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E-Learning: Moving Past Justification to  
Communication and Connectivity

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### Abstract

This article challenges the notion that the conceptual focus and research regarding e-learning should be directed toward justifying the use of the medium and instead proposes an exploration of the medium itself and its maximum utility. This article expands the boundaries of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) by focusing on communication and connectivity in an online Global Communication Course. Intercultural communication can be enhanced significantly by the use of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) because of its ability to link people in far away places, thus providing an online cross-cultural experience that may not be locally possible. First, a quadratic theoretical base is established to support such a course. This is followed by a description of the course design from the theoretical application perspective. Finally, student samples offer instances of how such a course helps maximize the potential of the medium through communication and connectivity.

E-Learning: Moving Past Justification  
to Communication and Connectivity

Despite significant successes in the employment of technology in education, many academicians are still embroiled in an ongoing debate to justify the use of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) in the learning environment. A recent example is an article by Robert Zemsky and William F. Massy (2004) published by the Learning Alliance at the University of Pennsylvania. The article, Thwarted Innovation: What Happened to E-Learning and Why, argues that the “boom in e-learning went bust” because of three failed assumptions: 1) “If we build it they will come” -- not so (p. 44), 2) “The kids will take to e-learning like ducks to water” – not quite (p. 48), 3) “E-learning will force a change in how we teach” – not by a long shot (p. 52). Prominent academic magazines and journals tout headlines of proposed, factual conclusions from this report. The Chronicle of Higher Education cited this study with the headline, “Report says Educational Technology has failed to deliver on its promises” (available at <http://chronicle.com/prm/weekly/v50/i43/43a03001.htm> ).

Needless to say, proponents of e-learning did not agree with these conclusions. Carol Twigg, who is the Executive Director of the Center for Academic Transformation, summed up the response to Zemsky and Massy from the e-learning proponents perspective when she wrote:

Although no one in higher education would consider Bob and Bill to be experts on “e-learning,” many (including myself) consider them to be both distinguished researchers and leading thinkers on higher education in general, so I assumed, their “strategic story” would be built on research. . . . Is it possible that they have

never heard of Casey Green's Campus Computing Project (<http://www.campuscomputing.net>), which has been surveying more than 600 campuses a year for the last 15 years about the role of information technology in teaching, learning, and scholarship? Somehow data from 600 institutions seems more representative of higher education's usage than data from six; somehow tracking trends over a fifteen-year period seems more substantive than over fifteen months. I am pretty sure that Cassey hasn't concluded that the boom in e-learning has gone bust. . . . Massy/Zemsky study . . . failed to present the other side of this issue – that increasingly more colleges are offering courses at a distance to meet the dramatically increasing student demand for distance learning. (See the July 2003 report from the National Center for Educational Statistics, "Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions: 2000-2001," to which 1,500 two and four-year degree-granting colleges responded, at <Http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003017>). (Twigg, 2004, pp. 2-6).

While many academics wish to rejuvenate the ongoing debate on justifying the use of computer-mediated-learning in education, increasingly communication researchers have moved out of the loop of justification and on to examining the medium itself and its maximum utility. Many have concluded through their studies the centrality of communication itself to technology. For example, some studies have concluded that interpersonal relationships could be created and enhanced by CMC, (McCormick & McCormick, 1992; Rice & Love, 1987). Other studies have shown that obstacles to CMC can be surmounted the more time is spent decoding messages and

developing the relationship (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther, Anderson, & Parks, 1994). Further, research indicates that online relationships develop and operate within different temporal frames than face-to-face communication (Walther, 1993; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). More recently, it has been argued that online communicators, in the absence of nonverbal cues, adapt their behavior to the online medium and whatever cues they have available such as content, chronemics, linguistics, and typographic cues (Walther & Tidwell, 1995; Herring, 1999; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Walther and colleagues have been avid proponents of CMC in all aspects and are producing research to confirm its utility. This trajectory of inquiring about the medium itself and its maximum utility are amplified in recent works in a variety of communication contexts and veins (See Cornelius & Boos, 2003; Herring, 1999; Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2003; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Vishwanath, 2003; and Wright, 2000).

As an addition to this quest to explore the medium itself and its maximum utility, the purpose of this article is to expand the boundaries of CMC in the classroom by focusing on communication and connectivity in an online Intercultural Communication Course called Global Communication. Intercultural communication can be enhanced significantly by the use of CMC because of its ability to link people in far away places, thus providing an online cross-cultural experience that may not be locally possible. First, a quadratic theoretical base is established to support such a course. This is followed by a description of the course design from the theoretical application perspective. Finally, student samples offer instances of how such a course helps maximize the potential of the medium through communication and connectivity.

