

ICT Technologies and Intercultural Issues

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Intercultural education can take advantage of new technologies; but risks also exist: the salvation narrative that a value-free communication technology can provide the means to overcome deep social and cultural divisions is pointed out. If we assume that any technology represents a cultural invention, then the Internet embodies the values of its creators: speed, reach, openness, quick response. Is it possible to intercultural learning take place in a not culture-free virtual environment? Potentialities of cyberspace for intercultural learning are singled out: cyberspace has a potential to be a place where individuals engage to manage processes of self-presentation and reality negotiation; computer-based simulation games provide players the opportunity to explore potentially threatening topics in a safer arena to confront cultural differences.

Keywords Interculture; Cyberspace; Computer-based simulation game

1. Myths of Cyberculture

Given the likely increase in intercultural interaction over global computer networks, it becomes apparent that people from different cultures are “on the net”: virtual environments are an increasingly common site of encounter and communication for individuals and groups from multiple cultural backgrounds.

The belief that contact between cultures automatically leads to intercultural learning and to the development of positive attitudes towards the target culture has already been rejected by many [1] and Richter confirms that this is also the case for virtual intercultural contact: “The Internet brings about the contact of cultures, but this does not automatically imply cultural understanding” [2]. Scholars have also found many impediments for intercultural learning in technology-supported exchanges [3]. In contrast, other studies have reported more positive experiences [4]. Little research exists on whether on-line intercultural collaboration does actually develop learners understanding of the other culture’s perspective and world view [5].

Hypothesis that new technologies represent an advantage for intercultural learning is advanced; but risks also exist: the salvation narrative that a value-free communication technology can provide the means to overcome deep social and cultural divisions is point out.

Two technological risks add to the typical ones of communication between different cultures. Each of them reveals an underneath myth:

- a first myth considers cyberspace as a pure space – almost a brave new world – where the self-expression gets rid of stereotypes;
- a second myth is thinking that technology is neutral as regards the system of values and cultures.

The following image is an effective representation of these myths.

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The image promotes a transcendent vision of intercultural communication and community to be achieved with the aid of social technologies [6]. In is an advert of a Danish Mobile Provide (appeared in the Danish press and on billboards in the early Spring of 1998); three Danish words “Samtale fremmer forståelsen” [“Dialogue promotes understanding”] bridge the starkly contrasted stereotyped images of two women separated by an abyss of white space. The advert promotes the salvation narrative that a value-free communications technology can provide the means to overcome deep social and cultural divisions. It also reinforces the false assumption that troubles in intercultural encounters are a matter of communicative misunderstanding between two distinct, homogenous cultures.

Cyberspace itself has a culture and is not culture-free and simply a neutral and value-free platform for exchange.

If we assume that any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it “brings forth a world” [7], and that the social organization of this world is rooted in the worlds which gave rise to it, then the Internet embodies the values of its creators: “speed, reach, openness, quick response” [8].

Is it possible to intercultural learning take place in a not culture-free virtual environment?

We singled out two main potentialities of cyberspace:

- cyberspace has a potential to be a place where individuals engage to manage processes of self-presentation and meanings negotiation;
- computer-based simulation games provide players the opportunity to explore potentially threatening topics in a safer arena to confront cultural differences.

2. Negotiating reality in the third space

Hewling makes use of the well-known optical illusion image of two mirrored faces in profile – which can also be seen as a central ‘goblet’ [9] – to argue for “another way of seeing” intercultural encounters in cyberspace. She suggests that the use of Hofstedian ideas of culture [10] can result in a focus only on the ‘faces’ in the picture, while the more critical field of exploration is the mysterious space in between [11].

Models such as those developed from the work of Hofstede [12] or Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars [13] assume that patterns of behaviour amongst those who share a common nationality are sufficiently coherent to offer a ‘model’ for how anyone of that nationality may perform in a given situation.

Using ‘traditional’, Hofstedian, ideas of culture may lead us to seeing only the faces in the picture, and to seeing them with ‘pre-conditioned’ eyes better designed to see what we expect to see rather than what might potentially be.

