

Chapter 4

Building Knowledge without Borders:

Using ICT to Develop a Binational Education Research Community

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to report on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a “leveling device” between colleagues dispersed across the United States and México, who shared similar education research interests but came from different research traditions. The author reports on the use of various ICT tools in a process that began in 2006 with a small planning group distributed across México and the United States; grew to include additional participants who met face-to-face in Monterrey, México, in 2007; and continued afterward into 2008 through ICT-mediated mechanisms that were structured to maintain purposeful linkages among colleagues dispersed across two countries. Through this slow, deliberate process, the participants increased their capacity for achieving a broader focus on a shared problem as a research community by learning each other’s perspectives. The strategic use of ICT to support collaboration across borders—in real time and asynchronously—assisted in building a binational education research community.

INTRODUCTION

Does information and communication technology (ICT) make a difference in teaching and learning? This question has been asked many times over the last one hundred years in distance education. Thomas Russell (1999) has compiled a volume of 355 studies that suggest, surprisingly, that in

many cases there was no significant difference in outcomes between those who learned with advanced technologies of the day and those who used more traditional, face-to-face approaches. Few, if any, of these studies focused explicitly on reciprocal models of any kind in a binational setting, where all participants were learning from each other.

Sharmilla Basu Conger (2005) asks, “If it is true that there is no significant difference, then

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why should we care?” This question is especially important when considering the use of information and communication technology to facilitate development communication that will lead to social equality and justice among collaborators who may begin their efforts with differences in research traditions and education policy and practice contexts. She tells us that we should care because we need to examine the methodological soundness of over 100 years of research on differences between mediated and face-to-face instruction. She points out that in many of these studies inadequate attention was paid to a variety of additional variables (e.g., learner characteristics, instructional method, and media attributes or technology affordances). On this basis alone, Conger concludes that many of these studies were flawed. They were also flawed because they were not grounded in educational theory. Despite their shortcomings, Conger posits that they provide context for similar studies that do control for these variables, that ask the right research questions, and that do not start from the assumption that face-to-face interaction is the only gold standard in learning and professional development. This concern is especially critical in a binational context.

In a global context, different worldviews come into contact with each other at unimaginably quick rates. Where one’s assumptions can result in unintended consequences of global proportions, any assumptions about the value of face-to-face and online learning environments must also be framed by this question: Does information and communication technology make a difference in capacity building for social justice, equality, and equity? In a technology-mediated environment that links participants with collaborators from other nation-states and continents, it can be easy to forget the linguistic, cultural, economic, and other asymmetries among them. As a support system for the real environment, it is important that technologists take heed of reality in designing virtual applications that will bring together collaborators who might never come into contact

with each other to the extent they are able with ICT support.

These questions frame this report on an ICT-mediated professional development process that (a) began with a small planning group distributed across México and the United States, (b) grew to include additional participants who met in a mountaintop conference setting in Monterrey, México, and (c) continues through ICT-mediated mechanisms that are structured to maintain linkages among colleagues who are dispersed across two countries.

BACKGROUND

This report represents one person’s impressions about a professional development process among education researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers around shared interests and concerns in an environment rich with institutional, organizational, political, cultural, instructional, and other asymmetries related to teaching and learning English in México and Spanish in the United States. I served as a participant observer in this process and introduced various information and communication technology to serve particular purposes throughout the process. For instance, when the planning group outgrew a telephone conference call from one of the participants’ phone numbers, I arranged for a free conference calling service where everyone called an outside number to meet. Also, I developed and reorganized the website from a planning tool at the beginning of the project, to a publicity tool, to an archive of symposium activities, culminating in its use to organize binational collaborators around the development of a multimedia resource book. For the face-to-face meeting in Monterrey, I advised on information and communication technology used to facilitate communication across two languages—Spanish and English. We multi-tasked the simultaneous translation services to serve two purposes: first, to facilitate communication between monolingual

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