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Intercultural Challenges in Networked Learning: Hard Technologies Meet Soft Skills

by Mackie Chase, Leah Macfadyen, Kenneth Reeder and Jörg Roche

Abstract

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This paper gives an account of themes that emerged from a preliminary analysis of a large corpus of electronic communications in an online, mediated course for intercultural learners. The goals were to test assumptions that electronic communication is internationally standardized, to identify any problematic aspects of such communications, and to construct a framework for the analysis of electronic communications using constructs from intercultural communications theory. We found that cyberspace itself has a culture(s), and is not culture-free. Cultural gaps can exist between individuals, as well as between individuals and the dominant cyberculture, increasing the chances of miscommunication. The lack of elements inherent in face-to-face communication further problematizes intercultural communications online by limiting opportunities to give and save face, and to intuit meaning from non-verbal cues. We conclude that electronic communication across cultures presents distinctive challenges, as well as opportunities to course planners.

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Introduction & Background

"There is now more negotiation to be held between the particular institution's processes and discourses on the one hand and, on the other, the uniqueness of the student's individual cultural and linguistic related histories" [1].

Despite rapid advances in information and communications technology (ICT) approaches to networked learning, relatively little is known about actual experience in the field using these technologies to facilitate communications between individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds. Rather, it is widely assumed that it suffices to deploy standardized technologies worldwide, and expect in turn that ways of communicating will become standardized for cohorts of culturally diverse learners and teachers participating in local, national or international programs. One of the major pitfalls in networked learning programs for culturally diverse participant communities is miscommunication. Expanding our understanding of the process of intercultural communication in a virtual learning

environment is a necessary step in designing exemplary networked learning in international/intercultural education.

The term "culture" has multiple meanings in different contexts. Often used to refer to the literature, art, music and architecture of a society, in the present study "culture" refers to the commonly shared system of general beliefs, values, and underlying assumptions held by a group of people. "Culture is always a collective phenomenon ... it is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another ... it is learned, not inherited" (Hofstede, 1991).

This paper describes Phase One of a longitudinal, large scale analysis of intercultural communications factors in the ICT elements of international, networked learning courses run by a large Canadian university. Preliminary findings include:

- differing communication patterns and instances of miscommunication in online exchanges between culturally diverse learners and online facilitators;
- a preliminary account of self-reported cultural and values data about participants; and,
- a taxonomy of intercultural communication problems associated with ICT elements of networked learning, developed using ethnographic methods and informal discourse analysis.

Our overall goals are to test critically the assumption that electronic communication will proceed in a standardized manner for culturally diverse learners in networked environments, to identify any problematic aspects of such communications, and to provide a preliminary framework for the analysis of electronic communications by using constructs from intercultural communications theory.



Method

Since 1996, the UBC Centre for Intercultural Communication (CIC) - a unit within the Division of Continuing Studies of the University of British Columbia - has offered a program with modular courses each having a major online component, as part of a certificate program in the field of intercultural studies. The program arose from the interests of professionals in the field of international education who wanted to enhance their skills in the intercultural aspects of their work and requested a "Canadian" perspective as opposed to a "U.S." perspective of the field. Initial development of the program was supported by the University of British Columbia, Canadian Bureau of International Education, British Columbia Centre for International Education, and Commonwealth of Learning.

Course Features

- participatory, experiential workshops combined with facilitated distance learning;
- part-time format to meet the needs of working professionals;
- delivered in centres across Canada;
- one to two facilitators for the two-day face-to-face component of each course; and,
- online facilitators, in a ratio of one facilitator for every three or four participants.

Course participants post weekly assignments, and are required to respond with comments and discussion to postings by their colleagues in the cohort. Online facilitators, selected from the professional community in Canada and internationally, respond to each participant, while facilitators who have delivered the face-to-face portion of the course also mediate discussion of content online. The course moderator from CIC is responsible for introducing participants to the 'culture' of the online portion of each course. From 1996 to 1999 the course was conducted through an e-mail listserv. However, from 1999 onwards, participants and facilitators post messages on a Web-based bulletin board within the program's Web site. This allows for threading of discussions by topic. Online modules are preceded by a two-day full-time workshop in which participants meet and work intensively together with their colleagues and one to two instructors.

