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Using Online Photography Portfolios to Enhance Cross-Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

There are two major challenges that we face when teaching and training about cross-cultural communication. The first is to develop the ability to observe and notice cross-cultural patterns that differ from our own. The second is that these observations become more significant when linked to some kind of context, model, theory or application. With this, the observations, if made at all, simply remain random thoughts and opinions.

The object of this paper is to describe our experience in providing cross-cultural training that addresses these two challenges. Specifically, we share a methodology where learners build online electronic portfolios (using e.g., pathbrite.com) to display original photographs that demonstrate cultural differences. Participants learn David Victor's LESCANT Approach for Inter-Cultural Communication to provide a context for these photographic examples. That is to say, participants take original photographs to show different aspects of cross-cultural perspectives that they have observed, and then they describe those instances within the context of the LESCANT Approach categories: Language, Environment, Social Organization, Context, Authority, Non-Verbal, Time.

INTRODUCTION

We have all had the experience of being with someone who by training and expertise notices things that others do not. For example, birders recognize birds, bird calls and bird songs when others are completely unaware of their presence. Astronomy enthusiasts look into the nighttime sky and point out the location of planets, star clusters, nebulae and constellations, while others don't even notice that there is a nighttime sky. Trained linguists hear regional pronunciations and identify the dialect and origin of a given speaker, while others don't hear anything noteworthy about the speech patterns at all. For those interested in learning about birds, it would be difficult to simply look for birds without any knowledge of their physical characteristics or patterns of behavior. Similarly, it would be hard to memorize what is in the night sky without any familiarity with the earth's rotation. And without some awareness of phonation, it would be challenging to understand the characteristics of different dialects. It is significant to note that not only does the training give people the ability to appreciate details, but it also increases their ability to observe and notice their surroundings. It is the skill of *observation*, combined with *training*, that leads to the expertise.

The same thing happens in instances of cross-cultural communication. There are some people, who through training, have developed the ability to observe cultural difference that affect communication. These are people who pick up on potential misunderstandings, are sensitive to

nuances in meaning, know when others seem baffled, or appreciate why another person feels offended. When teaching and training in areas related to cross-cultural perspectives, we often confront these same two challenges. First, people need to develop the ability to *observe* cross-cultural patterns that differ from their own. Second, these observations become more significant when linked to some kind of context, model, theory or application, without which they simply become an ever-growing list of random thoughts and opinions. In terms of pedagogy, we may also add a third challenge, which relates to assessing the most effective way to deliver the teaching and training of these cross-cultural issues.

The objective of this paper is to offer insights into our experience in addressing each of these three challenges: first, to recommend an effective pedagogy to teach cross-cultural communication; second, to offer a model or theory to provide a context for the learning; and third, to assist learners in becoming better observers of cross-cultural patterns. To address the first challenge related to teaching methodologies, we begin with an explanation of why we chose to use Pathbrite (https://pathbrite.com), a digital portfolio, to exemplify an effective pedagogical tool in teaching cross-cultural communication. As to the second challenge, we next review the benefits of using David Victor's LESCANT approach to provide learners with the context to observe and identify culturally based norms. And finally, we share samples from students' electronic portfolios to demonstrate their enhanced ability to observe cultural patterns around them.

CHALLENGE 1: EFFECTIVE METHODOLOGY IN TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Traditionally in academics our standard assessment tool has been a written or oral examination, one that is based on the memorization of material from chapters in a textbook or notes from lectures. Similarly, written reports or term papers are one of the most common ways to show progress in learning. In a digital world, however, we now have access to multiple electronic formats: video, photos, podcasts, google docs, PDF files, functions in spreadsheets, social media, blogs, Apps for mobile devices, etc. We find ourselves at a cross-road where traditional examinations and term papers seem a bit removed from all of the digital resources at our disposal. By using digital resources for assessment and learning, we expand the option to include all of these electronic formats. In the case of cross-cultural communication, we chose to ask students to create a digital portfolio. (For a review of the benefits and pitfalls in using e-learning and online exchanges to address cross-cultural awareness, see the Special Issue of Language Learning & Technology, Lewis, Chanier & Youngs, 2011.)

