MATCHES AND MISMATCHES IN INTERCULTURAL LEARNING: DESIGN AND FACILITATION OF AN ONLINE INTERCULTURAL COURSE

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Abstract: This paper explores communicative trends in an online, facilitated course for intercultural learners. We examine participation rates and communicative interactivity between culturally diverse learners, and find that participation rates differ by cultural grouping, by gender and by role, and that online interactions are dominated by facilitator-learner exchanges (rather than by peer-to-peer communications). Ongoing case study analysis will examine the ways that differences in facilitator practices, the use of story, identity construction, and facilitator/learner expectations conspire to facilitate or hinder interaction and participation in the online culture of this e-learning environment.
Keywords: intercultural, communication, online, participation, facilitation, interaction

Introduction & Background

"The social dimension influences the effectiveness of online learning…The preconditions of cyberculture usually involve the linguistic and communication norms of Anglo-American societies in which the aggressive, competitive individual is enshrined."

Wegerif (1998)

Intercultural communication is always a challenge, but even more so when it must happen in the absence of visual and oral cues or well-developed relationships. In computer-mediated courses, participants are involved in building learning communities. At the same time, culturally diverse individuals may have different ideas of how to best establish credibility, exchange information, motivate others, give and receive feedback, or evaluate information.

Recently, our research team has begun to explore the impact of cultural differences upon participation in a computer-mediated course offered by the University of British Columbia to a culturally diverse group of learners across Canada. The overall goal of the study is to test critically the widely held assumption that the use of standardised communications technology, implemented with competent professional pedagogy, will constitute sufficient conditions for successful communications and learning for culturally diverse cohorts participating in intercultural distance learning programs. (For the purposes of this study, we consider 'culture' to be a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in a symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1975). In this short paper, we ask the questions "Who 'speaks' in cyberspace?" and "Who continues online conversations?"

Our Approach to the Study

The course under study: An introductory course for a university certificate program in Intercultural Studies that was offered in a mixed mode consisting of two days of face to face meetings (delivered in parallel meetings held in Toronto and in Vancouver) followed by six weeks of facilitated online assignments and discussion using the discussion board tool of the WebCT course delivery platform.

The learners: The community of 24 learners granting permission to us to study their participation included 17 learners, and 7 course facilitators/moderators. There were 17 female and 7 male participants, aged 25 to 55 years, with educational backgrounds ranging from high school only, to college or university education. In the initial personal introductions posted online, participants used the following categories to identify their cultural heritages: Canadian, British Columbia First Nations (Aboriginal), Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, Southern European, German, African, South Asian, Italian, Chinese, and UK South Asian. Nine of the 24 participants were born and educated outside of Canada. We divided participants into three broad groups that we compared for purposes of descriptive analysis of participation (see Table 1). While the cultural diversity of this cohort does not allow it to be divided into easily identifiable ethnocultural groups, we feel that this grouping is relevant from the perspective of the learner's exposure to mainstream North American cultural values in early life and education.

The corpus and its analysis. Our data set consisted of printed transcripts of all 453 online contributions over the six weeks' facilitated online course component. Full details of the procedure used to prepare the corpus are provided in Chase et al. (2002). Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect confidentiality and to mask cultural membership prior to the analysis of the printed transcripts of the online contributions to the bulletin boards. After reading through the postings individually, the four investigators came together and exchanged observations relating to categories of postings, text, frequency, style, interactions, and patterns, with the aim of identifying themes that emerged in the data. Descriptive statistical techniques were applied to the corpus in order to identify patterns of participation by group.

Results

Who 'speaks'? Communicative contributions to an online course vary by group

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of total message postings by group, role in the course, and gender. In our study group, non-aboriginal Canadians (individuals born and educated in Canada, within the predominantly English-speaking Western Canadian culture) posted a significantly higher number of messages than, for example, aboriginal Canadian participants.