Classes vary in size but average between eight to ten participants, with diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, citizenship, professional training, educational background, experience in international and intercultural work, and age. There are usually more female than male

participants.

The program's first required module provides an experiential introduction to foundational thought in the field of intercultural studies. Assignments in this module involve identifying, researching and analysing intercultural encounters that the participants themselves have experienced. In addition, at the beginning of each course, participants are asked to post a 'self-introduction' contribution. A subsequent assignment asks participants to identify and examine some of their own cultural values, and to consider the origins of their personal and cultural values. Since 1996, the total communications of each course module offered in the certificate program - whether e-mail-based or Web-based - have been compiled and archived as text files. The archived text files for the set of courses therefore contain personal introductions written by each participant, personal explorations of cultural background by each participant, as well as extensive electronic exchanges between participants and facilitators, both formal and informal.

Selection and preparation of the corpus for analysis

Preliminary and informal discourse analyses of e-mail listserv technology and Web-based discussion groups indicated very similar processes and problems arising in the interactions. The ratio of participants to posted assignments and comments was similar and the comments concerning the overall reaction to the course by participants were similar.

Apart from producing a richer corpus (424 postings on the Web vs. 146 postings on the e-mail listserv by fewer participants), the main difference revealed by our preliminary analyses was that the discussion threads were far easier to follow in the Web format and therefore the analysis of interactions and related comments created by each posted assignment or comment could be conducted in greater depth. For this reason we have focussed on the Web-based example for our analysis in this study.

All messages were arranged in order of date sent, and superficially reformatted (extraneous headings reduced, etc.) for ease of analysis. However, within each electronic message all the original formatting, spelling, use of alternate characters, emoticons etc. were left as written by the course participant. Names were changed and individually identifying information about participants was removed. The corpus for this analysis consisted of 424 postings across six course assignments by 23 students, five online facilitators and two course moderators in two major Canadian cities. The postings were sent over a period of 12 weeks in late 1999.

Analyses of the prepared corpus for the course module involved the following steps:

1. Discourse analysis and ethnographic analysis techniques which allowed us to identify major themes and clusters of communications problems, and to produce an analytic taxonomy from those clusters.
2. Further analysis of selected instances of intercultural communications difficulty in the light of concepts from Intercultural Communication theory.



Findings

Cultural heritage, values and influences revealed by participants

As noted earlier, the first two assignments asked participants to post a "self-introduction" and subsequently identify their own personal and cultural values as well as the sources of those values. A sample of these findings appears in [Table 1](#). Details are listed in the order in which they were disclosed by participants over time. An indication of gender (which was always apparent from given name and/or pronoun use) appears for each participant. This information provided us with useful background for our analysis of problematic areas or themes that emerged from the electronic exchanges throughout the course.

Table 1: A Sample of Self-described Cultural Heritage, Values and Influences of Course Participants

Key: M, male; F, female; BC, British Columbia; B.A., Bachelor of Arts degree; B.Sc., Bachelor of Science degree; M.A., Masters of Arts degree.

