

New Educational Environments Aimed at Developing Intercultural Understanding While Reinforcing the Use of English in Experience-Based Learning

Nuevos entornos educativos destinados a desarrollar la comprensión intercultural y a reforzar el uso del inglés mediante el aprendizaje basado en experiencias

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New learning environments with communication and information tools are increasingly accessible with technology playing a crucial role in expanding and reconceptualizing student learning experiences. This paper reviews the outcome of an innovative course offered by four universities in three countries: Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Course objectives focused on broadening the understanding of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples primarily in relation to identity as it encouraged students to reflect on their own identity while improving their English skills in an interactive and experiential manner and thus enhancing their intercultural competence.

Key words: Communication technologies, experiential learning, identity, indigenous peoples, intercultural understanding.

Cada vez es más fácil tener acceso a nuevos entornos de aprendizaje que utilizan herramientas de comunicación e información en las que la tecnología desempeña un papel crucial en la expansión y la reconceptualización de las experiencias de aprendizaje del estudiante. En este artículo se revisa el resultado de un curso innovador que se ofreció en cuatro universidades de tres países: Canadá, Estados Unidos y México. Los objetivos del curso se centraron en ampliar la comprensión de los pueblos indígenas y no indígenas, en particular en relación con la identidad. Esto alentó a los estudiantes a reflexionar sobre su propia identidad, a la vez que mejoraban sus habilidades del inglés de una manera interactiva y experimental, logrando así mejorar su competencia intercultural.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje experiencial, comprensión intercultural, identidad, pueblos indígenas, tecnologías de la comunicación.

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Introduction

Daily interaction with people having different values, gestures, social mores, and ways of perceiving reality seems to have become without a doubt the norm rather than the exception in a world where we seem to be living in each other's backyards (Finger & Kathoefter, 2005; Friedman & Berthoin, 2005). In an increasingly more globalized and consequently more culturally diverse world, finding effective ways to help students acquire meaningful intercultural competence has become an important goal.

This paper reports on a project that involved undergraduate students from four universities in three neighboring countries; the United States, Canada and Mexico, who used technological resources to create an intercultural community of mutual learning. With the aid of technology and telecommunications, the opportunity to create an intercultural classroom where learning networks were constructed became a reality. The overall aim of this project was to encourage students to reflect on their own identity, interactively and experientially, and thus enhance their intercultural competence, improve their skills in English as a foreign language, and cross cultural borders, all through the use of computer technology, which enabled them to communicate actively in a virtual environment. Helping our students communicate with other students of different nationalities and cultures required aiding them in developing themselves "as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, p. 10).

Recent advances in information and communication technologies, particularly the effective use of virtual classrooms and the Internet, have given new meaning to geographical boundaries as distance

becomes increasingly irrelevant. This paper demonstrates how a mediated collaborative educational endeavor using communication technology can help students acquire experience and skills in intercultural communication, foreign language learning and computer-mediated communication, thus fulfilling several important educational objectives. According to Grosse (2002, pp. 22-23) "learning how to handle the technology and dealing with different cultures can pose the biggest challenges". The project described in this article gave our students the opportunity to experience some of these challenges first-hand through an approach to 'using' experience for learning. The results and implications of this project will be discussed.

Background of the Closing the Distance Education Project

In late 2002 the Closing the Distance Education Partnership Project (CDEPP) was first conceived by a group of university professors who were interested in providing their students with the opportunity to learn and work with students of different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds without having to rely on their physical presence in the classroom. In the summer of 2003 a partnership was formed among four institutions of higher education: the University of Wisconsin-Stout, USA (UW-S), University of South Dakota-Vermillion, USA (USD), First Nations University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada (FNU) and the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico (BUAP). Representatives of these four universities –in three neighboring countries with very different historical experiences and cultural heritages– met together in a virtual class experience over a period of 18 months, communicating via Internet and phone calls. They then came together in Puebla, Mexico, in the summer of 2003 to sit down and develop a multi-disciplinary course that would satisfy the general and specific interests of each.

After considerable discussion of the different interests involved, the participating professors and authorities from the four universities named the course: *The Peoples of North America: Identity, Change and Relationships*, which reflected the main themes to be studied in the course. The primary goal of this cybernetic course was to provide students of diverse cultural backgrounds opportunities to enhance their learning by bringing the diversity of the larger world into the classroom. The objective was to use experiential learning methodology applied in a nontraditional way to create a sense of community within the virtual classroom, despite the distance and variations in culture and language among the students. Central to accomplishing this task was the understanding that increasing intercultural awareness among students contributes to the overall education of all students, whatever their cultural, racial or ethnic background. In today's pluralistic world, which is becoming closer and smaller through technology, it is believed that those whose education has prepared them to work effectively and respectfully in a diverse global community will be more successful.