There are exciting pedagogical benefits when we ask students to show evidence of learning through the creation of a digital portfolio. The first is that this allows for individual creativity. Some students take photographs of items in their apartments, others go to local restaurants. Digital portfolios may include original video clips of staged events or video clips of community events. In every case we have expanded learning beyond the physical classroom. Second, the digital portfolio becomes a public record of learning. Students can receive comments, questions and feedback from others. Digital portfolios are created with a public audience in mind, knowing that everything is going to be seen and shared with others and not just the teacher. This can be controlled with gate-keeping and passwords, but the digital portfolio provides the flexibility to demonstrate electronic work, and to make it accessible to an audience anywhere.

There are many options in choosing an e-Portfolio. Chances are that every institution has a fixed web-based Learning Management System (LMS) such as Canvas or Blackboard. These all have options to build discussion threads, including the options to included digital attachments.

There are also independent software programs that provide e-Portfolios. Truthfully, any of them can be adapted for an e-Portfolio. We chose Pathbrite, which is actually designed to build digital resumes. In today's world it makes sense that if a resume exists to show evidence of work, if that work includes electronic projects, that they be digitally presented.

Although Pathbrite was designed to build a digital resume, it also works as an e-Portfolio for cross-cultural communication. In Pathbrite users create a portfolio and then upload work (in almost any electronic format) that can be customized, arranged, sorted and tagged by category. Users have options to openly share their portfolio, or restrict access with passwords or private settings. Pathbrite is free for individual learners, (although there is a paid option for institutional licenses.) In our case, we wanted students to be able to demonstrate their ability to observe and identify cultural issues, both within their own frame of reference as well as when interacting with others from distinct groups or cultures. We determined that the digital portfolio, and specifically Pathbrite, did exactly that. That is to say, we wanted students to create a portfolio of original photographs. Wherever they were, students were asked to look for evidence of cultural norms or evidence of things that differed from their own cultural norms. Students were required to identify the behavior, document it with a photograph, post the photo on the digital portfolio, and include a written description and justification.

After students have posted photographs to Pathbrite, there are a number of follow-up options. For example, we ask students to include a 50-100 word justification and explanation about the relevance of each photo. We then as other students (either from their own class or from our partner schools) to make comments and ask questions about the photographs. Next, we follow up with an in-class review where we talk about the various photos and their application to the cultural issues that we have been discussing. Finally, and depending on the arrangement, we also conduct a video-conference session with students from our partner schools, once again go over the photos, questions, and comments that have been posted on Pathbrite.

For those who are interested, my Pathbrite homepage is https://pathbrite.com/orkelm/profile. The site is ever growing, and currently has sample e-portfolios from a large number of student groups.

Figure 1. Orlando Kelm's Pathbrite Homepage.
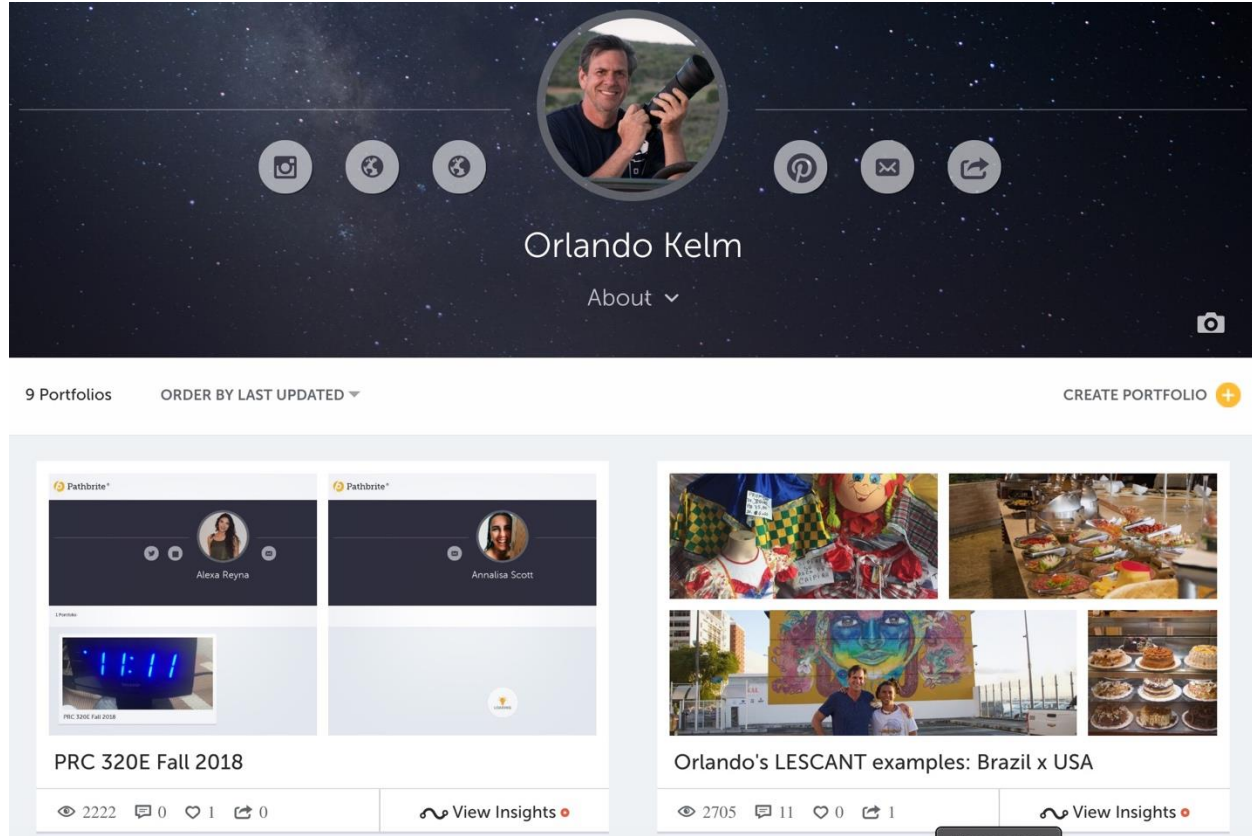
CHALLENGE 2: PROVIDE A MODEL OR THEORY TO PROVIDE CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