Pseudonym/Role	Self-described Cultural Heritage, Influences and Values
Asher Pinchas (M) <i>Online Facilitator</i>	Middle Eastern, Canadian university instructor, M.A.
Batsheva Carmela (F) <i>Participant</i>	Employed in Canadian university B.A.; Canadian Anglophone; Values: family, knowledge/learning, independence, creativity, idealism, risk-taking, humour, equality, achievement, patience, versatility.
Chava Pazit (F) <i>Online Facilitator</i>	M.A., born in Southern Europe; immigrant in Canada; teacher/consultant; collectivist cultural background.
Dana Ashira (F) <i>Participant</i>	Nurse, lived and worked in Canada, U.S. and overseas.
Dana Nirit (F) <i>Participant</i>	B.Sc., Mediation training; Manager and Ombudsman for large Canadian company.
Efrat Kalanit (F) <i>Participant</i>	Ph.D., born in Germany; immigrant in Canada (21 yrs.); Cultural influences: German collective post-war guilt; uncertainty avoidance; ascription-oriented; traditional gender roles.
Gabriella Hadas (F) <i>Participant</i>	Canadian; works for a natural gas pipeline company; international development project experience.
Kishi Galatia (F) <i>Workshop Facilitator & Online Moderator</i>	M.Ed; Canadian university administrator; Canadian; Languages: English/French; lived/worked across Canada, international experience.
Levana Tal (F) <i>Participant</i>	Canadian; B.Sc.; works in resource management with projects engaging first nations and non-natives.
Maya Zohar (F) <i>Participant</i>	B.A; 11 yrs. living/studying/working in Asia; teacher, editor, translator; Anglo-Saxon heritage; youngest child; Values: "peace, order & good government", compassion, generosity, idealism/altruism & service to others, honesty, politeness, integrity, fairness.
Michal Chilion (F) <i>Online Facilitator</i>	M.A.; Canadian, born and schooled in Africa, university teacher in U.S.
Naomi Adina (F) <i>Online Facilitator</i>	M.A.; Canadian university, teacher, counsellor; U.K.-born to South Asian family, raised and educated U.K. and Canada.
Raz Dafna (F) <i>Participant</i>	BC First Nations; small business manager; graduate of first nations school.
Sara Nitzan (F) <i>Participant</i>	M.A.; born/raised in South Asia, adult immigrant in Canada; Values: predominance of family, individualist, respect for authority; low tolerance for ambiguity; assertiveness and nurturing in men and women.

Shua Bartholomew (F) <i>Workshop Facilitator & Online Moderator</i>	Canadian; Anglophone; consultant/educator; international experience; M.A.
Sivan Penina (M) <i>Online Facilitator</i>	Born in South Asia; educated in U.S.; graduate study in U.K.; teacher/researcher/journalist; Canadian provincial government position.
Vered Maayan (F) <i>Participant</i>	First generation Canadian; Chinese heritage; graduate degree; Values: family; respect for elders, avoidance of confrontation.

Themes emerging from online communications

We identified nine main themes in the content analysis of the corpus of postings - these are (somewhat overlapping) arenas in which we frequently observed miscommunications, or 'mismatches' between communicator expectations. These themes are summarized in [Table 2](#), and described in further detail below. Our major finding is the discovery of the creation of an online culture within the course, and we discuss this at greater length than other perhaps more predictable findings.

Table 2: Emerging Themes from a Sample of Online Intercultural Communication

Online Culture
There is an "online culture" or "cyberculture", and the certificate courses under study have a sub-culture all their own. We find evidence that the course culture reflects the values of its developers, that this culture is overtly maintained by guideline creation, and covertly maintained by facilitators and participants. Features of the observed cyberculture include 'etiquette', rules of formality/informality, flexibility, interaction style (including greetings/farewells, use of apology), expectations of response speed, and work ethic (tensions between relationship building communications and 'on-task' communications).
Format and Participation
Distinct communication pattern differences are apparent when comparing e-mail-based and Web-based exchanges. Success rate of some communicators may be inferred from the frequency with which they elicit responses from the group.
Face-to-Face versus Online Issues
Individual discomfort with the 'anonymity' of online discourse is represented by different commentary from individuals.
Identity Creation
Significant cultural differences become apparent in the ways in which participants write about their own identity in online postings. This includes the nature of their short introductions (content, length, style), the degree of 'self-revelation' they display. Other features of identity sub-cultures (age/generation, and gender) also emerge.
Technical Issues
Technical and formatting issues clearly influence effective communications in these online arenas. We observe correlations between frustrations or expertise with the technology and various cultural or sub-cultural themes (age, gender, professional culture). Expectations regarding the role of facilitators in resolving technical problems

culture). Expectations regarding the role of facilitators in resolving technical problems emerge, and are reflected in a variety of 'housekeeping' messages.

Participant Expectations

Participant expectations of the course, online facilitators/moderators and the medium vary, and may be connected to differing cultural expectations of educational environments.

Facilitator Expectations

Similarly, facilitators from different cultural backgrounds have varying expectations of participants, and express these expectations in various ways.

'Academic Discourse' versus 'Stories'

We observe communication differences that might be related to different participant experiences with academic discourse. In contrast, other participants and facilitators incorporate narrative and 'stories' to teach ideas or share experiences. There is variation in participant tolerance of critical debate.

