

## FALLING THROUGH THE (CULTURAL) GAPS?

### *Intercultural communication challenges in cyberspace*

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**Abstract.** In this paper we report findings of a study of online participation by culturally diverse participants in a distance adult education course offered in Canada, and examine two of the study's early findings. First, we explore both the historical and cultural origins of "cyberculture values" as manifested in our findings, using the notions of explicit and implicit enforcement of those values. Second, we examine the notion of "cultural gaps" between participants in the course and the potential consequences for online communication successes and difficulties. We also discuss theoretical perspectives from Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Genre and Literacy Theory and Aboriginal Education that may shed further light on "cultural gaps" in online communications. Finally, we identify the need for additional research, primarily in the form of larger scale comparisons across cultural groups of patterns of participation and interaction, but also in the form of case studies that can be submitted to microanalyses of the form as well as the content of communicator's participation and interaction online.

### **1. Introduction and Background**

Intercultural communication is always a challenge, but even more so when it happens online in the absence of visual and oral cues or well-developed relationships. In computer-mediated courses, participants are involved in building learning communities. Culturally diverse individuals may hold widely different expectations of how to establish credibility, exchange information, motivate others, give and receive feedback, or critique or evaluate information.

In our recent study (Chase et al., 2002), we have 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 was to test critically the widely held assumption that the use of standardized communications technology “off the shelf,” implemented with competent professional pedagogy, will constitute sufficient conditions for successful communications and learning for culturally diverse cohorts participating in a distance learning program. Ascertaining the role of preconditions for successful online learning has potential significance for both policy and practice in distance learning for culturally diverse clientele who increasingly comprise the global educational mainstream (Cummins and Cameron, 1998). Recent studies of second language learning have begun to delineate in some detail the critical role of intercultural variables in mediated learning exchanges. Thorne (2003) for example develops the notion of medium as cultural artifact, and electronic cultures-of-use, both of which we make extensive use of in our problematization of ostensibly culturally neutral e-learning tools in this study.

This phase of our project explores two main observations. First, we discuss both the historical and intercultural background for the emergence of cyberculture values as a social construct, introducing the theoretical notions of explicit and implicit enforcement of those values to describe potential mechanisms underlying patterns of communication. Second, we examine the idea of “cultural gap” between participants in our course in terms of the consequences for online communication successes and difficulties, in the light of Gudykunst’s (1995) theory of the correlation between communication anxiety and perceived differences between communication partners.

For the purposes of this study, a definition of culture was used that moves beyond “essentialist” views of culture as values and beliefs and patterns of behaviour that are learned through our experience and environment. We have found that a majority of research and theory papers published to date in this area implicitly define culture as 'ethnic or national culture', and examine online communication patterns among and between members of specific ethnic or linguistic groups; only a few attempt to broaden the concept of culture (see Macfadyen et al., 2004 and references therein). In particular, a number of studies have relied upon Hofstede's theoretical framework that posits dimensions of (national) culture (1991), either to develop testable hypotheses about the impact of culture on Internet-mediated intercultural communications, or to interpret data *post hoc* (Abdat and Pervan, 2000; Gunawardena et al., 2001; Maitland, 1998; Marcus and Gould, 2000; Tully, 1998). Also referenced frequently is Edward Hall's theory (1966) of high/low context communications (Buragga, 2002; Heaton, 1998a; Maitland, 1998). Recently, however, others have worried about the use of extant social theory in work on online intercultural studies. Abdelnour-Nocera (2002a) discussed the risks of using "ready made cultural models" such as Hofstede's, arguing that one may miss "qualitative specific dimensions that don't fit certain pre-established parameters", and Benson and Standing (2000) have proposed a "systems theory" of culture that emphasizes culture as an indivisible system rather than as a set of categories. Thorne (2003) also offers a new conceptual framework that draws together "discursive orientation, communicative modality, communicative activity and emergent interpersonal dynamics". In line with these latter theorists, and while we acknowledge the contribution of learning and environment to beliefs and behaviour, we also worry that “essentialist” models of culture emphasize fixity of identity over the reality of identity fluidity. Instead, we tend toward the social constructivist view espoused by

Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1995) in which culture is viewed as “shared ways of symbolic meaning making among members of a social community” – especially when considering interactions between communicators who differ in many more ways than simple ‘nationality’. We treat the nexus of cultural production as discourse, – in the present case, the online discussions amongst participants in an emerging online community. We further argue below that in online communications, as in face-to-face communications, culture is negotiated, not given. On this view, culture is not learned in the usual sense, but rather, constructed ‘from the ground up’ as individuals negotiate varied and often multiple identities.

It appears in our study that what is learned culturally can place learners at considerable odds with the best plans and unexamined communicative assumptions of online distance course developers. The cultural assumptions about effective communication held by educators who develop online discourse platforms, course assignments and threaded discussions might match poorly with those of the adult learners that they target. In a stunning display of naïveté and smugness, Canada’s leading agency for the promotion of e-learning stated recently:

... Our position as a bilingual and multicultural country, as a Pacific nation with a neighbour's view of the American experience, makes it easier for our post-secondary institutions to develop online course offerings with appeal to learners in the United States, Europe and Asia. Canada also has an excellent reputation for high-quality, culturally neutral content. (Industry Canada, 2003.)

Our study contests the notion that culturally neutral content is even conceivable, let alone attainable in online settings.

## **2. Our Approach**

### 2.1. CONTEXT

An introductory course for a university certificate program in Intercultural Studies was offered in a mixed mode consisting of two days of face-to-face meetings followed by six weeks of facilitated online assignments and discussion. WebCT served as the software platform for the online component. The face-to-face component of the course took place in parallel meetings held in Toronto and in Vancouver. The two cohorts merged for the online introductions, assignments, and discussions that comprised the remainder of the course proceedings.

### 2.2. PARTICIPANTS

The community of 24 participants that embarked upon this course included 17 students, 5 course facilitators and 2 moderators. Three learners failed to complete all the requirements of the course. In our descriptions below, both facilitators and moderators will be described for convenience as “Facilitators” despite their somewhat differing roles in the leadership of the course. There were 17 female and 7 male participants, ranging in age from 25 to 55 years, and participants in this course appeared to be representative socially of the population normally recruited for the certificate program, including

individuals with high school, college, university, or post-graduate 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.

Table 1 divides participants into the three broad groups that we compared for purposes of descriptive analysis of participation. While the cultural diversity of this cohort did not allow us to categorize it into easily identifiable ethnocultural groups, we believed that this demographic grouping, employing participants' Canadian citizenship status, is relevant from the perspective of the participant's exposure to mainstream North American cultural values in early life and education

*Table 1.* Total Number of Postings by Citizenship Group, Role and Gender

GROUP (Gender)	ROLE				TOTAL	GROUP MEAN
	LEARNERS		FACILITATORS			
	M	F	M	F		
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.

### 2.3. DATA AND ANALYSIS

Our data set consisted of printed transcripts of all 423 online contributions over the six weeks' facilitated online 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. Preliminary descriptions of the corpus of postings revealed the broad dimensions of the course's communicative component. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of postings by group, role in the course, and gender.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. THE INTERNET HAS A CULTURE

Our first observation, and perhaps the observation with the most wide-reaching implications for the success of electronic intercultural communications, is that the communicative space or platform created by the Internet is not a culturally neutral or 'value-free' space in which culturally diverse individuals communicate with equal ease. Like all technologies, the Internet was and is socially produced – and all social productions are informed by the cultural values of their producers (Castells, 2001). The creators of the Internet were predominantly Anglo-American engineers and scientists “seeking quick and open access to others like themselves” (Anderson, 1995. p. 13). Their ethnic and professional cultures value aggressive/competitive individualistic behaviours. In addition, these cultures value communications characterized by speed, reach, openness, quick response, questions/debate and informality. Schein (1992) attributes similar values to the information technology community in general.