In order for students to create a photographic portfolio of cross-cultural patterns, it was necessary for them to have some kind of theory, model, approach, or methodology to frame their observations. We considered a number of options: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (https://geerthofstede.com/), Trompenaars & Hampden Turner's Culture for Business (http://www2.thtconsulting.com/), Hammer's Intercultural Development Inventory (https://idiinventory.com/), Cultural Intelligence Center's CQ (https://culturalq.com/), Lewis' CrossCulture Communications (https://www.crossculture.com/). The truth is that given preferences, any one of these would suffice. The important thing is that students are assisted in the study of cross-cultural communication when they have a context in which to interpret their observations.

In the end we determined that David Victor's LESCANT approach provided students with an easy way to categorize culture, enjoy flexibility in interpretation, and not be burdened by cost or the need to open accounts (Victor, 1992; Kelm and Victor, 2016; Yamada, Kelm and Victor, 2017). Victor's LESCANT approach gives structure and focus to the analysis. LESCANT is a simple acronym that represents seven *key* areas where intercultural communication may differ from one group of people to another. The seven areas are: *L*anguage, *E*nvironment, *S*ocial Organization, *A*uthority conception, *N*onverbal behavior, and *T*ime conception. Thus, as the students learned the characteristics of each key area, they were asked to look for examples, take an original photograph, post it to Pathbrite, write a description and justification, and share it with others. Our experience is that a simple 90-minute overview lecture to introduce the LESCANT

approach is sufficient to introduce students to the basic concepts. Then, a more detailed explanation can be applied as the portfolios are created.

When students become aware of the LESCANT categories they start to look for examples. For example, as they become aware of how *Language* affects intercultural communication, they start to see the consequence from the use of idiomatic expressions and the adoption of English loan words. With *Environment*, they begin to notice the cultural effects of such things as population density and climate. In the case of *Social Organization*, they notice how families, education, religion or sports all group people differently. With an understanding of *Contex*t, students begin to read road signs, advertisements, and public instructions with an eye towards culture. With a new appreciation of *Authority conception*, learners begin to observe how respect is shown to those who have power or how people react to those in authority. *Non-Verbal* cues like clothing, colors, gestures, physical touch and smells are brought to the forefront in new ways. And finally, appointments and schedules are now viewed with a new appreciation for the cultural aspects of *Time* conception.

It bears repeating that I am not necessarily advocating Victor's LESCANT Approach over any other model of cross-cultural analysis. The photographic portfolio project can be completed using any other model as well. The important point is that learners need a context to observe cross-cultural behavior. Without a model or theory, students will be unable to categorize and synthesize the cultural issues that surround them.

CHALLENGE 3: ACTUAL OBSERVATION OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In this final section we look at specific examples of photographs that students posted to exemplify cross-cultural communication. We will show photographs from three distinct student groups, each one to show the breadth of how the methodology works.