Time

Explicit and implicit assumptions about 'time' and punctuality emerge, and cultural attitudes towards these become apparent from the ways in which participants and facilitators account (or not) for lateness.

We turn now to these themes and provide examples of each, along with some preliminary discussion of the significance of the theme in terms of our study's overall aim of characterizing the nature of intercultural communications in networked learning environments and the often problematic nature of this undertaking.

1. The Online 'Culture' of the Courses

Examples of creation/enforcement of CIS online culture include:

"Here are the guidelines we agreed on in Toronto to inform our workshop and on-line discussions: feel free to share thoughts and feelings openly. I'd like constructive feedback that will help me learn, not punitive. judge my idea, but not me ..." (Shua Bartholomew)

"Here are the guidelines that the Vancouver group came up with and agreed to during the weekend workshop

- Confidentiality.
- Respectful, Non-judgemental approach.
- We speak from our own experiences.
- We agree to disagree.
- Respect the learning opportunity.
- We continue the conversations, even when it's difficult for us. We accept the questions others ask us - asking questions is okay." (Kishi Galatia)

We found that there were a number of remarks about the "culture" of the course reiterated and built upon at the end of assignment #3. After this third assignment, several of the participants decreased their participation.

We observed instances of the flexibility of online culture including several examples of "style mirroring" by the course facilitators, who sometimes matched their style and tone to the person they were responding to. In addition, we found that facilitators sometimes communicated in startlingly different ways with participants from different cultural backgrounds:

"Hi Sharon,
I'm sitting at my computer looking out into a wet but thankfully NOT rainy

Saturday morning in my backyard. The grass and trees are still amazingly green and children's toys are piled up in one end of the yard ... this is evidence of my five year old son's belief that "my mom doesn't like mess" ... Looking forward to talking Monday Sharon.
Amities, Kishi"

"Hi Raz,

How are you doing? How is your family? Are your children surviving the winter colds? As I type, my son is watching television ... - what is it about Saturday morning cartoons? Do your kids watch them? My daughter is talking on the phone with a friend making plans ... What's it like in Mount curry today - is there snow? ... What do you think Raz? I'd like to hear what you think Raz. Please let me know.
Kishi"

2. Participation Frequency

The frequency of participants comments vary greatly as do the number of times each person is addressed in postings. Some are never responded to and some stimulate a rush of responses as well as the length and style of the responses. Because there appears to be a connection between cultural background (including gender) and frequency of comments, we hope to investigate such a relationship in the next phase of the study, together with an analysis of discourse structure of online participation as a function of cultural background.

3. Face-to-Face versus Online Issues

Included under this theme were preferences expressed for 'distance':

"... in a group I am not always the one to jump in with an opinion. I prefer to sit and think things through before saying anything. That's why I really like this online course. I have time to filter rash statements (I hope) and can read and cogitate slowly on what all of you have written. In a way, it takes us back to the days when letter-writing was the norm, and people had lots of time to reflect :>)" (Maya Zohar)

We also found expressions of unhappiness about lack of face-to-face contact:

"I am hoping that through our online interactions we can project enough of ourselves to feel comfortable to proceed with our discussions and reflections ..." (Asher Pinchas)

" - it didn't matter that we didn't meet the Toronto group, but I would have liked a photo to relate to" (Maya Zohar)

"Hi everyone, I'm not sure if I will be involved in the December course, but I live in Vancouver and would love to meet you face-to-face, especially after these last few weeks of discussion." (Naomi Adina)

4. Identity

Some differences between self-introduction statements that we found included the dimensions of style, quantity and content focus:

- formal versus chatty style
- brief versus lengthy postings
- very focussed on educational/professional role/achievements versus more focussed on culture, family

Participants who first (or only) describe their job in a "self-introduction" included:

"Here's a little bit about me so you can start to get to know me My job is" (Bathsheva Carmela)

"I am a critical care nurse and have worked in" (Dana Ashira)

"I live in and work in the international arm of a ... company." (Gabriella Hadas)

Several participants identified themselves first in relation to their cultural heritage:

"My name is Raz, and I'm a First Nations woman" (Raz Dafna)

5. Technical and Formatting Issues

">Hi everyone!> ... >>My formal bio is posted somewhere (list of facilitators, I > think" (Sivan Penina)

