



Online intercultural sister classes

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Intercultural competence, while a goal of many language classes, is difficult to achieve when the sole representative of the target culture is the teacher. Authentic communication and frequent contact with others from the target culture would be a great advantage. In intercultural online sister class exchanges, students gain insight to the target culture based on online discussion that takes place with students from that culture. Many exchanges have gone well, with students gaining insight and expressing satisfaction. Others have gone badly, with open confrontations occurring and students developing negative attitudes towards the target people and cultures they are interacting with. Through examining case studies of exchanges, underlying reasons for the successes and the failures become apparent. By looking at the details of four prominent case studies, the parameters that exist within these exchanges can be explored, and guidelines for planning successful exchanges can be constructed.

「異文化コミュニケーションコース能力」を身に付けることは、多くの外国語授業の目的であるが、担当教員のみが対象文化の出身である場合は難しい。対象となる文化の人々とほんのうの意思疎通を図り頻繁に触れ合うことは、大いに学習者のためになるであろう。オンラインを使った「異文化間交流授業」においては、学生は対象文化の学生とオンライン上で議論をしながら、対象文化を理解していく。これまで多くの交流がうまく行われており、学生達は洞察力を身に付け、交流授業に満足している。しかしながら、うまく行っていないケースもある。あからさまに対立したり、対象文化に対して消極的な態度をとる学生もいる。このような交流についての事例研究を行うことによって、成功例と失敗例の両方の根底に潜む原因が明白になる。5つの顕著な事例の詳細を検討することによって、このような交流に内在する要因が調査され、うまく行く交流を計画するための指針を作り上げることができる。

In culture and language classes around the world, students often study the target culture and language with very little exposure to the real thing. Communication with native speakers of the target language and culture is frequently limited to conversations with their teacher. If we wish our students to have realistic views of their target culture and language, authentic communication and frequent contact with native speakers would be a great asset. To this end, intercultural online sister class exchanges, in which students in two different cultures communicate with each other via the Internet, are becoming a common way to expose students in a more personal way to the target foreign culture.

While intercultural online sister classes hold much promise, facilitating a positive exchange is not easy. There is a wide range of exchanges that have taken place, from positive exchanges where students walk away with increased understanding of the target culture and pleasant memories to negative exchanges in which misunderstanding and prejudice are the results.

In this article, I ask and attempt to answer the following question – How can facilitators of intercultural online sister classes construct, implement, and facilitate a plan which will eliminate as many obstacles to successful exchanges as possible? I will attempt to answer these questions by addressing this issue through a literature review of four case studies which exemplify a range of negative and positive intercultural learning exchanges. First, the four case studies and the main findings of each will be described. Next, the reasons for the success or failure of the four case studies will be explored. Finally, what we can learn from comparison of these case studies, and how to use this knowledge to better plan our own exchanges, is described.

Online intercultural sister classes—the four case studies

Case study 1

Language(s): Spanish and English

Students: Second year university students in Leon, Spain and London, England.

CMC Type: E-mail

Goal: To identify the factors which successfully lead to intercultural learning/sensitivity/communicative competence in virtual exchanges

Results: Positive and negative

In this extensive and well-researched article, O’Dowd (2003), who is the teacher of the students in Spain and the researcher asks the question, “What must occur in an intercultural e-mail exchange in order for [intercultural] learning to be achieved?” (p. 121). In his study, students completed a number of tasks designed to help them learn more about their partner’s culture and their own. O’Dowd (2003) found that the students who had successfully developed aspects of intercultural communicative competence had; 1) a receptive e-mail partner, 2) engaged in dialog about their target and home cultures, 3) completed tasks in an in-depth way, and 4) engaged in and enjoyed non-task related dialogue.

In addition, O’Dowd (2003) identified characteristics of e-mails that enabled students to develop a “successful and interculturally rich” (p. 138) relationship with their partner. These included providing their partner with analysis and personal opinion, asking questions which encouraged feedback and reflection, and developing a personal relationship with their partner instead of merely focusing on tasks.

Case study 2

Language(s): German and English

Students: A teacher education Proseminar at Justus-

Liebig-Universitfit (JLU) in Gießen, Germany, and a fourth-semester German class, at Penn State University, USA.