First, we show some photographs from a group of Fulbright Scholars from Iraq who spent about 8 weeks in the United States. This group was comprised of faculty from different business schools in Iraq and they were in the US to work on research projects that ranged from entrepreneurship to opportunities for female business owners. This group is interesting because it demonstrates how the methodology works when professional, non-student *foreigners* come to the United States. Next, we show photographs from a group of North American undergraduate students who participated in a summer study abroad program in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. This group exemplifies the methodology when taking students to another country. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, we show photographs from a group of students in Texas who took photographs of cultural issues in their own city of Austin. At the same time, students in Engenheiro Coelho, a small city in the interior of the state of São Paulo undertook the same assignment in Brazil, taking photographs that demonstrated Brazilian cultural norms. The Texas and Brazilian students then shared their Pathbrite photographs with each other, making comments, writing feedback, asking questions, and finally interacting in video conferences. In truth, these three representative groups make up a small subset of literally hundreds of students in dozens of courses who have participated in the photo-portfolios.

FULBRIGHT SCHOLARS FROM IRAQ:

During the summer session of 2018 a number of visiting Fulbright Scholars from Iraq spent 8 weeks in Austin, Texas. They were all academic professors from business schools in Iraq, each with different research objectives and agendas. As part of their U.S. experience, these scholars attended various lectures and classes, including a series of workshops dedicated to cross-cultural communication.

The Fulbright Scholars learned the seven categories of the LESCANT approach to cross-cultural communication, and they were asked to actively look for evidence that exemplified disparate cultural norms between Austin, Texas USA and their home regions in Iraq (i.e., Sulaymaniyah in the north, An Najaf near Baghdad, and Basra in the south). Their assignment was to take original photographs of these observations, post the photos to the Pathbrite Portfolio, and include a written justification explaining the distinct cultural issue. The URL of their photo portfolio is as follows: https://pathbrite.com/portfolio/PI0bDlPiVJ/fulbright-iraq-2018

Figure 2. Iraqi Observation of Women Truck Drivers in USA.

Two examples suffice. Knowing that he was going to be away from family for two months, one of the scholars was concerned for his family during his absence. Normally this person drove the car everywhere for the family because his wife did not have a driver's license and did not know how to drive. Just before leaving on the Fulbright trip, he spent time teaching his wife how to drive and helping her to secure a driver's license. She was still nervous about driving, but at least he felt better knowing that if need be, she would be able to drive to the store or drive to emergencies. While in Texas, the Fulbright students were returning from a trip to San Antonio. From the bus window, our culture observing scholar took a photograph of a passing truck (see Figure 2). In his own words, 'The truck was as big as a train!' What surprised him most was that the truck driver was a woman, a petite blonde woman. 'That is something that we have never seen in Iraq.' This example was even more pertinent when considering all that he had gone through to teach his wife how to drive. All were able to discuss the role of women in society under the LESCANT category of Social Organization. It was the assignment of taking a photograph of North American social organization that caused them to specifically notice and focus on the aspect of female truck drivers. This is not to say that the Iraqi visitors would not have noticed the woman truck driver otherwise, but it is to say that the assignment to photograph examples of North American social organization created the environment for observation and its subsequent group discussion.

The Fulbright students also took a trip to Fredricksburg and Enchanted Rock. While in Fredricksburg they stopped at the National Museum of the Pacific War. In front of the museum is a statue of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. The statue depicts Admiral Nimitz in a casual pose, hands on hips and a friendly smile (see Figure 3). All of the Iraqi scholars were taken back by the casual nature of the statue. They had never seen a 'military hero' depicted in any pose that wasn't either standing at attention, mounted on a horse, in battle, or with a weapon at hand. They immediately made the LESCANT association at multiple layers. As related to Social Organization, the statue illustrated the perception of the military. As related to Authority, the statue depicted the respect for the person more than just the position. As related to Non-Verbal, the statue exemplified the casual nature of North American dress. This is an especially poignant illustration of cultural awareness by those from another culture. I personally have seen this statue on multiple occasions, and never once thought of the casual way in which North Americans portray military heroes. Since this experience with the Iraqi students, I now see many statues in a new light. The digital portfolio was among the most positive experiences that the Fulbright scholars had while studying in Austin, Texas.