We observed that these communicative cultural values are embedded in the design of WebCT and similar Internet-based communications platforms. Layered over this 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 and female. Within the course environment, communicative cultural values are enforced both explicitly and implicitly. Implicit enforcement is due to features such as the technical infrastructure of the course (a discussion board which requires public postings and responses), and by unspoken assumptions and expectations about how communications should proceed. Meanwhile, the communicative culture of cyberspace and of this online course is explicitly enforced through overt statements, instructions and requests made by course facilitators and by some of the learners (Table 2).

#### 3.2. THE GREATER THE CULTURAL GAP BETWEEN ONLINE PARTICIPANTS, THE GREATER THE POSSIBILITY FOR MISCOMMUNICATION

Understanding that there exists a real and enforced Internet culture, and that this culture embodies communicative values drawn from North American, English-speaking and academic cultures, one might expect that participants from certain (formally educated, Western, English-speaking) cultures will have the least difficulty in communicating successfully in greatest affinity with the online course environment, whereas individuals from cultures with very different communicative values and strategies might be less successful communicators, according to cyberculture standards. We find that this prediction is supported by our analysis of participation patterns. In our study group, non-aboriginal Canadians (individuals born and educated in Canada, within the predominantly English-speaking Euro-Canadian culture) posted a significantly higher number of messages than, for example, aboriginal Canadian participants (Figure 1). It appears, then, that one important cultural 'gap', which may function as a predictor of online communicative success, is the gap between the communicative culture of an individual, and the communication culture of the Internet itself.

Table 2. Explicit and Implicit Enforcement of Cyberculture Values

Cyberspace Values	Implicit Enforcement	Explicit Enforcement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>speed</i></li> <li><i>quick response</i></li> </ul>	<p>Course design requires a minimum number of learner postings per assignment, including responses to each others work, made “on time”</p>	<p>“I found also that I was anxiously awaiting a facilitator reply...I realize the facilitators have other commitments and obligations, but it would be of greater benefit to me if I were able to see a response at an earlier time” [Learner]</p> <p>“This online course really works when postings come in on time and allow us all to get involved in the discussion” [Facilitator]</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>debate /questions</i></li> </ul>	<p>The underlying objective of requiring learners to respond to each other is to promote debate and discussion between multiple participants.</p>	<p>“We continue the conversations, even when it’s difficult for us...We accept the questions others ask us – asking questions is okay.” [Facilitator]</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>informality</i></li> </ul>	<p>No spell-checking facility in WebCT; limited capacity to for special formatting (e.g. for formal communication) without extensive knowledge of html; no course recommendations regarding structure of postings; no assessment of posting format, spelling, style or presentation; course design includes a ‘Café’ intended to promote social and informal participant interaction.</p>	<p>“hey you all...I hope you are doing well...it seems as though you have had a wonderful time, you have gotten to know each other better – at least you have an idea of each other’s faces...but not mine (oh yeah, I have an “image” in cyberspace”...check me on my website...Anyway, my name is Michal chilton...I look forward to learning with you in this track of the journey. take care. Michal (oh, I forgot, I am the mother of two teenagers – a challenge)” [Facilitator]</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>reach</i></li> <li><i>openness</i></li> </ul>	<p>Discussion board platform makes all postings “public”.</p>	<p>“feel free to share thoughts and feelings openly” [Facilitator]</p>

Cultural gaps can also exist between individual communicators from different backgrounds, and we find evidence of these cultural gaps in the communications of our online course participants. For example, we observe in participants' "self-introduction" postings some large difference in their approaches to online 'self-revelation', and, indeed, in their notions of how identity is established.. Cultural variations in-group vs. individual focus were evident in the variations in approach to self introduction

One South Asian Canadian learner wrote:

*"This is Sara Nitzan from Montréal, Quebec. I have lived here since 1971, but was born and raised in Bombay, India. My family comes from the former Portuguese colony of Goa in India. I am married with 2 children who are now young adults..."*

Sara identified herself primarily by membership in a national/cultural group, and in relation to her family. In response to the same request for self-introduction, a non-aboriginal English-speaking Canadian-born Canadian contributed a more individual focused introduction:

*"...My name is Batsheva Carmela.... My job is Program Coordinator of the International programs Office in the Faculty of commerce at [a Canadian University]. We run training programs for government officials, managers, administrative personnel, etc. from (mostly) China, take care of visiting scholars who come to study for shorter periods of time, help organize summer programs to other countries for undergraduate students....On a personal side, I have a degree in History (Business minor) from Wilfred Laurier University..."*

This learner identified herself primarily by her professional role and experience, and by her academic qualifications and achievements. Why might such divergent perceptions of personal culture, role and identity contribute to communicative challenges in an online setting? We suggest that Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (1995) may be useful here. Gudykunst suggests that all communicators (including online communicators) encounter each other as strangers – and the wider the cultural gap that exists between them, the greater the degree of uncertainty and anxiety. As anxiety increases, the potential for miscommunication increases. Anxiety must be 'managed' in order for successful communication to take place.

Individuals from different cultural backgrounds will employ different anxiety management strategies, with varying degrees of success. For example, in the 'self-introduction' exchanges above, individuals are giving information about themselves in ways that reflect their experience, the influences of their educational and group cultural "programming". The likelihood is, however, that neither is providing the other with the kind of culturally-expected and familiar personal information that would serve to reduce anxiety and promote better communications. The door is opened to hasty assumptions on both sides about the others' cultures.

#### **4. Conclusions and Future Directions**

##### **4.1 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION GAPS**

We anticipate that a number of theoretical perspectives from Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Genre and Literacy Theory and Aboriginal Education may shed further light

on the “cultural gaps” identified in our corpus, and on the need for negotiation of these in online communications. For example, *genre theory* (Halliday and Martin, 1993; Halliday, 1994; Gee, 1999) suggests that cultures apprentice their members in preferred genres of realizing everyday communicative exchanges. The contrast between Sara’s and Batsheva’s chosen genres (genealogy vs. résumé) for introducing themselves may create anything from very minor irritation to outright misunderstandings amongst members of a group if they expect their own preferred genres to express important communicative acts. Equally unfortunate would be negative evaluations from instructors who, on the basis of their cultural expectations and professional training, might not be prepared to accept a job résumé or a traditional genealogy as an adequate approach to performing a personal introduction.

Other communication gaps might also be illuminated by studies of second language acquisition. Cummins (1984) found that (heavily contextualized) *Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skill* (“BICS”) was acquired earlier, and more quickly by young immigrant learners than the less contextually-supported *Cognitive Academic Language Performance* (“CALP”) which took immigrant students up to a further five years to acquire to a native-like degree. It could well be that we found in our data something more than an ability gap: as noted earlier, all of our participants could have been expected by virtue of their professional and academic backgrounds to possess good levels of basic communication skills. Rather, these participants may have experienced confusion or doubts as to whether basic interpersonal communication, academic language, or perhaps something in between (another site of negotiation?) was expected in the online situation.