### A Quadratic Theoretical Base

The world is so complicated that it is quite the challenge to have any one theory represent how things work for even a small population. As Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank (2002) argue regarding the growth of CMC, new media, the Internet, and human information seeking and uncertainty, that, “existing theoretical perspectives appear challenged to account for these advances” (p. 226). If online instruction, computer-mediated-communication, and intercultural communication are to be combined in the same overlapping space, it is necessary to consider several bodies of information. In this case, Cognitive Education Theory, Theory of Technological Change, The Contact Hypothesis, and Hyper Personal Communication all provide conceptual tools to address this complex interrelationship. A brief review of the literature surrounding these concepts will establish a multifaceted theoretical base for incorporating technology into the intercultural communication course.

#### *Cognitive Education Theory*

Cognitive Constructivist Theory basically asserts that learners make meaning of their experiences and therefore that knowledge is internally constructed. (Cronin, 1997; Jonassen, et al., 1995; Miller & Miller, 1999). “The importance of constructivism is best understood by comparing it with the opposite, more traditional, approach in epistemology or cognitive science, which sees knowledge as a passive reflection of the external, objective reality” (Heylighen, 1997) –Cognitive Processing Theory. In this sense, the professor holds all the knowledge and transmits that knowledge to the students. Cognitive Processing Theory stands in stark contrast to the cognitive constructivist approach in which communication, collaboration, dialogue, and the exploration of alternative

perspectives facilitate the subjective learning of objective reality. When viewed in this manner, the knowledge constructed by each learner is unique (Jonassen, et al., 1995; Miller & Miller, 1999). This theory calls for the creation of learning environments that promote the construction of knowledge. “The associative, hyperlinking, and nonlinear features of the Web environment (Aysersman 1995) are well suited to support constructivist learning” (Miller & Miller, 1999, p. 8). Miller and Miller (1999) proposed four primary instructional goals of web-based instruction from a cognitive constructivist approach; 1) Present problem-solving situation in a realistic context – “software that communicates “real life” problems in a format and that provides opportunities for students to collaboratively resolve the problems” 2) Provide opportunities for learners to collaboratively construct knowledge based on multiple perspectives, discussion and reflection, 3) Provide opportunities for learners to articulate and revise their thinking in order to insure the accuracy of knowledge construction, and 4) Create opportunities for the instructor to coach and facilitate construction of student knowledge. These cognitive constructive principles can be useful in guiding the development of web-based courses.

### *Theory of Technological Change*

“Over the past three decades the use of computers has steadily changed along the spectrum from adding computation (data processing) to communications (e-mail, etc.) It is now entering a new era of helping cognition – human thinking and knowledge processes” (Skryme, 2002, p. 1). We are increasingly seeing a merger of minds, technology, and human-environment interaction. Hardt and Negri (2001) summarize this evolution in their book, *Empire*. They write:

Today we increasingly think like computers, while communication technologies

and their model of interaction are becoming more and more central to laboring activities. One novel aspect of the computer is that it can continually modify its own operation through its use. Even the most rudimentary forms of artificial intelligence allow the computer to expand and perfect its operation based on its interaction with its user and its environment . . . Interactive and cybernetic machines become a new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds and a lens through which to redefine our bodies and minds themselves. The anthropology of cyberspace is really a recognition of the new human condition. (p. 291).

Many experts from a broad range of disciplines (sociology, cognitive psychology, economics, communication, etc.) support this notion of mind, technology, human-environment interaction (See Boczkowski, 1999; & Clark, 2003).

Empirical studies informed by this conceptual trend have revealed that users integrate new technologies into their daily lives in a myriad of ways. Sometimes they adapt to the constraints the artifacts impose. On other occasions they react to them by trying to alter unsuitable technological configurations. Put differently, technologies' features and users' practices mutually shape one another.

(Boczkowski, 1999, p. 90)

There are multiple examples of this mutual shaping. Two simple, common examples are Amazon.com and Microsoft Word. Amazon.com tracks your browsing behaviors and orders, compares these to the likes and dislikes of other shoppers who have purchased the same items and makes suggestions for your future purchases based on this information. Microsoft Word tailors itself to your usage of the software and acts on predictions about

your future behavior. For instance, if you type two bullet sentences and hit enter, Microsoft Word will bullet the next line for you.

This section, rather than positing one particular theory, accentuates the discovery by many disciplines of what successful technology companies have known for some time. There are social consequences of technology but technologies are shaped to user preferences.

### *The Contact Hypothesis*

The contact hypothesis basically asserts that there are certain conditions in which intercultural interactions would result in positive outcomes (Allport, 1954, Amir, 1969). The conditions that this theory suggests for positive change are maximized cooperation, intimate contact, strong normative support, perceived voluntary interaction, and similarity of members. This theory was originally designed to produce positive change and reduce intercultural problems and prejudice. It can also be used as an intercultural enhancement tool. Combined with the cognitive constructivist approach and the rapid advancement of communication technologies, it seems reasonable that this theory could be extended to include CMC as well as its originally intended face-to-face interaction format.