NORTH AMERICAN STUDY-ABROAD STUDENTS IN BRAZIL

The undergraduate students spent 7 weeks in a study abroad program in Salvador, Bahia. While there, the students lived with Brazilian host families, attended class in the mornings, and had a number of cultural excursions and tours in the afternoons. They also participated in a number of local festivals and holidays that coincided with the time of year that they were in Brazil. These students were also asked to build a photo portfolio of their experiences, also identifying these observations within the context of the LESCANT approach. We also had specific class sessions where students shared the photos with classmates and discussed the cross-cultural implications. The photos from this group are found on the Pathbrite homepage: https://pathbrite.com/portfolio/PI0bDaPyBJ/ut-por-367-salvador

Figure 3. Iraqi Observation of the Casual Pose of American Military Generals.

The first photo shows a medical clinic in town that is called *Hapvidav* (see Figure 4). This falls under the LESCANT category of Language. Brazilians generally do not have many syllables that end in a consonant. As a result, *hapvida* is pronounced [ha.pi.vi.da]. *Vida* means 'life' and *hap* is not a Portuguese word, but sounds like the English word for 'happy.' The name of the clinic is therefore, *Happy Life*. This play on words and the nuance in meaning is only appreciated when one understands the Brazilian tendency to borrow words from English, and then invent subtle changes and novel meanings to these words. A number of the students took a photograph of this clinic, as there were a number of branches all over town. Notice the depth of analysis that goes into *Hapvida*. One needs to interpret the meaning of the name, then one needs to appreciate the Brazilian pronunciation of words that add an epenthetic vowel, then one needs to know that the normally silent "H" in Portuguese is somehow pronounced in this word. And finally, one needs to make a connection of how a health clinic relates to a happy life. Notice that all this results from the assignment to create a photographic portfolio within the context of the LESCANT approach.

Figure 4. Brazilian Healthcare Clinic Called "Happy Life."

In another example related to the LESCANT category of Time, one student noticed that during a tour of a local hospital, the hosts were anxious to show us more of the hospital, and to explain additional events and activities (see Figure 5). However, the driver who was assigned to pick up the students was about to arrive and he had additional stops to make after picking up the students. Because of this, we closed the hospital visit, despite the fact that more could have been discussed. One of the students posted a photograph of this visit, and she wrote comments to show how the North American adherence to the clock was stringent, and even when the Brazilians were

willing to meet longer with the students, the schedule took precedence. This is a beautiful example to illustrate that the cross-cultural story behind the photograph represents a cultural issue that isn't necessarily even evident in the photograph itself. This example further illustrates the benefits of asking students to observe and photograph cultural differences when traveling abroad. In the end, the photo portfolio became one of the major activities associated with the study abroad experience, so much so that students referred to the activity as 'LESCANTing' or noticed that something was a 'LESCANT moment.'