The general description of this course leaned heavily upon exploring relationships among both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of North America (see Appendix). One variation in the title and course description on the part of First Nations University by instructor William Asikinack was: *Systems of Indigenous Identity, Culture and Society*, with the following course description: This course will examine concepts central to Indigenous identity, including those categorized as cultural, social and psychological. The holism of Indian perspectives will be demonstrated.

In the UW-s syllabi the following details about the course were given:

This is an experimental course and for most of you unlike any other course you have taken. Perhaps the best skill you can

bring to the course is a sense of adventure and a sincere desire to learn. Because of the experimental nature of the course, we, your instructors, cannot predict exactly where we will go or where we will end, except to say that we will most certainly have a profound learning experience. No one else in North America has been enrolled in a course of this nature. You are the first.

At the BUAP information was sent to students in different career areas of social science and the humanities, who, having shown a good command of the English language, might be interested in participating in the course. The invitation stated:

Come and take part in a new, experimental, multicultural course where you will have the opportunity to interact with students from Canada, and the USA and actively practice your English. This course aims to foster intercultural understanding and appreciation of native and non-native cultures through unique experiential learning experiences available through the "magic" of technology in a virtual e-learning classroom.

Our interest as educators was to establish a dialogue among students coming from these three North American countries with 3 different official languages and many differences in their diverse socio-economic, racial, ethnic, geographic and political backgrounds. By creating an uncommon experiential learning environment through the use of the latest technology and telecommunications tools, we hoped to provide our students a creative, rewarding educational experience that would ultimately succeed in preparing them to live and work successfully in a global society.

Our hope was that the experiential learning experiences offered by this course would supplement overall classroom-based learning experiences and give students the opportunity to cross cultural borders and put the theories they were learning in class into practice. Although students participating in the CDEPP were not engaging in an experiential learning experience in the classic sense

(e.g. a study-abroad experience), they were in fact coming face to face with experiential learning every time they entered the virtual classroom and met with their classmates and teachers from different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. While learning theory is important, real-life experience offers students opportunities to encounter the complexities of intercultural communication, to connect what they learn in class to what occurs in the real world, and to question their own beliefs and assumptions when dealing with behavior and practices that may not fit their pre-existing ideas. According to Cheney (2001, p. 91), “experiential methods are ideal for intercultural communication precisely because *culture is experienced*” (emphasis was given in the original). “Ultimately, the intercultural journey seems to be one of facing ourselves as we become aware of and responsible for the meanings we create and through which we then interpret our experiences” (Seelye, 1996, p. 12).

In this article, we shall first assess the relevant pedagogical uses of communication technology in the creation of a non-typical experiential educational experience and review the important role that experiential learning plays in a long-distance intercultural classroom setting. Next, we will present the course objectives and describe the way the course was organized. We shall conclude by discussing the outcomes of the project, hence exploring the overall implications with respect to learner interaction throughout its duration.

Literature Review

Computer Technology – A Pedagogical Tool

It is increasingly obvious that information and communication technologies (cellular telephones, iPod Touch, iPads, etc.) have become an essential

part of life –at home, at work, or in almost any setting– for a great number of people in the world today. The Nielsen Company, a market research group, affirm in their Social Media Report (2010) that social networking is the number one activity online, and it has increased by 43 per cent since 2009. Accordingly, Americans spend one third of their time online, networking and communicating through social networking sites (over 906 million hours a month).

It has been found that using technology as a teaching tool promotes student participation and interaction (Absalom & Marden, 2004; Boles, 1999; Campbell, 2004). Absalom and Marden (2004, p. 421) found that having their students engage in e-mail exchange “encourages the most reticent students to participate”. Computer-mediated technology and live online interaction can open up and create educational spaces that entice students to communicate in different, creative ways, and to explore and learn about other cultures. Through computer technology collaborative learning is enhanced (Eastman & Swift, 2002; Li, 2002) and it has acquired a new meaning. In addition, “collaborative learning promotes higher achievement as well as personal and social development” (Li, 2002, p. 504).

