

Chapter 24

New Era, New Media, and New Strategies for Cross-Cultural Collaborative Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to share a cross-cultural project between Taiwan and the United States for educational practitioners. Taking advantage of Web 2.0 applications as facilitators, the project served as action research to discover better strategies for conducting online cross-cultural collaboration. Specifically, the authors describe the evolution of the instructional design of the project and the difficulties encountered during the cross-cultural collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

With increasing globalization and the exponential growth of communication technologies, people with a global vision and the ability to collaborate internationally are increasingly becoming sought-after members of society. Thus, the question becomes how can institutions provide higher education students with the training needed to become global citizens who have cross-cultural empathy? Although the strategy of global learn-

ing through short-term study abroad can achieve this goal (Donnelly-Smith, 2009), due to limited resources, it is almost impossible for students to go abroad on a regular basis. Thus, an increasingly important issue has become how to use online technologies to link students in higher education in order to fostering intercultural awareness. The major issue is if higher education, through the use of technology, can prepare students to become culturally responsive global citizens. Underlying this question is the challenge of adopting

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appropriate pedagogical and learning activities to infuse technology into the learning process (McRae, 2006).

Out of a desire to discover which strategies would work in the virtual learning environment, the authors of this chapter initiated a project to connect – via online media – over one hundred college students in Taiwan and the United States in the winter of 2007. The cross-cultural collaboration begun at that time has continued every fall semester since. From the start of this relationship, the project involved Web 2.0 applications, and the intention was they would decrease the burden of administrative work on school technology staff and encourage conversations among students after the class had ended. More importantly, Web 2.0 applications are generally free for use and their interfaces are continually improving in order to make them more accessible to everyone. As a result, in this new era of globalization, it is a meaningful challenge for educators to take advantage of Web 2.0 applications and create a virtual environment for cross-cultural student collaboration.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce how the project was conducted and what instructional design was applied throughout the project. In examining these issues, we share the evolution of the instructional design of the project as well as the difficulties we encountered and the compromises we made during the cross-cultural collaboration. The chapter also presents student feedback and recommendations for improvement as well as reflections from the teachers and facilitator involved in this project. The chapter then concludes by suggesting components readers might consider in order to conduct more successful cross-cultural collaborations in educational contexts.

BACKGROUND

Although culture has been acknowledged as an important factor to be considered during the process of instructional design (Henderson, 1996;

McLoughlin, 1999; Reeves & Reeves, 1997; Wang, 2004), a need exists to translate these cultural considerations into practice (Rose, 2005). In the cross-cultural setting of this project, cultural differences actually became learning materials for nurturing intercultural competence related to a range of activities (Byram, 1995).

Interestingly, for almost 20 years, educators have been exploring the application of technology to connect students and teachers from different nations and cultures (Davis, Cho, & Hagenson, 2005). As Davis (1999) pointed out, the motivation for making such connections was the belief that education was now operating in a global context, and technology could increase access to education on an international scale. As a result, providing pre-service teachers with an opportunity to learn from peers in other cultures could equip those teachers with the skills needed to become effective educators within global contexts. These same experiences could be used to provide students with similar kinds of experiences in order to make them more effective global citizens.

Culture and Communication in Cyberspace

For example, a study conducted by Shaughnessy, Ross, and Jackson (2008) examined 18 specialist primary and secondary teachers in the Teachers' International Professional Development Programme in UK. The researchers found that, in addition to mutual commitment and enthusiasm, factors important to the success of collaborative international projects included the development of a good working partnership in a short space of time, the ability to collaborate effectively on projects, and an underlying belief that the project could support realistic curriculum goals. The same study also identified workload and time commitments as two frequently cited reasons for lack of success of collaborative international projects.

Other research in this area reveals additional factors to consider in creating such relationships.

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