Figure 5. The Challenge of Fitting a Hospital Visit into the Tight Schedule of the Day
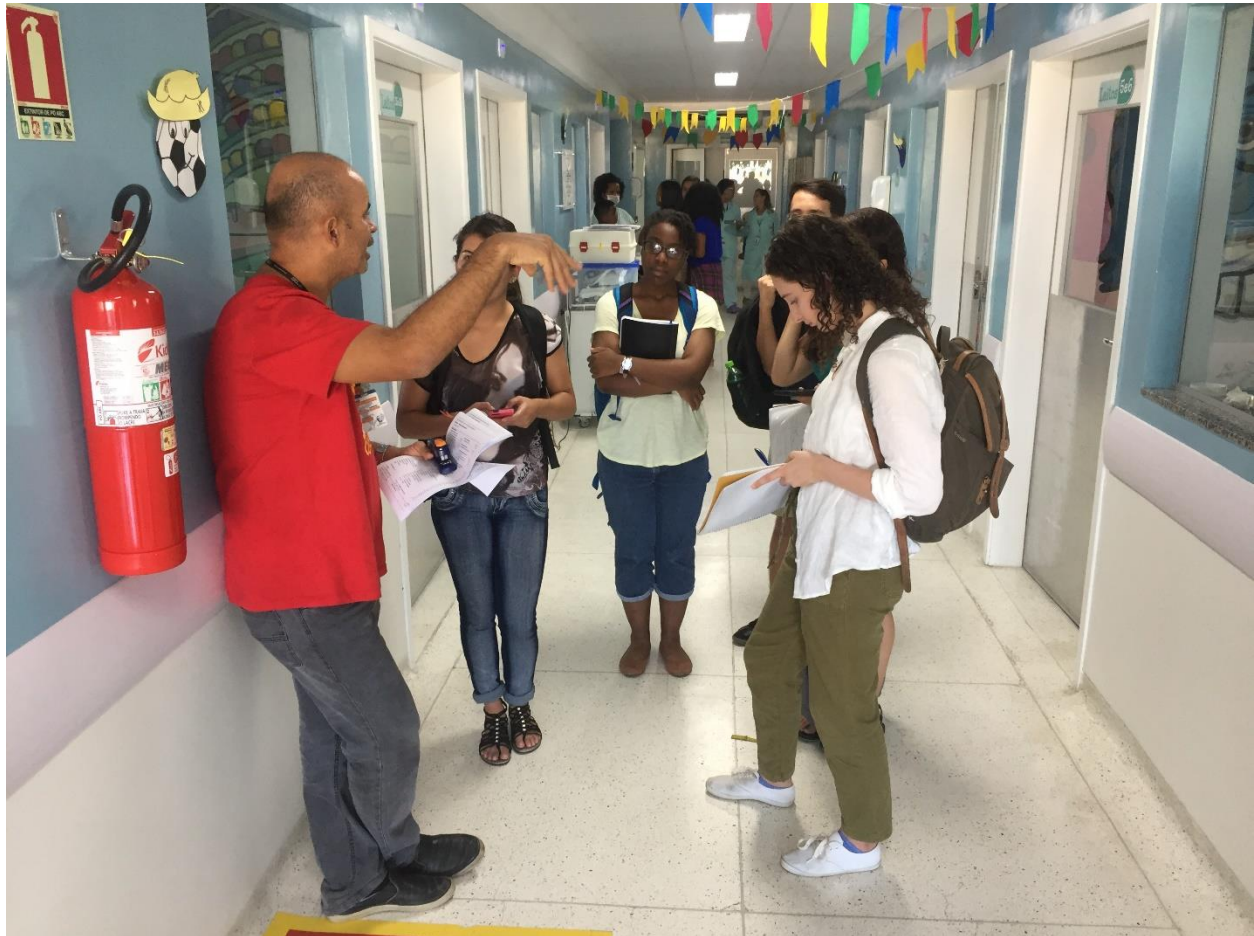
NORTH AMERICAN STUDENTS IN TEXAS AND BRAZILIAN STUDENTS IN SÃO PAULO

This third group introduces a twist to the photograph portfolio idea. During the Spring semester of 2018 we offered a course at the University of Texas at Austin, comparing cultural aspects of Brazil and USA. At the same time, students from the state of São Paulo at the Universidade Nacional Adventista de São Paulo (UNASP) were also enrolled in a similar course at their institution, a course also designed to study cultural aspects of Brazil and USA. Students at both institutions learned the LESCANT approach, both groups were asked to create a photograph portfolio with Pathbrite, and both were asked to justify the cultural issues that were then illustrated in the photos. These portfolios were then shared among all the North American and Brazilian

students, who were asked to write comments and questions to members of the other group. We then also conducted video conference sessions, using Zoom, where the students had a final opportunity to discuss the topics together, following up on the questions and comments that had been written earlier.

This exchange provided students with the opportunity to think of their own behaviors within the context of culture. It is one thing to observe the cultural differences of others, it proved to be much more challenging to analyze one's own behavior within the context of cultural differences. The photographs from both the North American and Brazilian are found in the following Pathbrite homepage: https://pathbrite.com/portfolio/PI0bDcPVmG/ut-ugs-303-lescant-examples-portfolio

Let's look at a few sample photographs from both groups. We begin with photos that the students in Texas posted about US culture. In Austin Texas there is significant influence from neighboring Mexico. We see this precisely in the use and pseudo-use of Spanish language. In true Austin eclectic style, there is a pub/donut restaurant and food truck called *Gourdough's* (https://gourdoughs.com/). Of course, the cleverness of the name only makes sense if one knows the meaning of the Spanish word *gordo* 'fat.' This is only enhanced by the clever spelling of *Gourdough's* combining *gourmet* with *dough* from which donuts are made. This all results in their tag line: Big. Fat. Donuts. Next, imagine what the Texas students had to go through to explain to the Brazilians why an Austin food truck would want to call themselves *Gourdough's*. Furthermore, imagine explaining this to a group of Brazilians who only understand the original meaning of *gordo*, but who likewise did not understand, *Quesoooo good*, *Keso's Tacos*, *Gorditas*, and the like!