### Hyper personal Communication

Hyperpersonal communication is a term coined by Walther (1996). Walther has done extensive research to support the notion that CMC can be and often is, an *interpersonal* medium rather than the *impersonal* medium described in the initial conceptualization of CMC. According to Walther (1996) computer-mediated environments can range from impersonal – task based, to interpersonal – social exchanges, to hyperpersonal – “that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel face-to-face interactions”

(p. 17). Hyperpersonal communication occurs when “users experience commonality and are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited-cues channel that allows them to selectively self-present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations of their partners and relations without the interference of environmental reality” (p. 33). Walther identifies four characteristics in a CMC environment that may encourage hyperpersonal communication; 1) the idealized perception of the receiver, 2) the optimized self-presentation of the sender, 3) asynchronous channels supporting information management, and 4) a feedback loop allowing intensification magnified in minimal-cue interaction.

These four theories offer us conceptual tools for understanding, interpreting, and preparing for the incorporation of CMC into the intercultural environment. Drawing from these theories and some examples, the benefits of linking CMC and intercultural communication become apparent.

#### Course Design and Theoretical Application

Global Communication (Stefani 2002) is an online intercultural communication course that was created and based on these four theories (<http://www.grossmont.net/lisastefani>). It’s interactive web-based component, Global Intercultural Connection <http://www001.upp.so-net.ne.jp/GlobalVillage>, was jointly created by a Professor in the United States and a Professor in Japan (Stefani & Shirono, 1996). Intercultural communication students in the U.S and Japan study together, share in cross-cultural activities, and communicate interpersonally via these websites. Each semester, every student participating in the course has a photo and introduction of themselves posted. Partners from each country are selected at the beginning of the

semester. Student pairs spend the rest of the semester studying intercultural communication, participating in cross-cultural exchanges and developing friendships through e-mail, discussion boards, and chat rooms, all available on the website. A similar cross-cultural classroom exchange at the K-12 level won the Education Technology Leader of the Year award in 2003.

Through a partnership she [Stephanie Moore, Director of Instructional Technology at Villa Duchesne/Oak Hill School ([www.vdoh.org](http://www.vdoh.org))] formed with the University of Missouri-Columbia, Moore gained access to the Shadow netWorkspace ([sns.twmo.Missouri.edu](http://sns.twmo.Missouri.edu)), a web-based work environment designed to support learning, collaboration, and communication in K-12 schools and higher education institutions. The secure platform provided the venue for a budding relationship between VDOH and an international school in Taipei, Taiwan, allowing teachers and students from both communities an opportunity to upload multimedia presentations, share e-pal letters, and complete collaborative Web-based units. (Milone,2003, p.25)

Global Communication along with it's interactive platform, Global Intercultural Connection, displays many of the important features of cognitive constructivist theory by creating an online environment where students can communicate, collaborate, dialogue, and explore alternative perspectives. "Real life" problems that occur through out the class offer learners an opportunity to collectively resolve the issues. Students collaboratively construct knowledge through a variety of perspectives including studying from the same textbook, engaging in Internet based activities, and through communication with each other. This dialogue allows students to pose their intercultural inquiries to a group of

people who actually live in the other culture thereby allowing them to revise their thinking and the accuracy of their knowledge construction. Professors from two cultures set a core structure and then coach, guide and facilitate the student's knowledge quest.

As evolution of technology theories indicate, there is an integration of technology and the human/environment interaction. The technology shapes the users and the users in turn shape the technology and what is used in the course. For example, originally the professors from the course posted photographs and introductions of all the students. As technology advances, many students came to create their own websites containing information and profiles of themselves. They requested that rather than a simple photo and introduction, that their name be listed along with a hyperlink to their self-created website. Now, the hyperlinking of student websites is common. As another example, the course started with one chat room. Students expressed their frustration at having so many people trying to "talk" at the same time. As a result, they influenced the shaping of the course and four more chat rooms were added to accommodate the volume. Further, from the specific makeup of the class will emerge a preference for or dominance of the use of one interactive device over another device. While students have the opportunity to e-mail, post discussions on a discussion board and chat in chat rooms, they determine among themselves and their preference which medium they will use most often. E-mail is a standard preference, but in addition some students prefer to meet in the chat rooms and "talk" synchronously. Still others prefer to post on the bulletin board in order to address many more people. The course outlines minimum requirements for each but beyond this, the students choose their preference.