CMC Type: E-mail, synchronous chat, and Web-based information exchange (e.g., the construction of Web sites)

Goal: To examine the ways in which society and institution may have meaning for the development and execution of a German-American telecollaborative partnership

Results: Mostly negative

Belz's (2002) study was besieged by problems from the onset. The German students wrote in English that was at a much higher level than the German of the American students. This affected most, though not all, of the partner pairs and led to feelings of incompetency on the part of the Americans. The German students were disappointed that they did not get to establish a personal relationship with the American students. The German students had many technical problems that affected their participation, so American students felt like they were constantly waiting for e-mail from their partners. In the final phase of the project, student groups were supposed to develop a website containing a bilingual essay. Here open confrontation broke out because of the Americans' serious focus on the task and their concern with their grade for the course, which was not important for the German students, who saw the project as a chance to communicate with Americans, in the words of one student, "only a fun-e-mail-writing-thing" (p. 69). The author attributes these problems to the differences in grading systems of American and German universities.

However, the difference in grading systems is not the main problem. It seems that not enough preparation had gone into planning this exchange. Had the teachers discussed what the goals of the exchange were, computer access, how much time their students would be spending on the project and grading issues, many of these problems could have been avoided. Although there were some positive exchanges, overall the teachers failed to predict and deal with problems which arose mainly because of differences in student perceptions of the goal of the exchange.

Case study 3

Language(s): French and English

Students: University students in Evry, France and MIT, Cambridge, USA.

CMC Type: Web-based information exchange; online asynchronous forum; videoconferencing

Goal: To "develop foreign language students' understanding of foreign cultural attitudes, concepts, beliefs... with particular emphasis on the ways in which the Web can be used to reveal those invisible aspects of a foreign culture... and empowering students to construct their own approach to cross-cultural literacy" (p. 55).

Results: Positive

In order to facilitate student learning through experience, Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet (2001) assembled a wide array of materials, including French films and their American remakes, a virtual newsstand with French and

American magazines and newspapers, cultural texts, as well as exercises (questionnaires, opinion polls, etc.) designed to highlight cultural differences. The authors took great pains in choosing materials and setting up the project before introducing it to their students. The students used these source materials to develop hypotheses about the other culture. Students communicated with students from the sister class through asynchronous dialogue in which a wide variety of topics were discussed as a result of the students' previous efforts, such as reading and answering questionnaires. Students read each other's responses and tried to infer reasons for differences in attitudes and formulate hypotheses about how the other culture differed from their own. Students communicated in their native languages, which eliminated possible problems associated with differing levels of L2 ability.

In the end, students could arrive at some conclusions regarding the other culture that have been touched on by "experts", such as the observation that French people are not as concerned with amassing wealth as Americans are. Conclusions were arrived at by negotiating with foreign partners.

The authors clearly show their ambitious goal was achieved. They noted that the students felt that they had learned about the foreign culture they were studying. Students enjoyed direct contact with their counterparts and had a positive experience.

Case study 4

Language(s): German and English

Students: Grade 11 and 12 high school students in Germany, Canada, and the USA

CMC Type: E-mail

Goal: "To examine the way task properties, setting, the roles of teachers and learner, and the structure of interpersonal exchanges in asynchronous e-mail projects influence intercultural learning" (Muller-Hartmann, 2000, p. 129).

Results: Mostly positive

In this descriptive study, Muller-Hartmann (2000) focuses on Candlin's (1989) emphasis on empathy, tolerance, and critical stance. High school students in Germany, Canada, and the USA went through four phases;

- Phase I: Getting to know each other—Establishing cultural identity
Tasks included letters of introduction, short problem-solving activities, and video exchange.
- Phase II: Setting up the dialogue—Project-based exchanges
Students read texts and exchanged views on cultural content.
- Phase III: Intensive "readings"
More intensive discussion of issues raised in Phase II, some negative incidents occur, resulting in one student withdrawing from the course as a result of being criticized for expressing a strong opinion.
- Phase IV: Coordinating perspectives
Collaborative projects reflect issues that have been raised in earlier phases.

Muller-Hartman's focus was on tasks, which he hoped would initiate negotiation of meaning. These tasks triggered dialogues in which all three groups of students learned a great deal about each other's cultures and led to altered views of their own as well. Muller-Hartmann (2000) found that in addition to the importance of task structure, the creation of personal relationships led to active engagement of tasks, leading to intercultural learning. The role of the teacher and teacher preparation in such an exchange is also explored.