"I found it really hard to read assignments that weren't divided into paragraphs. My printer died and I have a hard time reading a run-on paragraph on screen" (Maya Zohar)

"I did find the long run-on paragraphs difficult to assimilate Must be old--eye strain comes easily these days I found the facilitators disinterest in helping us understand how to use the website to be discouraging." (Gabriella Hadas)

6. Participant Expectations

Examples of statements regarding participant expectations of the course included the following:

"The main reason I'm taking this course is to learn how to communicate more effectively with other people. The one thing I would like to take away from this course is a better understanding of other cultures, especially the white culture." (Raz Dafna)

" ...I want to have a more "scientific" basis for communication" (Dana Nirit)

7. Facilitator Expectations

Two questions arose in our consideration of this theme: What do facilitators expect from participants? And how do they express it? We observed that expectations were expressed both directly and indirectly. Expectations were expressed directly when a facilitator asks for more information, indicating that more is needed from the assignment. (We also found that the way of asking and the frequency of direct questions varied between facilitators.) On the other hand, Naomi used academic information as well as personal stories to express expectations.

8. "Academic Discourse" versus Use of Narrative/Stories

Examples of academic discourse included one student who structured her 'research plan' for assignment two with background, hypothesis and method explicitly identified. Others employed academic illustrations, theories, reading references, as well as formal structures with headings and paragraphs. There was assumption of common cultural and academic frames of reference:

"Aye and there's the rub." (Kishi Galatia)

Comments on the (Western) 'Academic' nature of the course included:

"By the time I was half-way through reading the third chapter I woke up because I dropped my highlighter on the floor ... I had to move to a noisy room to stay awake while finishing all the chapters. I was drowning in the boredom of theory after theory." (Raz Dafna)

"I also didn't read much about the human spirit Our environment does ensure distinct cultural behaviours, but how do our spirits differ? How are our

spirits similar? ... Western civilization has institutionalized human spirituality in various forms of religion ... Once you mention the human spirit it seems as though most people look at you in a weird way as though you still believe in Santa Claus." (Raz Dafna)

The role and use of narrative in the postings varied widely and included:

- narrative used as a case study to illustrate a point (Asher Pinchas)
- narrative which is very personal (Batsheva Carmela)
- personal description of immediate here and now family situation/ moment to create an opening into the topic (Kishi Galatia)
- feelings, reactions, emotions, finding commonalities (Shua Bartholomew)
- stream of consciousness
- one tight text with no breaks at all (Raz Dafna and Efrat Kalanit)

9. Time

Some participants occasionally complained about lack of punctuality of facilitators in responding to their assignments. Others commented on life versus homework commitments:

"Thought I would like to eat my turkey with a good conscience and do my homework first" (Efrat Kalanit)

Reasons were sometimes given for lateness, but in widely varying styles:

"Please note that I will be out of town from Nov. 19-25 so my next assignment will be late, as I'm not sure that I'll have internet access during that period of time." (Vered Maayan)

"My computer decided to take a rest, so it's away in the repair shop. I'm using a friend's computer to send this message. Dana and Batsheva, I can't wait to read your research results. I'll respond as soon as I get my computer back." (Asher Pinchas)

"I think this procrastination is part of the top of Hofstede's triangle (page 10, course notes) - the personality part, partly inherited from my Father (why not that calm cool organized mother!) and partly learned and practise through years of - putting of dealing with it? :>)" (Shua Bartholomew)

"Policing" of lateness by facilitator emerged in these postings as well:

"NUDGE NUDGE NUDGE to those who haven't posted!! Post those assignment 4's please, great day to sit in front of the computer and write." (Chava Pazit)

"I hate to be a heavy, but ... Assignment 5 is due this coming week and your assignment 4's are not in yet!!! This on-line course really works when postings come in on time and allow us all to get involved in the discussion." (Chava Pazit)

"Hi Tal, we haven't heard from you in a while (no assignment 3 and 4. Hope you are okay. Please let us know what's happening and hope you can re-join us soon." (Naomi Adina)

Discussion & Conclusion

Our preliminary survey of the data has highlighted some key areas of cultural value differences that had an impact upon successful online communication between learners from widely divergent cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds. Discordance between cultural values and expectations of individual communicators in these areas rendered networked learning problematic.