TABLE1. Total number of postings by group, gender and role

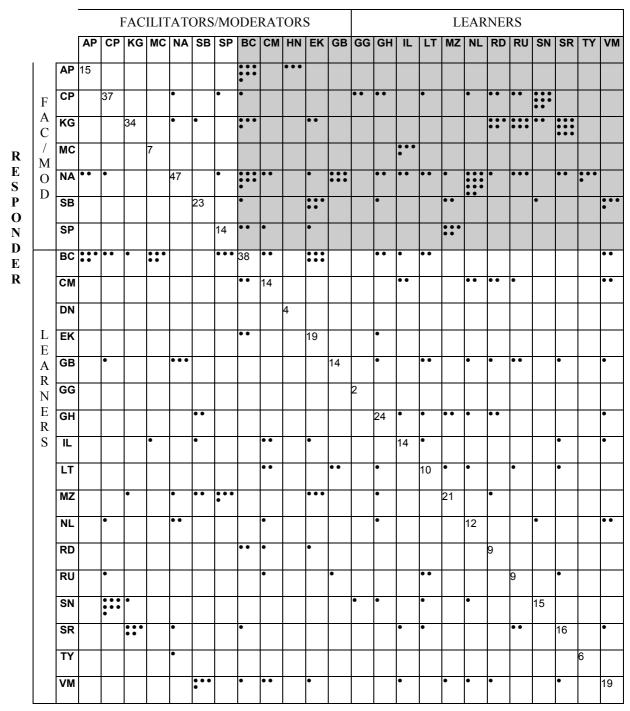| Group | Role | | | | | Group |
| | Learners | | Facilitators | | | |
(Gender)	M	F	M	F	Total	Mean
Aboriginal Canadians	12 (2)	9 (1)	n/a (0)	n/a (0)	21 (3)	7.0
Adult immigrants to Canada	27 (2)	61 (3)	28 (2)	106 (3)	222 (10)	22.2
Non-aboriginal Canadians	0 (1)	153 (8)	n/a (0)	57 (2)	210 (11)	19.1
Total	39 (5)	223 (12)	28 (2)	163 (5)	453 (24)	18.9

Total number of postings is indicated; number of individuals is indicated in parentheses.

The average number of postings made by aboriginal Canadians was disproportionately lower than that of either Canadian-born Canadians, or adult immigrants to Canada. Similarly, male participants posted significantly fewer messages than women did. On average, all individuals received about the same number of *responses* from about the same number of people (data not shown), when these sub-groupings are compared. This tells us that in spite of receiving the same number of postings from a similar array of people, certain subgroups of participants were more likely to interact (or re-post beyond the required minimum) than others. Put another way, we could argue that certain groups were more likely to continue an online conversation.

Another contrast of interest is between the proportion of responses in relation to the aboriginal Canadians' postings compared to proportions of responses to postings of all other groups in the sample. Only the aboriginal Canadian group gets more responses on average than they produced postings (data not shown). (This difference should be interpreted with caution given the smaller number of postings this group contributed to the course compared to those of the other two groups).

Who responds to whom? Communicator role influences communicative exchanges

We constructed an interaction matrix to help us detect patterns in postings of responses within the group, and to determine whether some participants were more likely than others to continue a communicative exchange (Fig. 1.). By reading down each column we can see how many participants *responded* to an individual, and who the responders were. By reading along each row, we can see how many different people an individual responded to (if any), and how often. In addition, by comparing the number of responses made by an individual to their total number of postings, conclusions can be drawn about the degree to which each individual simply posted messages, and the degree to which they responded to others. The frequency of interactions back and forward between two individuals can be assessed by comparing the mirror-image 'poster' and 'responder' scores.