Figure 6. Gourdough's – Big, Fat, Donuts

Following the LESCANT approach, Social Organization addresses the importance of sports in society, including how people identify with their sport and their team. Soccer may be king in Brazil, but in Texas football rules. 100,000 cheering fans at Darrell K. Royal – Texas Memorial Stadium (Yes, that is the official name of the football stadium) create a cultural scene that Brazilians simply will not understand. From the gigantic Texas flag, the Longhorn Band playing *The Eyes of Texas*, the mascot Bevo, cheerleaders, Hook 'em Horns gesture, $8.00 beers, and even a football game on the field, all of these will baffle a Brazilian. Imagine what it was like for the Texas students to convey all of this to the Brazilians as they posted photographs about Texas football.

Figure 7. Trying to Make Sense of American Football, from a Brazilian Perspective.

The Brazilian students from UNASP also posted their photographs of Brazilian culture, many of which perfectly illustrated cultural differences between the North Americans and the Brazilians. For example, one student started an interesting discussion about hygiene. This student posted a photograph of a Brazilian student, still in class, nearly at the end of class. What made this photograph unique was that the student had already prepared a tooth brush with tooth paste, so that as soon as class was over, he could stop by the bathroom to brush his teeth. We asked how many of the American students carried a toothbrush with them in their backpacks while at school. One, only one of thirty students had a toothbrush in his backpack. Nearly all of the Brazilians carried a

toothbrush in their backpack, and they brushed their teeth multiple times during the day. Additionally, sometimes public bathrooms in Brazil have dental floss dispensers. The LESCANT category of Non-Verbal Communication opened the door to show these photographs, and then to participate in the subsequent discussions.

Figure 8. Class Is about Over and It's Time to Brush Your Teeth.
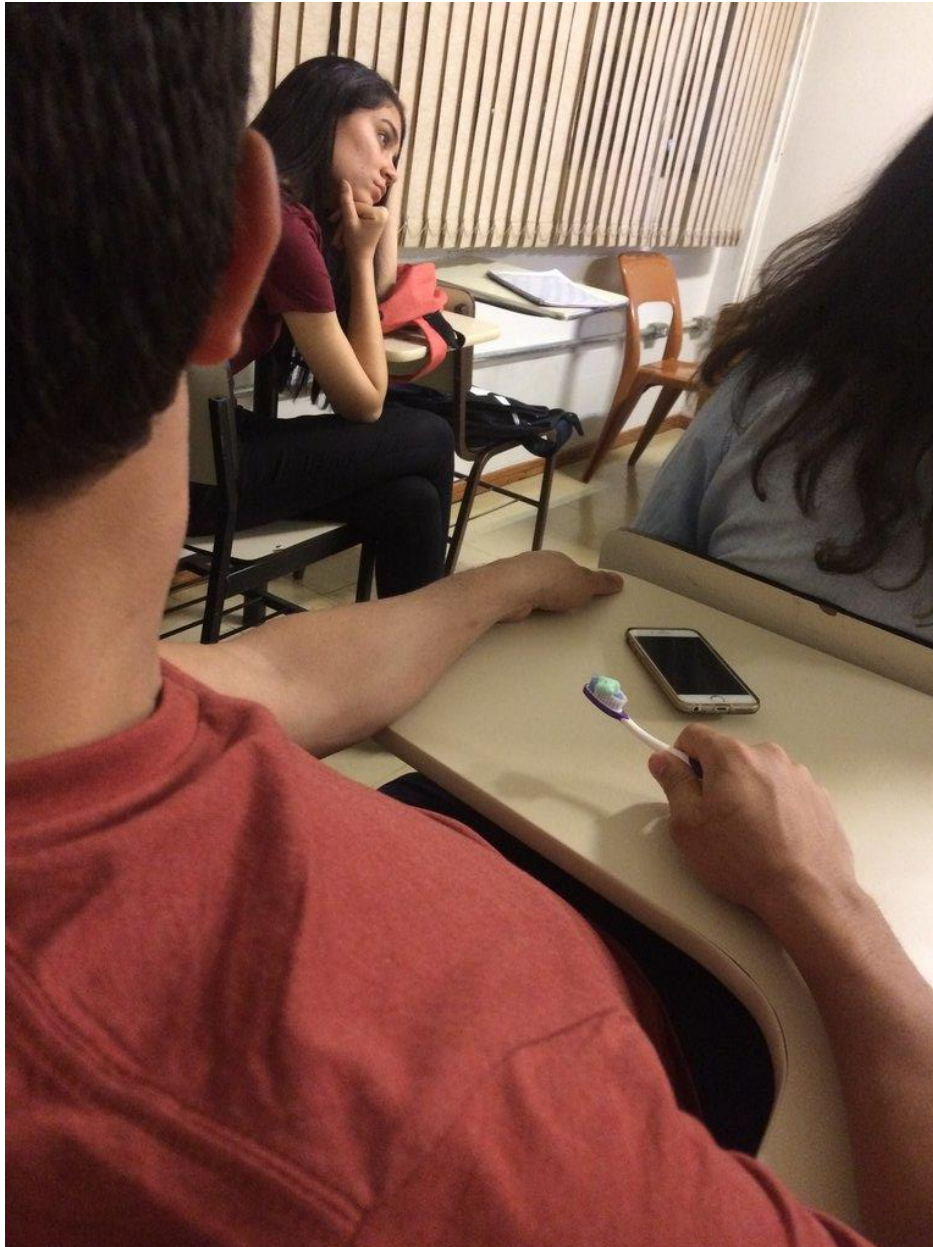
Finally, in discussing the LESCANT topic of Time, one of the Brazilian students posted a video from her hometown of Belem, Pará, in the north of Brazil. In Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon, almost every day it rains for a brief period in the afternoon, usually around 3:00pm. Because one can pretty much expect the rain every day, instead of making appointments for a specific time on the clock, people in this area make appointments either 'before' or 'after' the