Finally, the linguistic distinction from literacy theory (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Olson, 1994; Reeder, et al., 1996) between *oral and literate uses of language* could prove a rich source of understanding of online communication corpora such as the present material, and raises the fundamental question of whether online participation of the sort we have considered here is a variant of oral language, or of literate language, or a new hybrid of the two. This question has given rise to a spate of investigations and fruitful theoretical work. For instance, Dudfield (1999) agrees that students are increasingly engaging in what she calls “hybrid forms of literate behaviour.” Gibbs (2000) has extended this to suggest that new forms of communication are actually constructing “new forms of thinking, perceiving and recording.” Essays in Gibson & Oviedo’s 2000 anthology offer a range of perspectives on “the ways in which literacy is shifting in relation to new technologies.” Thurstun (2000) has examined “perceptual difficulties posed by the new technology” and, together with Harpold (2000), discusses challenges of reading electronic texts. Kramarae (1999) similarly discussed the new “visual literacy” required of Internet communicators, while Williams and Meredith (1996) attempted to track development of electronic literacy in new Internet users. Discourse studies of online communications such as Crystal (2001) lend weight to the conclusion that corpora such as ours represent some intermediate stage between oral and written discourse. We might speculate however that our corpus and others like it represent a new genre, neither spoken nor written, yet drawing upon conventions of both. In any case, distance educators need to be cognizant of the relative “fit” between their participants’ origins in oral or literate cultures and the distinct genre requirements of online communication in e-learning.



Even some of the most basic assumptions about electronically mediated communication and learning still have to be examined in the context of intercultural encounters. This in turn means that more consideration needs to be given to:

1. micro-studies of intercultural communication features (including encounters of closely related communication cultures) (length of exchanges, depth, topics and taboo topics, initiation of talk and communicative roles, power distribution) as well as to
2. the problems of generic course designs.

With respect to the first concern, we intend to follow up the descriptive data we have developed in this phase of our study with microanalyses conducted with larger samples of participants from systematically varied cultural backgrounds. Parameters of interest in such microanalyses of online interactions would include interaction depth (as exemplified by depth of hierarchies in discussion threads,) length as well as intercultural distribution of postings and exchanges, and textual coherence within exchanges. A fruitful proposal along somewhat similar lines is offered by Belz (2003) who outlines a Hallidayan approach to such microanalyses of online discourse (Halliday, 1994), and argues that more detailed understanding of process rather than means is needed in the field of intercultural learning as it bears upon language learning.

Further, we are beginning a small set of case studies, not of individual participants in our sample, but of those participants in interaction with one another, employing as its unit of analysis what we term the “electronic exchange.” An electronic exchange, like its counterpart in face to face discourse analysis (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) consists of a stretch of contiguous turns produced by a cluster of two or more members and bounded by a common topic of discussion, for instance “late assignments,” or “balancing study with family responsibilities.” A useful, early theoretical exploration of potential units of analysis for online communication research is found in December (1996), while a recent exemplar of the use of case study methods in the field of second language learning is found in Thorne (2003).

At the outset, we indicated that our work tries to problematize the notion of culture in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and claimed that a less essentialist and more dynamic, discourse-based understanding of culture was needed for the sorts of analyses we wished to conduct. Perhaps a more fundamental problem is that identified by Ess (1998), who argues that the lack of an adequate theory of culture prevents the analysis of the complexities of virtual cultures and virtual communities. Ess recognizes that theories of culture elaborated by Hofstede, Hall, Geertz (see especially, Abdelnour-Nocera, 1998, 2002) and Carey are used frequently by intercultural educators, but asks:

Do these various definitions, enumerations, and observations [of culture] give us an understanding of culture which is adequate for examining, much less predicting ... the complex interactions between culture and technology?... Can we have an adequate theory about 'culture' and CMC without considering religiously-shaped components of culture and worldview?... Do CMC technologies necessarily result in the importation of specific cultural values (the issue of technological determinism)?... Does the meaning of 'embodiment' ... need elaboration if our theories are to be more complete?... Are postmodern frames of reference, informed by McLuhan, Ong, etc.

in communication theory ... fully adequate for understanding the interplay between culture and CMC? (Ess, 1998, pp.12-14.)

Our study has suggested that there are many more factors inherent in intercultural communication that can enhance or adversely affect the success of e-learning courses or programs. Those factors are not limited to 'off the shelf' inter-technical features such as different power supplies, varying keyboards or non-matching plugs. They touch on the very essence of the way we conceptualize our world.

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