MESSAGE POSTER

		AP	CP	KG	MC	NA	SB	SP	BC	CM	HN	EK	GB	GG	GH	IL	LT	MZ	NL	RD	RU	SN	SR	TY	VM
RESPONDER FAC/MOD	AP	15							••••••		•••														
	CP		37			•		•	•					••	••	•			•		••	••	•••••		
	KG			34		•	•		•••		••									••	••••	••	••••••		
	MC				7											••••									
	NA	••	•			47		•	•••••	••	•		•••		••	••	••	•	••••••••	•	•••		••	•••	
	SB						23		•			••			•				••		•				•••
	SP							14	••	•	•							•••							
RESPONDER LEARNERS	BC	•••••	••	•	•••			•••	38	••		••••••			••	•	••								••
	CM								••	14					••				••	••	•				••
	DN										4														
	EK								••			19			•										
	GB		•		•••								14		•		••		•	•	••	•			•
	GG													2											
	GH						••								24	•	•	••	•	••					•
	IL				•		•				••		•			14	•						•		•
	LT										••	••	•		•		10	•	•		•		•		
	MZ		•			•	••	••••			•••		•		•			21		•					
	NL		•			••					•		•		•				12				•		••
	RD								••	•	•									9					
	RU		•								•	•					••				9		•		
	SN		••••	•										•	•	•			•			15			
	SR			••••••		•			•						•	•					••		16		•
	TY					•																		6	
	VM						••••••		•	••	•				•			•	•	•			•		19

Legend: '•' represents a posted *response* message; individuals are identified by initials; numbers on the diagonal indicate total postings (initial messages + responses to others) made by each individual; 'participation status' differentiates between course facilitators/moderators (FM) and 'learners'.

FIGURE 1. *Response and interaction patterns between learners and facilitators.*

By sorting participants according to their course role – learner or facilitator/moderator – it is clear that by far the most frequent 'response' postings were from course facilitators/moderators to learners (shaded in grey). The next most frequent group of responses is from learners responding to facilitators/moderators. Least frequent were responses between learners. Two learners *never* responded to any of their peers, and several more responded less than five times to others throughout the 6-week period.

Discussion

Our preliminary study suggests that there are distinct differences in the degree to which culturally different learners participate in discussions in an online forum, both in the number of messages posted and in the pursuit of threaded communicative exchanges. In Chase et al. (2002), we described the differing ways in which cultural experiences, values and influences were revealed in the online postings of our study's participants. We constructed a taxonomy of nine major themes or clusters of communication difficulties encountered by our participants. Foremost in that taxonomy was the revelation that cyberspace itself came to constitute a cultural space in the course, so that cultural gaps could emerge not only between individuals but also between individuals and the dominant cyberculture. Analysis in progress suggests six ways in which social theory and research, and intercultural training theory, can help us explain the relations between socio-cultural factors and variations in online communications. In particular, we suggest that a given learner's culturally encoded "communicative style" (*Am I predisposed to participate in communicating*?) (Hymes, 1997), their culturally encoded response to course structure (*Is this an appropriate context in which to participate?*) (Philips, 1972), and their culturally-encoded expectations of communicative genre (*Is this an acceptable genre for me to employ?*) (Bakhtin, 1986; Halliday, 1978) combine to determine an individual's degree of communicative success in an online environment.

Moreover, we observe that in this online course environment that hopes to promote learner-learner interaction and create a community of learners, the bulk of communicative exchanges take place between one learner and one facilitator. Moreover, since it is the *assigned role* of the facilitators/moderators to respond to learners, we cannot assume that learners' initial communicative posting spontaneously inspired these responses. We suggest that this lack of congruence between course designer/facilitator's objectives and actual communication patterns may reflect the existence of mismatches between the cultural assumptions about effective communication held by designers and facilitators of online course discussions and those of the (diverse) adult learners. We are currently conducting case study analyses which will focus upon the role of story, construction of identity, and matching expectations between facilitator and learners in representative electronic exchanges.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our preliminary study suggests that there are many factors inherent in intercultural communication that can adversely affect the success of e-learning programmes.

Those factors are not limited to inter-technical features such as different power supplies, varying keyboards or non-matching plugs. They touch on the very essence of the way we conceptualise our world. What is learned culturally can place learners at considerable odds with the best plans and unexamined communicative assumptions of online distance course developers. In other words, even some of the most basic assumptions about electronically mediated communication and learning still have to be examined in the context of intercultural encounters.   Clearly, course design, facilitation and choice of communicative platform and tools impact participation and interaction online, and we urge further study of the patterns we describe, given the implications for future design, policy and implementation of online distance learning courses for culturally diverse clientele who increasingly comprise the contemporary educational mainstream (Cummins & Cameron, 1994).

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