The contact hypothesis has been extended to the online environment through this course. Intercultural contact has been expanded to include people in far away places. All of the conditions for positive outcomes are met here. There is maximized cooperation because it is an elective “classroom setting.” Intimate contact is established through e-mail partner pairs, chat sessions and discussion board postings. The professors from both countries provide strong normative support for environment and interactions. There is perceived voluntary interaction because students “volunteer” to take the class and willing participate in communicative exchanges outside the course requirements. Finally, there is a similarity of the members because they are all people/students who want to learn about another culture and communicate with other students from a different place.

This course represents the creation of an online environment in which the interaction is potentially more rewarding than face-to-face interactions. The four characteristics Walther (1996) proposes to encourage hyperpersonal communication to occur are present in this CMC environment. There is an idealized perception of the receiver because students share the commonality of “wanting” to be in the course. They voluntarily sign up because they “want” to communicate with people who come from different backgrounds than themselves. They are all studying the same thing – global/intercultural communication. They are all using the same textbook. They all have the desire to interact with someone from a different place.

The self-presentation of the sender is optimized because the students write their own introductions and select the picture that will be used for the course. The American students bring in a scanned version of their favorite photo and the professor posts the

photos on the web. The Japanese professor uses a digital camera to take individual photos of the students and they select which photo they prefer to be posted.

Students can manage the information they include because asynchronous channels allow for premeditation and preparation of the messages – e-mails and bulletin board postings. As the students become more comfortable with each other they can choose to discuss/disclose more and more personal information. Synchronous communication is also available via chat rooms and can progress from general disclosures to specific details.

These interactive devices allow students a feedback loop to comment on various components of the class and thereby participate in co-construction of the course despite the fact that they are physically separated. Because this feedback loop as well as the online environment itself presents a minimal-cue interaction, the structure of the course establishes general parameters for net etiquette. Outside these parameters, and as noted repeatedly, most students want to participate and learn about another culture. This motivation is combined with the knowledge gained from the readings in their textbooks and the interaction experiences gleaned from the cross-cultural activities. Participants are typically respectful and considerate of their counter parts although some unintentional offenses occur. For example, a female Japanese student wrote admiringly of a female American student's independence and the fact that she lived with her boyfriend away from her parents. She expressed desire to move out on her own but indicated that her parents would be very unhappy if she moved out, so she couldn't. The American student interpreted this as her parents exercising unnecessary "control" over their adult children

and wrote back that she was over 18, her parents couldn't tell her anything to do anymore, that she made her own money and paid for herself, so no one could tell her what to do. She made her own decisions. The Japanese student in turn interpreted this as an "insult" -- her ability to act on her own behalf. It is in situations like this where the professor's monitor and explain the situation, in this case individualism versus collectivism, and guide and coach the students to new levels of understanding and knowledge construction. These students are happily exchanging e-mails and chatting again.

This brief review of literature of the quadratic theoretical base and the examples of their application serve to support the incorporation of CMC in the intercultural communication course. With this solid base established, the focus is directed toward the students and enhancing their communication and connectivity throughout the course.

### Communication and Connectivity

Several issues impede the progress of computer-mediated-communication in the classroom, two of which play prominently here. First, is an inability or unwillingness to adapt to the medium for higher goals. In many cases, e-learning has not progressed past a publishing/posting mechanism – that is to say, professors publish reading materials and students post responses. Zemsky and Massy criticized e-learning for this limitation:

“ . . . e-learning is still a concept in search of a consistent definition . . . e-learning as distance education . . . For the most part, however, what the Web provides are merely correspondence courses distributed electronically . . . the

development and expansion of course management systems – BlackBoard and WebCT are the best known -- that both organize courses and present materials online, . . . e-learning as electronically mediated learning . . . a host of products, services, and applications . . . what all these products and resources have in common is that they involve electronically mediated learning in a digital format that is interactive but not necessarily remote” (2004, pp. 5-6).

Although this course did consist of some “publishing and posting,” its primary focus was the use of communication to connect people around the globe.

A second issue that has been neglected in computer-mediated-communication educational environments is student’s input. As Lyotards prediction of the commodification of education becomes more and more a reality, it is important to recognize that the students are our “customers” and they have a choice in which institutions they patronize. Students opinions of the course itself, the technology used, and what they would like to have the opportunity to experience are sometimes overlooked or ignored all together. For instance, in Zemsky and Massy’s (2004) controversial report, they note that there was, “. . .a sense that no one had ever asked the students whether or not they actually *liked* e-learning” (p. 49). Yet, Zemsky and Massy (2004) don’t ask the students either. Instead, they ask the faculty and administrators what *they* think the students will like and what the students will have trouble with! They make broad generalizations about student wishes based on administrator and faculty input. They did include one lone site from *The Daily Texan* – an opinion piece by a senior honor student at the University of Texas -- cited because “it gives voice and language to those doubts [students are becoming distrustful of what she called “teaching

technology”]” (p. 49). This section, through student examples and input, will demonstrate the communication and connectivity accomplished through this online intercultural communication class that does indeed represent a change in how we teach “e-learning.”