Reich and Daccord (2008) point out that the best use of technology comes when “teachers are doing less of the teaching and students do more of the learning” (p. xvii). Activities that require students to work in groups with one another via computer technologies are being used more and more to encourage peer collaboration. Student-centered activities with a technological component foster creativity and empower students to take charge of their own learning. In the e-learning model students not only work individually, but also engage in collaborative learning for gathering information, examining issues and resolving problems.

Communication technology has added a new dimension to intercultural education, offering students and teachers the opportunity to step out of the classroom and transcend geographical boundaries without need of a passport or visa. It is clear from the literature reviewed that the influence of communication technologies on teaching and learning goes beyond the classroom. E-mail, chat rooms, Facebook, computer conferencing and so on are tools that can “offer contemporary students and faculty truly extraordinary potential for re-designing and expanding the learning environment” (Bazzoni, 2000, p. 101). Computer-mediated communication provides a framework for teaching and learning from a distance.

The Importance of Experiential Learning in Acquiring Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is essential for good communication with people from a different culture. In a broad sense, being interculturally competent means being open to trying to understand and respect people from other cultures when communicating with them in any form. All the participants of the CDEPP considered exploration of the intercultural dimension of people from different cultures as something of utmost importance since that was the driving force that brought us together to design and teach *The Peoples of North America: Identity, Change and Relationships*.

The intercultural dimension is concerned with -helping learners to understand how intercultural interaction takes place, -how social identities are part of all interaction, -how their perceptions of other people and others people's perceptions of them influence the success of communication -how they can find out for themselves more about the people with whom they are communicating. (Byram et al., 2002, p. 15)

Helping students develop skills for discovery and interaction, behaviors that constructively express feelings e.g. tolerance, respect, empathy, compassion, and flexibility, which will ultimately lead them to understanding the “other” (Seelye, 1996, p. 14), clearly expresses the fundamental views that the CDEPP were founded upon:

In such work, we are leading and supporting people to explore new views of reality and to develop new frames of reference for categorizing and explaining behavior. We are suggesting that one can adjust to new ways of being and doing and that life will be richer and deeper for having encountered differences. We call attention to strategies for encountering change, unfamiliarity, and ambiguity in creative ways. Our work demonstrates that it is both possible and positive to realize that what is taken as “common sense” is indeed “cultural sense”. It becomes possible to see that the consensual reality in which one lives is only real to the extent that one believes and accepts the power of that consensus. And we suggest that such realization is partner to the development of consciousness, that is, the capability to become self-reflective about habits of heart and mind and the ways these are expressed in daily life.

The importance of introducing students to new perspectives beyond those of their particular community is fundamental to successful learning. Experiential learning requires reflection and critical analysis of experiences in order to make the experiences educational (Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Silcox, 1993; Welch, 1999). In preparing them for living and working together in global communities it is important that students are given the opportunity to search other points of view and ways of thinking. When dealing with problem-based education it is clear that this is crucial, for it is impossible to solve a problem without first analyzing and understanding the nature of it. The initial analysis leads to the development of a hypothesis, which must be tested on some kind of action. This then requires further analysis and reflection, as it is in this

reflection that learners come to make sense out of the new information and experiences (Silcox, 1993).

Much of the literature that revolves around intercultural learning strongly emphasizes problem-posing education. This kind of learning involves the whole student on both the affective and cognitive levels because it engages the learner in the learning process by connecting the subject matter to the student's life or way of thinking, which is strongly influenced by his/her cultural, ethnic and racial background. Consequently, Shor (1993, p. 26) notes that, "Through problem-posing, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions. In this pedagogy, students experience education as something they do, not as something done to them".

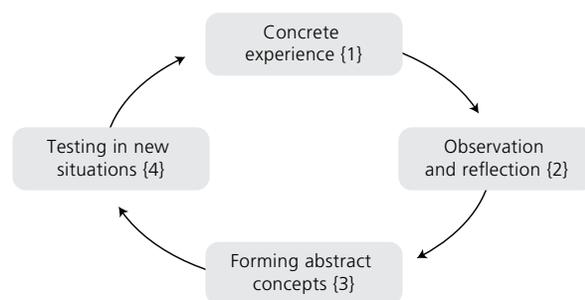
Philosophies of experiential education built upon Jean Piaget's model of learning and cognitive development take into account learning in different contexts. Learning takes place as people test concepts and theories based on experiences they have lived, and from these experiences develop new concepts and theories. As denoted by Piaget, there must be a balance between these two processes. Citron and Kline (2001) place learning "in the mutual interaction of the process of accommodation of concepts or schemas to experience in the world and the process of assimilation of events and experiences from the world into existing concepts and schemas". Similarly, organizational theorist Kurt Lewin (1952) argued in the 1940s that personal and organizational development results from a process in which people set goals, theorize about prior experience, then test their theories through new experiences, and finally revise their goals and theories after evaluating the results of the new experiences.

