training compulsory?
27. What other languages are spoken besides the dominant language? What are the social and political implications of language?
28. If, as a customer, you touch or handle merchandise for sale, will the storekeeper think you are knowledgeable, inconsiderate, within your rights, or completely outside your rights? Other?
29. What kinds of options do foreigners have in choosing a place to live?
30. How do mass media operate?

(Courtesy of Dr. Albert Linderman)

APPENDIX 2

Case studies for discussion

Case Study 1

You are the tutor for a business communication class who have to write group reports. In one group of four, which we'll call Group A, three members have complained to you that the fourth did not do his share. You know that in another group of four Chinese students, which we'll call Group B, one had done *nothing*, but when you asked the others about it, they all insisted it was a joint report. Use any examples you have experienced or heard about to support your views.

1. What should you do about group A?
2. What should you do about Group B?
3. Should group work be set at all? Why and why not?
4. Could you give different members of one group different marks for the same piece of work? Why or why not?

(Written by Dr. Margaret McLaren)

Case Study 2

Star Consumer Electronics needs a new systems analyst. The CEO, Mr Bill Duncan, has heard of Mei-Yong Noh, a young Korean woman, and thinks she has exactly the skills and qualifications wanted. He has written asking her to give his board of directors a presentation explaining her strengths and describing the distinctive contribution she has made in her current employment in Moon Corporation.

He has advised her to do her utmost to sell herself because the other applicant is Frederick Kim who was her teacher in her final high-school year five years ago.

Mei-Yong Noh has had to give presentations before during her university education but she has been brought up to be modest, to avoid self-praise, and to work as a team member. Above all, she has learnt to revere her teachers.

1. If Mei-Yong Noh asked you for advice, what would you say to her?
2. What reason might a person have for not wanting to compete with a former teacher?

(Written by Dr. Margaret McLaren)

Case Study 3

Mrs Jane Simpson enjoyed her job as departmental secretary in a New Zealand university. She enjoyed trying to be helpful to students as they worked their way through departmental and university regulations on their way toward their degrees. One day, a student from India entered the departmental office and began demanding attention to his various problems with his visa, his low course grades, and his thesis adviser. He never used words such as "please" and "thank you", talked in a tone of voice reminiscent of a superior talking to subordinates, and gave orders to Mrs Simpson. She counted slowly to ten, but her anger did not subside. She went to see the department chairperson to see if someone else could work with this student in the future.

How would you help Mrs Simpson sort out her feelings about this incident?

[Adapted from Brislin, R.W., Cushner, K., Cherrie, C., & Yong, M. (1986). *Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide* (pp. 202-203). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage]

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