Discussion

While different projects have different goals, common goals of intercultural online sister classes include enabling learners to broaden their views of their target culture and to gain personal insight into the other culture. Students are expected to learn that behaviour of others should be interpreted as being linked to a particular cultural context. They must also be willing to distance themselves from their own culture, in order to be able to see it more clearly from a foreigner's point of view.

Intercultural online sister classes use a variety of forms of computer mediated communication (CMC), including e-mail, online forums, chat, and videoconferencing. Via tasks designed to bring critical focus to the exchange, students negotiate understanding of each other's culture. Although a wide variety of cultural items (including texts, videos, online libraries, and images) can be used to stimulate discussion, it is the dialogue that occurs between students that brings true learning and cultural insight. The facilitator is the designer of tasks and mediator of discussion but is not seen as a repository of knowledge. Instead, students construct

knowledge based on their negotiations with each other.

While the dialogue that occurs between students is expected to encourage learning and cultural insight, challenges to one's way of thinking do not always go well and cultural awareness does not always come easily. In fact, in her study, Belz (2002) found that the attitude of the American students towards their German partners worsened as a result of their exchange. Yet in other studies, for example the Cultura Project (Furstenberg et al., 2001), the students gained a great deal of cultural awareness and enjoyed the project very much. To better understand why it is that one exchange was unsuccessful and another successful, we will analyze and compare the case studies further, starting with O'Dowd (2003), where positive and negative exchanges occurred.

O'Dowd (2003) describes a study which was mainly successful. However, two of the partner-pairs failed to gain positive critical cultural awareness. In both cases, male Spanish students seemed to have had the best of intentions in e-mails to their female English partners. They took care to explain their thoughts on their culture and asked for their partner's opinions on various topics. The English students, who were more interested in completing the tasks that been set for them, ignored their partner's efforts to engage them in discussion of their culture. The students failed to connect on a personal level and this led to a superficial completion of tasks. Negative feelings on the part of all four students resulted, with the English students complaining they felt it was hard to get their Spanish counterparts to do anything productive. The Spanish students felt the English were cold and had no interest in learning from them.

The failure to engage each other in meaningful negotiation leading to cultural awareness seems to be the result of differing goals on the parts of the students. The Spanish students focused on the personal aspect of the exchange and the English focused on the tasks. However, the other partner-pairs in O’Dowd’s (2003) study built strong relationships and learned a great deal from each other. These students moved on from the stereotypes and prejudices they had expressed in interviews and questionnaires at the beginning of the exchange. In the cases where interaction was successful, goals were compatible and a strong combination of personal and task-oriented exchange was the result.

This brings up two important issues—those of goals and tasks. In his article, Müller-Hartmann (2000, p. 130) states, “the degree to which one is able to understand others and oneself, and to learn interculturally, depends on learners’ ability to open up to each other on an emotional plane, and on the degree to which they are involved in meaningful activities that allow for negotiation of meaning.” Müller-Hartmann puts Candlin’s (1989, pp. 14-15) “range of problem-posing and problem-solving pedagogic classroom tasks” at the center and notes Candlin’s emphasis on empathy and tolerance as well as his critical stance in task design. Müller-Hartmann found that appropriate tasks led to a great deal of intercultural learning in most of the exchanges that occurred and focuses on the importance of in-class face-to-face discussion for the students to make progress in their cultural understanding.

Although tasks form the basis of his method, Müller-Hartmann’s (2000) Phase 1 is “Getting to know each other—Establishing cultural identity” in which he invites

students to interact in precisely the kind of exchange that was missing from O’Dowd’s (2003) problem pairs. Initial tasks included exchanges of engaging introduction letters and cultural information packages. Müller-Hartmann focuses on the importance of interpersonal interaction in bringing about positive exchanges. Most of the students in his study successfully combined personal interaction with on-task activities and wrote in a style called “talking writing” which exhibits the following characteristics (Müller-Hartmann 2000, p. 136);

1. “sounds” like dialogue
2. often includes direct questions or answers
3. often asks for elaboration and clarification
4. builds a “conversation” on previous talking writing
5. refers to cultural, regional, and personal material not apparently related to the text, frequently contains slang, humor, and a sense of playfulness

Müller-Hartmann (2000) notes that the students whose notes exhibited “talking writing” established strong bonds and this may have led to their intensive negotiation of meaning in on-task exchanges. Since their relationship was secure, students could accept different views, leading to changes in their perception of the target culture.