Most significant of these is the observation that

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- "Cyberspace" itself has a culture, and is not simply a neutral and value-free platform for exchange.

If we assume that any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it "brings forth a world" [2], and that the social organization of this world is rooted in the worlds which gave rise to it, then as Anderson noted [3], the Internet embodies the values of its creators: "speed, reach, openness, quick response". It was, at root, "a tool of engineers and scientists seeking quick and open access to others like themselves" [4]. Layered over the foundational but 'invisible' culture of the Internet, the culture of the online modular courses under study here is similarly the product of its creators: predominantly university-educated Canadians, who are Western English-speaking women. Within the course environment, cultural values that are overtly and covertly maintained speak to this culture.

- Cultural gaps sometimes exist between speakers and the dominant "cyberculture", as well as between individual speakers.

Individuals culturally 'at home' in the foundational scientific/technical culture of the Internet encounter others whose cultures vary widely, and whose culturally-defined communication styles do not 'match' the dominant communication patterns of cyberspace. In our corpus, this was exemplified by the rich mix of communication styles: academic versus informal, and on-task versus relationship-building.

- The greater the perception of cultural differences between the "speakers" online, the greater the incidents of miscommunication.

Gudykunst (1995) proposed that the greater the cultural gap between communicators, the greater the 'anxiety' on the part of communicators. As anxiety rises, the potential for miscommunication increases. In the environment of an online course, significant cultural 'gaps' can be the result of role differences, (facilitator or 'student'), seniority/experience, perceptions of academic ability, gender (Tannen, 1994), perceptions of time, professional status, expectations of an educational environment, or tolerance for criticism or debate. Differences in the degree of comfort with online 'self revelation' is apparent in the extreme range of styles of "self-introduction": from brief, formal and professionally-focussed, to casual and intimate. We suspect that the online environment may also limit the ways in which participants can utilize face-saving and face-giving strategies - vital for allowing participants from some cultural backgrounds to feel secure to participate fully in personal discussions. Miscalculation in face strategies increase anxiety and emphasize feelings of power differences (Kim, 1997). The impact of a 'cultural divide' on online communications is exemplified in our data by the interactions of First Nations participants and facilitators in this study. The number of postings by First Nations participants decreased sharply over the course, and facilitators used distinctly different discourse patterns with these participants.

- Attitudes towards person to person communication using new communications technologies vary greatly between cultures.

Relevant cultural dimensions which vary among participants and which will be examined in future analyses include: task vs. relationship focus (Laurent, 1983), attitudes toward authority, masculinity vs. femininity, group vs. individual focus (Hofstede, 1991), attitudes towards time, high vs. low context communication patterns (Hall, 1966) and universalism vs. particularism (Trompenaars, 1993). Elements of these cultural dimensions are evident in the discourse examples cited above.

- Characteristics of electronic genres, communication styles and routines, and viewing/listening practices differ between cultures.

In-person greeting rituals, viewing/listening practices and other patterns of communication vary between cultures (Kramsch and Anderson, 1999), and similar differences are evident in online communication patterns.

- Many communications technologies lack elements inherent in face-to-face communication.

Missing elements include: context perception, dynamic real-time repair mechanisms, a parallel visual channel, eye contact, gestural information, and in general the flexibility we normally expect to obtain or emerge between conversational partners. Unsurprisingly, participants express their unhappiness with the lack of these elements in their online communications: another factor creating anxiety on the part of communicators.

In summary, our preliminary work confirms the role of intercultural determinants in successfully establishing and maintaining electronically mediated communication, and offers

a preliminary framework for analysis of the use of communication technologies in networked learning contexts across cultural boundaries. We have identified and rendered problematic several central themes that emerged from an extensive corpus of Web-based communications. Further analysis will allow us to relate culture determinants of our communicator-participants to intercultural communications theory, to illuminate in more detail the underlying framework of online intercultural communications, and to develop tentative recommendations for maximizing successful intercultural communication online.



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Notes

1. Jones et al. in Goodfellow et. al., 2001, p. 81.
2. Escobar, 1994, p. 211.
3. Anderson, 1995, p. 13.
4. *Op.cit.*

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