This class incorporates four different interactive assignments that focus on communication and connectivity rather than merely publishing and posting – 1) Webquests, 2) cross-cultural, inquiry based bulletin boards, 3) cross-cultural, synchronous chat sessions and 4) cross-cultural e-mail exchanges. Each will be discussed individually.

### *Webquests*

Webquests (Stefani, 2003) are assignments that send students on virtual travels to other countries via the Internet. Students use a workbook throughout the course to explore various cultural components. The webquest assignments each offer an introduction to the specific topic, a description of the task students are expected to accomplish, specific directions for accomplishing the task, a list of quality online resources for completing the assignment and clear evaluation standards that they will be judged by. Webquest topics include issues such as, the world as a global community, alternative cultural perspectives on values, history, worldview, and family, the impact of culture on language and nonverbal behavior and the role that culture plays in the learning environment, the business context, and the healthcare industry. Students are allowed to select from a variety of webquests on each given topic so they can tailor their interest to the cultural components of the class. For example, when covering family and culture, students may choose from 3 assignment options: Comparing Family Structures, Family

and Cultural Values, or Alternative Perspectives: How to Make Your Spouse Happy. In the Webquest, “How to Make Your Spouse Happy,” students first make a list of what it takes from their cultural perspective to make their spouse/partner or potential spouse/partner happy. Then they visit a website created by devout Muslim students describing what it takes to make your spouse happy from the Muslim perspective. Students compare and contrast the two lists and make predictions about what might happen if someone from their culture married someone from the Muslim culture. Student comments on the webquest assignments fell into the following four categories:

- 1) Freedom to choose what is most interesting to you to research

*“The fact that I could pick what interested me most from a topic helped motivate me to learn.”*

*“I really liked the fact that we could pick from which webquest interested us the most.”*

*“The biggest reason why I think webquest is a success is because students are given the freedom and option to choose a project that they have the most interest in. This promotes the students to really work hard and have fun researching their topic, instead of having them dread the assignment.”*

*“There is a lot to be said for being allowed to pick your homework assignment, which does not occur in most classes.”*

- 2) The opportunity to explore other countries in a way that is more beneficial than

just reading a textbook.

*“The first thing I liked about the webquest was it was something new. I have never had a class that had assignments like the webquest and I liked it. I was excited to do the webquest when it was explained the first week of school.”*

*“The webquests really gave me and I feel the class an opportunity to take a look at other cultures that we normally wouldn’t have done or had time for in this course or other courses. The websites for the webquests had vast amounts of information about the various topics. This information really opened a window into the understanding and appreciation for others and their culture for me.”*

*“I feel the webquests have taken my “narrow” American perspective and pushed it aside for good.”*

*“The webquests were very enjoyable for me. I thought that they were an excellent source for becoming more connected and knowledgeable of culture issues within our culture and other cultures. They are designed so that they are entertaining and interesting but also so that we could learn about intercultural communication. The webquests weren’t like dull projects that we have to do for other classes, they were exciting adventures that were fun to embark on throughout the course.”*

*“The webquests were nice because they let me learn something that wasn’t in a text book which is really rare for college courses.”*

3) Webquest resources offered quality websites

*“I especially liked how the links were provided for us, so that we had more structure and knew exactly what to be looking for when doing the research.”*

*“I thought it was very helpful that there were websites that were given to us to help us with our quests because sometimes researching on the Internet can be tough and it is difficult to tell what a legitimate website is and what isn't a legitimate one.”*

*“I liked that the webquests provided the websites that provided accurate information for the assignment. Without these websites, I probably would have searched the Internet for hours, and would only find the wrong or superfluous information.”*

*“By far the best thing about the webquests was the opportunity to check out websites that I never knew existed.”*

*“We didn't have to go rummaging through the Internet trying to find websites that would work or even have the information we needed on it. It was nice to be able to just click and be there. It gives you time to actually do nice research because you didn't spend all your time looking for websites.”*

*“Just from the webquest that I did, I wouldn't of even known where to begin looking on the Internet.”*

4) Further application of materials – acting for the future

*“My favorite was the Becoming a Global Citizen webquest. I believe in unity and understanding and the meaning of life to me is helping others. People can help others in many ways, but one of the biggest ways to help others is to physically help others. I knew about the Peace Corps, but never considered that a volunteer abroad program and understood it to be a career choice. Now that I understand it, I want to help that cause more. When I saw that there was a UN Volunteers program, my eyes lit up. It is so cool that the UN Volunteers program exists! I never knew it existed. Among all the ways I want to change the world, I think the UN is a good way to do it, and would love, love, love to help the UN through the UN Volunteers program.”*