Similar goals and the building of strong partnerships are two of the many variables that can help bring about a positive outcome to an intercultural online sister class exchange. In Belz’s (2002) study, differing goals and impersonal relationships combined with other variables (differing levels of linguistic ability, access to computers,

technical problems) to bring about complete failure. What is of interest is that the author attributes the failure of the exchange to differences in the grading systems of Germany and the USA. For German students the course was pass/fail while American students were concerned about their grade, which meant focusing on tasks at the expense of building stronger personal relationships.

While this difference was one reason for the project's failure, it seems the major problem was instead the failure of the facilitators to predict potential problems and deal with them before the project began. Their students came into the project with different goals, timetables, degree of access to computers, and linguistic ability. It seems the facilitators did not consider these differences before beginning the exchange.

This inability to predict potential problems can become catastrophic. To avoid this, "scenario planning" (Rowan & Bigum, 2001, p. 96) can be invaluable. Scenario planning involves looking at all the variables which could affect the exchange, making predictions, and eliminating as many variables as possible which could lead to negative exchanges. Contingency plans are drawn up before the exchange begins. In Belz's (2002) case, had the facilitators discussed the differences in the expectations on both sides, perhaps the exchange would have been called off. This may have been more desirable, as the result of this study was Americans coming to believe Germans were lazy and had no work ethic despite thinking Germans were hardworking and industrious before the study began.

An excellent example of solid planning can be seen in the Cultura Project (Furstenberg et al., 2001). While not all

researchers or teachers have the facilities and infrastructure available at MIT and the University of Paris, it was by building their project on a solid foundation of constructivist pedagogy from the beginning that the researchers ensured a meaningful experience for their students.

We need to do more than link computers: We need to construct an approach to how other people, in other cultures, experience their world. The Cultura project situates itself within a fully constructivist pedagogical approach to learning—an approach whereby students themselves gradually construct an understanding of the subject matter, at the intersection of language, communication, and culture. (Furstenberg et al., 2001, p. 56).

Their careful and time-consuming preparations resulted in students observing that "what is regarded as perfectly acceptable or mainstream within one culture can be perceived very differently when seen through the eyes of another culture, and that reactions to a given situation are often based upon culturally different underlying assumptions" (Furstenberg et al., 2001, p. 64). These observations go to the heart of critical cultural awareness, in which behaviour of others is understood and interpreted as belonging to a particular cultural context. This is the result of a meticulously planned and well-supported study.

This brings up the role of the teacher. Of note is that in the case studies in which the exchanges brought about positive effects and cultural awareness (Furstenberg et al., 2001; O'Dowd, 2003; and Müller-Hartmann, 2000) there is a great deal of attention paid to the role of the facilitator. O'Dowd (2003) found that his students did not know how

to compose effective e-mails, so he set up guidelines for interpreting e-mails from the other culture, as well as posting examples of what he perceived to be good messages. Müller-Hartmann points to the importance of the teacher's own "intercultural competence" (p. 140) as well as their ability to develop appropriate tasks to initiate negotiation of meaning between students. Furstenberg et al. (2001) contribute a list of pitfalls for the teacher to help the student to avoid, such as interpreting too literally what is said or written, which could lead to misinterpretations and making hasty generalizations and unfounded observations of the other culture. Although the authors of these studies differ in how they see the role of the teacher, the point is that they all see the teacher's role as important to the success of online exchanges. In Belz's (2002) study, where mostly negative exchanges resulted, the role of the teacher is not described.

Conclusion

These case studies (Belz, 2002; Furstenberg et al., 2001; Muller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd, 2003) exemplify many of the variables which exist in intercultural online sister classes. While many are uncontrollable, for example the personalities of the students and how they react in various situations, others are predictable and avoidable. Careful planning, a skilled and dedicated facilitator, adequate support, and appropriate tasks are part of the recipe that can bring about a positive exchange. A thorough appreciation for the special parameters which exist in online environments is essential in avoiding potential pitfalls.

Several key strategies can help to improve the chances of success for a particular exchange project. Scenario planning

helps to predict and minimize potential pitfalls. Also, sister classes should have similar goals, timetables, and access to computers. While it may be difficult or impossible to find a perfect match, eliminating as many potential obstacles as possible should be a priority for planning a successful exchange.

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