It is important to remember that experiential education is embedded in constructivist theories of teaching and collective or cooperative learning.

Constructivist theory proposes that knowledge is constructed individually and collectively as people reflect upon their experiences, thereby converting experience into knowledge (Geary, 1995). According to this theory, meaning is not intrinsic in experience. Rather, knowledge is socially constructed as people observe and interpret it (McNamee & Faulkner, 2001; Searle, 1995). Kolb (1984, p. 41) agrees when he states that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience".

Kolb (1984) illustrated a "simple description of the learning cycle" based on the above-mentioned work of Kurt Lewin (1952), which is still relevant today. As can be seen in Figure 1, the cycle begins with a concrete experience, followed by observation and reflection, which are assimilated into the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations from which suggestions, ideas or implications for action are realized. Lastly, these lead to testing the idea or implications of concepts in new situations, followed by another concrete experience, which starts the cycle anew.

Figure 1. Diagram of Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning



According to this model of experiential learning, in order to transform experience into knowledge, learners must begin with their own concrete experience. They then engage in reflective observation and move to a stage of abstract

conceptualization, during which they begin to comprehend the experience, which finally brings them to active experimentation of the concepts. In this model, observation and reflection is an essential component of experiential education.

The cycle is implied as a continuing spiral, where the learning achieved from new knowledge acquired is formulated into a prediction for the next concrete experience. Within the CDEPP we found that as students approached a new intercultural experience, the first part of the cycle was a type of absorption or immersion in the actual “doing” of the readings, questioning or direct interaction. The reflection stage was stepping back from the experience and noticing differences, comparing and contrasting the familiar with the new.

In terms of academic assessment, the most important stage is conceptualization, where students generalize and interpret events by asking: *What does this mean?* Understanding general principles and theories is central for explaining the experience. In the last step testing the new theory or principle in new situations is essential to the learning experience. At this stage, the student has an opportunity to change behaviors or thinking and apply these changes to a new set of circumstances. Specific actions can then be made from direct or inferred reflections that have been refined based on the initial concrete experience. This process involves intentional preparation and the transfer of new knowledge to concrete actions (Montrose, 2002).

Experiential learning is being taken into account more and more by many educational institutions since the relationship between experience and reflection in the experiential learning process insures significant long-term learning. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) endorses this fundamental approach to student-centered learning for a sustainable future claiming that experiential learning

engages students in a concrete experience that involves the learner to make a critical analysis of the situation and enables them to shape new knowledge so that it can be used at a later time when a similar situation is encountered. What makes this an educational endeavor is not so much the activity in and of itself, but it is the analysis of the activity that is made through personal reflection, discussion, writing, or projects that assist the learner to make the transition from experience to integrated meaning and consequently to understanding (Cox, Calder & Fien, 2010; Montrose, 2002).

According to Montrose (2002), experiential learning methodology is intended to promote and encourage a solid academic agenda, where justifiable grades, academic course credit, and concrete experiences can all be integrated, not only in terms of the curriculum and the syllabus, but in daily activities as well. This learning model of obtaining educational results from direct experience can be and is structured, allowing academic credit to be awarded. The experiential learning that takes place in the CDEPP stems from pedagogy that actively engages the student in the phenomena that they are studying. When students develop their own research agenda, engage in critical thinking and test their interpersonal skills, they directly encounter an alternative world view, learning through analysis and reflection, including the consequences of the larger social and ethical implications of this knowledge. This learning approach engages students in an intentional process of critical thinking and hands-on problem-solving. It often develops with the smallest amount of the common institutional structure being presented to the student before the actual learning experience. Students in an experiential learning situation do not memorize and parrot back information: They create and produce their own ideas and work through possible solutions to complex problems. This integration

of concrete action, analysis and reflective thought makes possible the evaluation of the overall learning experience through intentional, measurable learning goals and objectives (Montrose, 2002). As Itin (1999, p. 93) points out: Experiential education engages “carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis”, which are “structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results”.

The Project

Described in this section are the participants of the CDEPP project and how the course was set up and carried out.