chuva vespertina 'afternoon rain.' The Texas students simply had no equivalent story to tell, but once again the photo portfolio and the LESCANT Time category opened the door for this discussion. Although we cannot show the actual video clip that was provided in class, here is a link for those who would like to view a similar video clip from YouTube that shows the afternoon rain from Belem, Pará: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFI2y8GTo8o

There is one final part to this project, assessment. For those students who completed all the assignments to post photographs and make comments on the photos of others, we also provided an opportunity to earn a digital open badge. Students earned the badge by taking an online LESCANT quiz, and then using a site such as badgr (https://badgr.com/), to display their badge on various social media platforms. Additionally, one beautiful evidence that students benefit from this project is that some students continued to send more photographs to me after the semester was over, "Prof. Kelm, I took this picture yesterday because I thought of LESCANT when I saw…"

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that traditional teaching methodologies are perhaps less *messy*. That is to say, read a chapter, listen to a lecture, take a quiz, these are all easier to control. However, if our objective is to engage students actively, invite them to observe and identify the cultural issues around them, move beyond the classroom and enable them share this with others, then we need a new pedagogical strategy to do so. The use of a photo portfolio has been a successful way for us to do exactly that. We used Pathbrite.com, but the activity is more significant than the actual software used. My recommendation is to adopt the concept, with flexibility in using available software.

Second, we utilized the LESCANT approach to provide a context for the cultural observations, but any other model will serve the same purpose. The important thing is to give students a system in which they can analyze the cultural norms around them. What we can affirm is that students observed things around them while thinking of Language, Environment, Social Organization, Context, Authority, and Time. It proved to be a valuable tool.

And finally, we applied this methodology in three distinct situations: adult professionals in the U.S., undergraduate students who were studying abroad, and students in their own countries who also shared their portfolios with others in a different country. We had equally successful results in all three cases. In a program that aims to train professionals who will deal in cross-cultural communication settings, we are anxious to continue to develop this methodology and provide learners with opportunities to build cultural portfolios.

In full disclosure, there are a few tweaks and modifications that we still need to apply to the methodology. For example, initial training for Pathbrite always seems to always have a glitch somewhere. Some students do not set their comments to public or others do not know how to create categories to sort the photos. We continue to modify instructions in the syllabus, and often offer help from a TA, but these cases still come up. Another challenge is that usually at some point during the semester some students take photographs of things that are "cool" but fail to actually connect the photograph to a cultural issue. We work to give students constant reminders to focus on cultural issues and not just take photographs of cool things. And finally, in academic settings we always face the challenge of how to score and give grades. To date our grading rubric has not effectively differentiated the A students from the B students. Student grades are based on the

posting of the photos, the written justification of the cultural issue, and the comments and questions that students write about others' photos. A solution to this challenge has yet to be resolved.

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