*“These webquest and this class in general has really gotten me excited and interested in trying to hold a position in business where I get the opportunity to associate with and travel to different countries.”*

*“My favorite webquest was the one on Study Abroad, mainly because I found it so interesting, and it was so much fun to research about Italy and the study abroad programs there. I think that I enjoyed that one the most because it was something that I have always thought of doing and wanted to do, so it gave me the ability to research something that I had a huge interest in, which is why I think it was the most enjoyable.”*

*“My favorite webquest was the one on education. This would have something to do with the fact that I want to be a school teacher. I never really considered what I would be faced with as a teacher. I feel that this assignment has helped to open my eyes to some of the issues that I will be facing and I feel much more prepared to face those just by knowing something about it. I think what really is comforting about this webquest is that I have learned that there are websites that will allow me to do research and learn about the children in my classroom. It was particularly eye opening to learn that the educational system here in the US is not universal. For some reason I had it in my head that teacher taught the same way no matter what country you come from. I guess I have a lot to learn before I become a good teacher and am able to reach most, if not all of my students.”*

*“I focused a lot of my Webquest assignments on the Caribbean, Canada, Middle East and Mexico. I now have a feel for each of these cultures and would be ready to plan a trip there.”*

These are but a few examples of how a well-constructed online course can offer students far more than you would ever be able to give them in the classroom alone. These types of enriched course materials and “world-class resources can be assessed, viewed, and studied 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” (Kassop, 2003, p.3).

#### *Bulletin Board Discussions*

The bulletin boards offered this class spread across the globe an opportunity for asynchronous communication in an environment predisposed, set-up, constructed, and conducted to facilitate mutual understanding. Although many topics have been discussed

on the bulletin board, one particular topic offers an excellent example of this desire by all of the students to better understand the other and his or her culture. The assignment is called, *The Accuracy or Inaccuracy of Stereotypes* (Stefani, 2003). Often times people will hold assumptions or stereotypes of another culture, or note a behavior prominent in one culture but misinterpret the meaning behind that specific behavior. This assignment asked the students in both countries to make a list of 5 stereotypes that they held about the other culture. The stereotypes were then turned into questions for the students in the other culture to answer and explain. Because students volunteered for the course with a desire to learn about the other culture and talk to people from the other culture, and because there was a pervasive atmosphere of inquiry to understand versus inquiry to judge, students were quite open and frank with their questions and responses. Here are some examples:

#### **Sample questions from the Japanese students to the American students**

*“Why do Americans kiss their girlfriends/boyfriends in the crowd, even in a house with other family members?”*

*“Why do many Americans eat food while walking?”*

*“Why can American citizens have guns?”*

*“Why is the divorce rate high in the U.S.?”*

*“Why can Americans lie or sit on the bed with their shoes on? Don’t they think it is dirty?”*

*“Why do Americans serve food in large quantity?”*

*“Why do many American students do their homework in a coffee shop?”*

*“Why do Americans seem warlike?”*

*“Why do many Americans wear scanty outfits? (Why do they expose their skin?)”*

*“Why don’t American trains run on schedule?”*

*“Why do Americans speak only English when they go abroad?”*

*“Why do American drivers blow the horn easily/quickly?”*

*“Why do Americans have nicknames?”*

*“Why are there many heavy/overweight people in the U.S.?”*

*“Why do many Americans think they are Number 1 in the world?”*

*“Why do Americans take a shower instead of a bath?”*

*“Why don’t American mothers sleep with her baby? (We do in Japan)”*

### **Sample questions from the American students to the Japanese**

*“Why is the majority of the population so skinny or lightweight?”*

*“Why are the women much more submissive than American women? In the U.S. women demand to be treated equally.”*