Participants and Class Composition

The students and the two professors participating from UW-S were non-indigenous Caucasians, who primarily came from families that had immigrated to the USA from a Scandinavian country at least 2 generations before (the class at UW-S started with 24 students and ended with 18). The participants of FNU were indigenous and included 6 students. Two of the students and the teacher were from the Anishinaabe indigenous group, and the other 4 students were Cree. Of the six students enrolled in the course from USD, 2 were Dakota (Sioux) and 3 Lakota (Sioux) and one Caucasian, non-indigenous; the instructor was mestizo, indigenous-American. The students participating at the BUAP were a mixed group: 7 native Mexicans (mestizo: Spanish-indigenous), 1 exchange student from California who considered herself “Chicana” (daughter of Mexican-born parents who moved to the USA, where she was born), 1 Russian-Ukrainian, and 1 Nicaraguan student. The two participating professors (authors of this article) at the BUAP were Cuban-American, and Native American-Lakota, Sioux from the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

At the end of the course, a total of 40 students –17 men and 23 women– had participated from beginning to end. The majority of the students were in their 3rd year of undergraduate studies and there was one Master’s level student. The youngest student was 20 and the oldest 47. The majority of the students were in their midtwenties. Four men and 2 women professors participated in the course along with 1 special guest speaker, Joseph Marshall III, a Lakota scholar and writer from Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Class Procedures

The class was held every Tuesday morning from 9 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. (in Canada an hour earlier) for 13 weeks and was structured in the following manner:

- Segment one - Live television lecture led by instructor(s) at one of the universities: 30 minutes.
- Ten minute break.
- Segment two - In-class discussion at each site with video and audio turned off: 30 minutes.
- Segment three - Interactive live television session with all students and professors participating for 45 minutes.
- Five minute break.
- Segment four - online chat/email exchange for 30 minutes, arranged in six groups consisting of students from UW-S and students from USD, FNU, and BUAP.

Total: 180 minutes.

All class sessions were taught in English with all the professors participating in the course. Facilitation alternated among the participating professors (see the course outline at the end of this work with the list of topics presented in this course) in each of the universities. Joseph Marshall III, a visiting professor at the University of South Dakota during the semester in which the course was given, gave

the opening class. His presentation was important in several aspects. Conceivably, however, his most valuable contribution to the course was the precedent he set for all the classes to follow, which was one of total respect, collaboration, and wonder, which invited us all to join in and explore this new unfamiliar territory. Marshall, a very gifted storyteller, used his talents as such in giving this first class. At the end of his presentation, imparted with calmness and clarity, he answered questions. He was very willing to clarify words and concepts not understood by the Spanish-speaking participants and he expanded on many of these to help the non-indigenous students, especially those from UW-s, who, not wanting to offend their indigenous classmates at this first encounter, were unsure of the appropriate terms to use. An important discussion opened on this first day of class, which revolved around the best way to refer to indigenous people of Canada and the USA and from this discussion many misconceptions were aired, reviewed and changed.

The different ideas concerning appropriate vocabulary reflected the cultural differences and stereotypes that students possessed. Examples of these came up often throughout the course. Such pre-assumptions were discussed repeatedly, appearing as important themes in long threads of comments made in e-mail interactions. While the Spanish-speaking students had a good grasp of the English language and were able to receive clarification when needed, the class as a whole seemed to be constantly immersed in an ongoing negotiation of meanings commonly encountered in intercultural situations. And although English was the language of the class, many words and meanings in Spanish and of the 4 indigenous languages spoken by the students in the class were also brought into the virtual classroom, into e-mails and chat session interactions. This opened windows of opportunity

for participants to explore and understand each other more fully.

Course Evaluation

Students' overall grade for the semester was based on the aggregate of three portfolios and was determined by the professor in charge of their class in their home university. Basic rules and requirements for all students participating in this course were the following:

Students were required to keep a weekly process journal that included thoughtful and critical reactions to the following parts of the course:

- readings
- live television lecture
- in-class discussion at Stout
- interactive live television session involving all four universities and three countries
- online e-mail exchanges and chats.

Three times during the semester students were required to turn in a formal portfolio in which they organized the ideas and observations from their weekly process journal into a cohesive narrative showing what they were learning and how their understanding changed. Students were expected to include in these journals quotes from the readings in support of their ideas. Each of these portfolios received a grade.