What about the mysterious space in between faces? Bringing Street’s ideas to the worlds of cyberspace [14], Raybourn et al. [15] have suggested that intercultural interaction online involves construction of a ‘third culture’ – a process, not an entity in itself. Intercultural learning involves finding what Kramsch describes as a “third place” [16], a location between the home and target cultures: has Cyberspace a potential to be a “third place”? In cyberspace individuals engage to manage processes of self-presentation and negotiation of face in virtual environment; cultural differences do also exist in these processes [17].

Negotiating reality could be considered as the more promising aspect of cyberspace.

The term “negotiating reality” is used to name the process whereby individuals generate an effective strategy of action in an intercultural interaction by making themselves and each other aware of their culturally-shaped interpretations and responses to a given situation and expanding their repertoire appropriately.

Negotiating reality involves having the ability to surface the tacit knowledge and assumptions belonging to the parties involved and to bring this knowledge to bear in the service of addressing a particular issue or problematic situation. In this process individuals become aware of the contours and dynamics of their own “cultural iceberg” and how their own backgrounds shape their perceptions, expectations and behaviour as complex cultural beings.

Negotiating reality is, however, more demanding of personal mastery, because individuals must have an active awareness of how their own cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions and behavior, an ability to engage with others to explore assumptions, and an openness to trying out different ways of seeing and doing things.

Rather than assuming that people need to adapt to other cultures by gaining knowledge of “the other”, negotiating reality involves reflecting first on the impact of one’s own cultural underpinnings.

In cyberspace the heart of negotiating reality is carrying out an action strategy that combines high “advocacy” with high “inquiry” as a means of exploring and testing theories of action and reality images collaboratively with the other person or people involved in the intercultural interaction.

3. Reducing cultural misunderstanding: computer-based simulation game

Computer-based game environments offer a richer communication medium for facilitating exploration of prejudice-reduction than face-to-face interaction. Computer-based simulation games provide players the opportunity to explore potentially threatening topics in safe, player controlled environments [18]. Intercultural simulation games may benefit from the use of new technologies, thanks to several features:

a. Experimentation of unusual forms of the Self

The simulated reality of a game, albeit in many ways a real experience, is a safer arena for many people to confront cultural differences. The simulation game experience is a model of reality in which the potential exists for players to test boundaries and discover facets of themselves they never knew before [19].

b. Cultural shock experience

Intercultural communication experiences are inheritantly stressful in varying degrees [20]. Adler describes culture shock as: “a profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth” [21]. Rather than being only a disease for which adaptation is the cure, culture shock is likewise at the very heart of the cross-cultural learning experience. It is an experience in self-understanding and change [22].

Traditionally seen as a profound negative experience while encountering another culture [23], cultural shock experience has a potential to start shifting variables in the culture system of either the individual or the society as a whole.

If “many intercultural experiences occur indirectly through being exposed to messages that we read, see and hear in the mass media (including books, journals, magazines, movies, television programmes and newspapers)” [24], computer-based game environments provide players the opportunity to have experience of culture shock in safe, player controlled environments.

c. Real experience enlargement

Better game design enables players to better connect simulated actions and decisions to their everyday experiences through a swinging movement between virtuality and reality [25], and build a knowledge base of intercultural communication skills.

d. Cultural stress tolerance

Simulation games usually provide a non-threatening environment to explore difficult questions, particularly when addressing some cross-cultural issues of potential controversy [26].

The adaptation and the accommodation of the new ways of thinking, perceiving and acting can result, according to Kim, in “a temporary personality disintegration, or even ‘breakdown’ in some extreme cases”. Intercultural stress is therefore viewed as the internal resistance of the human organism against its own cultural evolution.

To the extent that stress is said to be responsible for suffering, frustration and anxiety, it also must be credited as an impetus for learning, growth and creativity for the individual. Temporary disintegration is thus viewed as the very basis for subsequent growth in the awareness of life conditions and ways to deal with them” [27].

What results out of the process of disintegration and adaptation, of stress and growth is a cyclic, forward and upward moving process in which the internal meaning structure is continuously leaping forward.

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