*Why are Japanese house walls made out of paper?”*

*“Why do you take so many pictures?”*

*“Why do you sit on the floor when you eat?”*

*“Why does the Japanese culture work so hard to achieve success?”*

*“Why don’t Japanese like foreigners?”*

*“Why are Japanese women so quite around others?”*

*“Why are Japanese people so fond of Karaoke?”*

*“What do the Japanese really think about Americans? And be honest.”*

*“Why are Japanese so into anime’ cartoons?”*

*“Why is it so expensive to have a drivers license in Japan?”*

*“Why do the Japanese always seem so serious?”*

*“Why do Japanese people hang their clothes out their window?”*

*“Why are Japanese people so much better at math than Americans?”*

*“Why are Japanese people so short?”*

**Sample responses from the American Students to the Japanese students:**

Q: *“Why can Americans say hello to a stranger even just when their eyes meet?”*

R: *(by a foreign exchange student attending school in the U.S. from Denmark)*

*This I have many times wondered myself walking down the aisles of Safeway being greeted by every person I meet. I like it, though; it makes me feel welcome even by people who have no idea of who I am. It is also completely different from what I am used to. In Denmark, you do not usually greet people you do not know. And it is highly unusual to engage in conversation with a stranger. If doing so you can very quickly be considered both weird and maybe even a bit frightening! In the U.S. however, my experience is that people talk to each other and smile and are basically very polite when around strangers. However, the openness and friendliness from people you meet can seem a bit overwhelming in the beginning and I think that might be what the Japanese student asking this question has experienced. When not accustomed to this cultural behavior it is rather difficult to know whether you are supposed to stop and engage in conversation with every “Hi, how are you doing?” or if you just smile, say “Good, thank you,” and walk on. This is not a problem in the negative sense, it is a cultural difference that by experience and maybe a bit of curiosity can be overcome. And from my personal experience, become highly valued.*

Q: “Why don’t Americans eat raw fish?”

*R: Well this here is definitely an incorrect stereotype! I know so because I work in a sushi restaurant and serve raw sushi to customers all day long. Though it is probably not as common as it is in Japan, Americans do eat raw fish. Sushi these days is a very popular item and the amount of people who try it for the first time is really increasing. At my restaurant, I serve people sushi for the first time almost every day. I personally eat a lot of sushi also. Sushi is actually one of my favorite foods. Americans don’t eat as much raw fish as the Japanese and I think that could be because of the fear of food poisoning.*

*Growing up, I was always told by my parents never to eat raw food. I think that ideal has been imbedded in people’s mind since they were young and so they try to steer clear of raw foods. Also, here in America we have so many different varieties of food and often times people will just eat whatever is cheap and convenient.*

Q: “ Why do Americans eat and walk?”

*R: Americans have become more and more time conscious, they do not want to waste a single second. This time consciousness is even spilling over into how, what, and where we eat. Some people eat on the go, myself included, because there is no time to eat, therefore we eat when and where we can.*

Q: “Why is the divorce rate so high in the U.S.?”

*R: I feel the divorce rate is high for several reasons. The first reason is the American influence of independence. Many Americans are allowed to get married and divorced in a day and society does not condemn it but rather thinks of it as a personal choice. Rather than fixing problems in a relationship many Americans get a divorce and carry the same problems into their next marriage. Commitment seems to be dwindling and family life*

*seems to be changing. Children of divorced parents are not uncommon so the parent think that it is socially acceptable to be divorced and remarried. Many Americans look for happiness. If they become impatient with their spouse then they move on to find happiness in another individual.*

**Sample responses from the Japanese Students to the American students:**

Q: “How do you have any privacy if Japanese house walls are made out of paper?”

R: *I don't care casual conversation but in the case of formal conversation, I go out and talk.*

R: *I'm sorry. I can't imagine good resolution well. But I would say I would feel uncomfortable if I live in the house with the walls of paper.*

Q: “Why do Japanese take many pictures?”

R: *In my case, I take pictures for fun, and keeping precious memories with my friends, family and boyfriend. I think almost all Japanese have the same reason. And we Japanese seldom decorate the pictures and keep them in photo albums. I think most Japanese tend to want to keep every fun memories forever. So, taking a lot of pictures is good way for Japanese.*

Q: “Why are Japanese women much more submissive than American women?”

R: *I don't know if it is right or not, but I think Japanese women hadn't had a right to do anything in the society by themselves like men till Meiji era. So Japanese women have to obey men to live, therefore, Japanese women become obedient. This custom take root still nowadays . . .*

Q: “ Why are Japanese fond of Karaoke?”

*R: Japanese like music. We accept both of Japanese song and English song. It is simply because singing is fun. We might feel as if we become a singer! And also singing English songs is useful for acquisition of English. We learn rhythm, pronunciation and vocabulary and so on by singing English song.*

This type of bulletin board discussion format exemplifies how empowering student centered learning can be when an online environment of inquiry and mutual understanding has been established. Rather than have the teacher provide the answer, or reading the answer in a textbook, students had the opportunity to develop course materials themselves in the sense that they constructed the questions for the students in the other culture. The students also served as “instructors” to their student counterparts across cultures by commenting, explaining and responding to the questions the other students proposed. The students in each culture met the learning objectives of the class as well as their own individual learning goals. This high quality communication was further extended via chat room discussions and personal e-mails between the students.