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|--------------------------------------|-----|
| • Portfolios | 75% |
| • Classroom Citizenship & Attendance | 25% |

Analysis

Qualitative data from approximately 700+ online chats generated in segment 4 of the class, responses to open-ended questions, and information from students' portfolios were all collected and categorized according to themes. These were reviewed and analyzed using the thematic analysis technique. Thematic analysis allowed us to identify themes based on three criteria: recurrence,

repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence refers to the same thread of meaning, in different words, coming up in different parts of the text being analyzed. Repetition refers to the same word, phrase, or sentence, representing an idea or concept, occurring in multiple places. Forcefulness refers to the emphasis given to a particular idea to show its importance or the intensity of the speaker/writer's feelings. Thematic analysis was very helpful in discerning not only themes that emerged within each of the participant's data, but also themes that we found common among all of our students who participated so actively in this course (Zorn & Ruccio, 1998).

Initially to help them interact outside the virtual classroom setting with other students and teachers, students were organized into 6 groups of 6 students each: two students from the UW-s and one student from each of the other universities. Teachers were involved with all the groups. After 2 sessions, this format began to change. Without any teacher intervention, the groups opened up to each other, creating a "free-for-all" where all students eagerly participated. From this point on, all e-mails were sent to everyone in the class and anyone from the class was free to reply to any of the letters and / or all e-mails.

E-mails were answered in different ways and from contrasting perspectives e.g. according to the student, her/his cultural background, language and form of expression. These online discussions were almost all written informally, consisting of a question being posed or an answer to a question already posed. Often the great amount of feedback about comments regarding an email would open to other topics, some related to the class and some not, but all clearly demonstrating a healthy curiosity about what others in the group thought about a topic. Some students became messenger buddies with other students, engaging in online chat ses-

sions, which were usually carried out in a written form, though there were also verbal exchanges. The Mexican students especially enjoyed the verbal exchange although they commented that they inevitably summed up what had been said in writing.

The following is an excerpt of a chain of e-mail exchanges demonstrating how they were conducted, the type of themes that were discussed, how these were started, and how they opened to other related topics dealing with students' interests and concerns. Students' names have been changed to protect their identity. Their enthusiasm and interest in sharing their thoughts on the different class themes can be traced in the following email exchange that begins with comments about the class, thoughts about multicultural metaphors and a bit of family background and interrelated reflections:

Hey ya'll...

Just like everyone else, I'd first like to say that this class is taking off quite well. About the comment from Carl (maybe the wrong spelling, sorry sir): I silently disagreed with your statement that the United States of America is still a "melting pot". I have come to the conclusion that differences in cultures should be celebrated... I apologize for the generalization, white people were the ones that wrote the books, and coined the term "melting pot". For them, this "melting pot" was a way for the United States to justify our apparent lack of understanding other cultures. For example, try to imagine what this shows America as saying: "I don't care about my culture, so why should you?" I for one /do/ care about my culture, and I want to learn more about it. Thanks guys ;)

Hey everyone,

My name is Andy Wilson. I am currently enrolled into the Telecommunications program here at University of Wisconsin-Stout... The main point I would like to address is how most of us from UW-s feel we do not have very strong cultural beliefs. Although, this may not be obvious to us, of course we have all gained some culture from our past. I think we are more susceptible to look past what we have gained from the past and

look at what we have gained from our own lives and beliefs we feel we have decided on. For example with me, I feel work ethic has been a quality and belief that has been engrained in me. This type of quality seems to be part of most of Wisconsin and the Midwest, since we have been acknowledged for our hard work. For instance people within the south and some amongst the east coast have acknowledged Wisconsin for their ideals and hard work. Thanks, Jake

Hey- its Janet and Ginger from Stout. We found today's discussion really interesting because there were many points of view expressed.

My name is Janet and I'm from St. Paul MN. I am Dutch, Welsh, Irish and German. I don't have that strong of a sense of my cultural background but I was introduced to the Mexican culture when I was younger. My best friend/ neighbor since I was 3 wks old is Mexican and we basically grew up together and I took part in celebrations and meals. I have visited Durango Mexico 3 times and stayed for about 3 weeks at a time. I am very interested in either studying abroad or living in Mexico in the future. Although this isn't my heritage, I find it to be a very important part of my life.

My name is Ginger and I'm from Spring Valley, WI. I am German and a little bit Polish. I don't know too much about my cultural background. I am however exposed to different cultures on a regular basis. I work at a hotel so I have the opportunity to meet different individuals from all over the world and they are very willing to discuss their culture. I also work with Mexicans and have learned a lot about the Mexican culture and their traditions. Please E-mail us back and tell us a little about yourselves.

Hello everybody,

This is Ana from Mexico and I would like to say that this is being a great experience for me. I find this course pretty interesting. I must confess that I wasn't aware of many things that have been discussed during these two sessions. And I hope to keep learning more about them. I'd like to learn more about identity and all the factors that influence over the acculturation situation. Ana

Hi to everyone, this is Tere from Mexico I didn't come last class so I couldn't send you a message, so I just want to say that I'm so glad to be in this class, to know you and to learn more about the different cultures represented in this big class. I'm so sorry for the mistakes in my grammar if there is one; you know that I'm still learning. Thank you. bye

I admire you and our classmates in Mexico for taking a class being conducted in a language that is not your first language. I have understood everyone very well. My English isn't perfect either and I am a terrible typist so I hope you understand me, too.
Professor at USD

Students' Reflections on Their Learning Experience

At the end of the course all students were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their learning experience. The majority of students who completed the questionnaire (n=36) found the course very interesting (96%), valuable, meaningful and/or worthwhile (98%), and motivating and fun (95%). They felt that the email and chat exchanges helped them to further understand themes discussed in class (98%), they enjoyed doing the final portfolio project (92%), and they reported they were glad they had participated in the course (98%). 98% said they felt that their opinions about the groups represented in the class had changed significantly and in a positive way. The questionnaire results were supported by comments made in their journals and portfolio reports, but more substantially they came from responses made in email exchanges during the last segment of the class period.

Other questions asked referred to what the students had most enjoyed about the class. Many mentioned having the opportunity to see, hear, talk to and exchange thoughts, questions and ideas with someone from another part of America and a background different from their own. They enjoyed learning about history, culture,

current events, and life in general from real people, not simply from a book, a movie, or a talk show. Our conclusion, based on many of these comments, is that the project indeed fulfilled our objective as it encouraged our students to examine more closely their own beliefs, attitudes, values and feelings. As the course developed they became more keenly aware of any personal ethnocentric feelings they might have or have had, and they began to understand how this could be an obstacle or wall blocking their understanding of others (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). This type of self-reflection about their own self-awareness is also reported and discussed in a research project on email discussions between Taiwanese and American students by Ya-Wen Teng (2005). As noted in the literature related to effective intercultural communication teaching, it should include reflection on one's own culture (Cheney, 2001) to ensure optimal learning.

According to the majority of students' comments about the project, they felt that on the whole, the course allowed them to study, evaluate, and even re-evaluate, different topics and issues from diverse points of view and compare them to their own. Students voiced opinions about their increasing awareness of several ethnocentric attitudes they had had before the course, and how they were able to analyze them with clarity, coming to an understanding of their origin and an awareness of the influences that had sustained them. One student commented:

When I was in Germany in the summer of 2002 I heard the term "towel-heads" in German used to describe people of Islamic faith (mainly Taliban) also is to describe the near two million Turks in southern Germany which differs from the catholic majority. I don't know about Canada or Mexico but there are other countries that have used racial/ethnic denigration. This discussion has made me think about these kinds of attitudes and examine some of my own...surely

not all Arabs are terrorists and not all white males in the Milwaukee area are Jeffrey Dahmers.

Conclusions

The interaction during class time was very lively and interesting, and the participants were very motivated. The voices of the indigenous students were active during the televised parts of class, though in the part of the class that pertained to exchanging written commentaries via email they were not as active. Students at the University of South Dakota seemed slow to engage in the written exchange of comments, but by mid-semester they became quite active. Students in Canada participated a bit less, although the professor participated on a more regular basis, speaking about the situation of the First Nation people of Canada. We suspect that the lack of Internet involvement could have been attributed to insufficient computer and Internet connections and to students' hesitancy to add to the flow of thoughts and ideas.

Professors participated freely in the class and in email interaction, sharing information, clarifying doubts that arose and answering specific questions. There was always plenty of space available for students to carry on the interactions.

At first, the students at the BUAP were a bit timid during the televised sessions and in their written messages. These students felt somewhat apprehensive and shy about speaking and writing in English- a foreign language for most of them. However, after the first couple of sessions they felt more comfortable and engaged in making more comments during the televised part of class as well as in emails.

The students at UW-s were for the most part the *quietest* of all the students during the televised part of the class; even when directly asked, their

participation was low-key. This reaction did not change during the course; however, these students were very active in their Internet communications. They asked questions, expressed thoughts, revised thoughts and opened up much more than we saw in the televised sessions of the class.

When the UW-s students were questioned about their silence in the classroom sessions they answered via email. Here are a few examples of what they said:

Hi Everybody! I just wanted to comment on why Wisconsin, Stout doesn't comment. For me this is all a learning experience, we are able to learn so much about other cultures. The real stories. I feel bad that we don't learn more of other cultures throughout high school, before college. I feel that is part of the ignorance of the US; it's all about us. It seems a lot of the things we learned are only the "good" stories the whites did for the Native Americans. Hopefully through this class we will be able to take our learning farther and one day we can all be a "community". Not so unknowing of each other's countries. And hopefully this will encourage better political interactions, one not so dominant. I love learning about the other cultures; it has definitely broadened my horizons!

Another student wrote:

I couldn't have said it better myself, actually! Most of the time I'm just absorbing all the new information that is coming in! This class has been great; I've learned so many things. Specifically, I'm very proud that I was part of this class; I look forward to sharing my knowledge with others.

From Canada one of the students added to the discussion saying:

I am glad that we all can learn from this class. We need to be aware of different cultures in order to understand. There needs to be a willingness to learn by the other culture before this can happen.

When the course was over, students and teachers alike participated in the overall evalu-

ation. Many positive comments were made. The only negative comments were in reference to the occasional technological difficulties, such as seeing each other but having no sound or vice versa, that occurred during the course. There was also the occasional difficulty in receiving the readings with time enough to read, especially for the Mexicans who needed more time to go through the material. As far as the course itself, the overall evaluation was that it was a very successful and challenging course that really propelled everyone to explore both within and beyond themselves, their communities and their countries. It stimulated thought, challenged old viewpoints and introduced new and different ways of looking at many issues. Student participation in the class, both orally in the televised segments and in the emails was most successful. Students grasped the conceptual framework of the syllabus and commented succinctly on the subject matter. They found the class not only informative, but fulfilling and enriching as well.

In closing, we have chosen one comment of the many that students sent via email or wrote in a final paper relaying their overall feelings about the course:

From a Mexican student:

Now that the course finished our task was to write about all the things that we have been through in this course. First of all I would like to start with some of the topics that were discussed in the course. The theme that I was interested the most was "identity". I remember Mr. Marshall told us that being aware of whom and what we are is very important. I totally agree with this idea. I think that in order to be able to identify ourselves from others first we need to know ourselves better, we need to know where do we come from and finally taking into account all the process that we have passed through we will be able to know what we have become. Although some of us may not like the final product of that process, we still have the opportunity to make some adjustments in order to improve ourselves. I learned the things that I expected to learn

and much more which makes me more than happy. I realized that I still need to learn more about my country and others, it was very interesting to know what other people think about my culture and it was more interesting to tell them the way we see and think about them. I think that all of us learnt many things about each other and everybody was interested on knowing more. In general the course was amazing; I found it more than interesting, helpful and fun. Also my English has improved A LOT!! I really enjoyed each session and I would totally recommend other people to take it, during each session I could learn something new and now I am able to use it in my daily life. This course fulfilled my expectations and went beyond. Thanks to all in the course for helping me to open my eyes and for making of this course an unforgettable experience.

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Appendix: Description of the Course

The Peoples of North America: Identity, Change and Relationships

The main course objectives and outline for the course that were agreed upon and later implemented by the four participating universities in the summer 2003 meeting were:

Main Course Objectives:

1. Broaden the understanding and perspective of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of North America in areas of identity, change and relationships;
2. Prepare students for service within their respective communities;
3. Prepare students for the global society and workplace.

Course Outline:

I. Introduction

- a. Course overview;
- b. Instructor introduction.

II. Identity

Objectives:

- a. Provide students a means and method of understanding the relationship between heritage and identity;
- b. Introduce students to the debates and discussions of concepts such as race, ethnicity and multiculturalism.

III. Ethnocentrism, Stereotyping and Norming.

Objective:

Pose the question of how we think others perceive us, and how we perceive others.

IV. Contemporary Realities- Globalism/Colonialism

Objectives:

- a. Expose students to and discuss the various opportunities and threats presented by globalization;
- b. Ask students to identify the forces that have contributed to their understanding of race and ethnicity.
- c. Introduce students to the widening gap between the rich and poor, both intra-nationally and internationally.

Content Area 1

- Provide students a means and method for understanding the relationships between heritage and identity, and
- Introduce students to the debates and discussions surrounding the concepts of “race, ethnicity, culture and multiculturalism”.

Content Area 2

- Pose the question of how we think others perceive us and how we perceive others.

Content Area 3

- Expose students to and discuss the various opportunities and threats presented by globalization.
- Ask students to identify the forces that have contributed to their understanding of race and ethnicity.
- Introduce students to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, both intra-nationally and internationally.