#### *Chat Room Discussions*

In addition to bulletin board discussions, chat room discussions helped to develop what Kassop (2003) calls an “intimate community of learners.” He is referring to the close relationships that develop between the students participating in the course as well as between students and teachers. He writes, “. . . it is common for participants in online courses to develop a strong sense of community that enhances the learning process” (p. 4). In this case, the concept of “community” was extended half way around the globe. During the course of the semester, three chat sessions were scheduled between the

Japanese and American students. The time difference between Japan and the U.S. – 17 hours -- posed a challenge for coordination. Matters were further complicated by the fact that Japanese students often don't have Internet access at home, but must come to the campus to log on. This meant reserving a computer room on campus for the Japanese class while the American students all had Internet access at home. The end result was two chat sessions from 1230am to 130am U.S. Pacific Time (430pm – 530pm Japan time) and a final chat from 1130pm to 1230am, U.S. Pacific Time. This final chat was scheduled earlier due to day light savings time changes. Japan does not shift back and forth for day light savings. The late timeframe for the American students certainly presented some issues surrounding sleep deprivation, but the students chose to participate despite their sleepy conditions. Several American students were in different parts of the United States on Eastern Standard time and they had to log on at 330am! Still, times for chat sessions were posted before the course began and students still elected to enroll and participate in the course anyway. Three discussion topics were selected by the instructors; Family life, Religion, and Education Systems. When the semester began, students were asked to post their expectations for the chat sessions on the bulletin board. Expectations tended to revolve around notions of learning more about the other culture, finding similarities and differences between the two cultures, and having the opportunity to chat with new friends.

Five chat rooms were used. Students were divided into five groups composed of American and Japanese students. Each of the five groups was assigned a specific chat room and each group stayed together for the length of the semester for chats. We believe this enhanced hyperpersonal communication, community, and communication in general.

Like the bulletin board discussions, these chat sessions afforded the students an opportunity to “write” the course materials themselves under the broad guidelines of topics to be discussed. For example, in one chat room, during the discussion on religion, students began the conversation with “what religion are you?”

Hiroe > Christian is two things. Chatoric {Catholic} and Protestant. . . .Are you a Chatoric? {Catholic}

Vicky > Yes, Christian . . . kind of, I mean I don't go to church, but I was baptized.

They moved the discussion to “how religious people are in both cultures,”

Joseph > Do most people in Japan have the same religion?

Hiroe > All Japanese people isn't have a religion.

Masayo > Hi. My name is Masayo. I don't have a religion.

Joseph > Would you say most Japanese are no longer religious?

Akiko > Yes, of course there are people who is very religious, but many Japanese are not.

To the younger generation “going to temple for training,”

Hiroe > Myself, I go to temple to do training.

Joseph > What kind of training?

Hiroe > We call it sessin.

Joseph > Is sessin religious training?

Hiroe > Sessin is training a mental state.

To religion and “weddings and churches in hotels,”

Akiko > I work as a maiden in the servise {service} of shrine at Hotel. It is for

wedding ceremony . . . Recently {recently} many young couple want to marry in Christian's church in Japan.

Joseph > Akiko, why do you think that is? . . . Are there many Christian churches there? I would not think so if only 1% is Christian.

Masayo > Maybe I think it just to wedding.

Akiko > Yes, they are. Also, many hotel have church. It's only for wedding ceremony.

Joseph > Very interesting. So many Japanese get married in a hotel?

To "who is God?"

Hiroe > Now, who is God?

Joseph > God is the supreme being. Creator of the Universe.

Hiroe > But, Buddhism {Buddhist} people think that God is Hotoke-sama.

Joseph > Hotoke-sama?

Hiroe > In Buddhism {Buddhism} we don't call God. We calls hotokesama.

Joseph > But Hotoke-sama is the same concept as God?

Hiroe > Maybe it's different . . . Buddhism {Buddhism} doesn't think who is the world begin.

Akiko > In Japan, God is not only one. Shintoist consider there are plural Gods. . . .Shintoist believe everything has god such as mountains and rivers and tree. . . . every natural creature has each God.

Hiroe > Now I study Greece myth. It's a lot of God.

Joseph > We have a similar religion here. Emerson wrote about it in Nature. . . . I think it is called Pantheism – the belief that God is a part of nature.

This interesting trajectory of this chat session was illuminated in the student's bulletin board postings of their impressions of the chat sessions once they were complete. It appears that many students found the topic of religion difficult – not from the perspective of the age old adage that discussing religion (as well as sex and politics) is taboo, but instead because many of the students participating in the chat session were not religious and had little personal background knowledge on the subject. A few examples illustrate this point:

### **American Students Comments**

*“I’m a little apprehensive about the second chat on religion. I was prepared to discuss education and didn’t have a lot of time to research the topic of religion and I’m not well versed on religion so it’s going to be hard for me.”*

*“ . . . some people aren’t religious. I think that the topic on education will be much easier to discuss for most, considering it is a common goal among us to become educated.”*

*“I would agree with your comments, the subject of religion was difficult. I know I am not a religious person so I was kind of at a loss as to what to say. I think the final chat on education will go a lot better. At least I will have a little more input on that topic.”*

### **Japanese Students Comments**

*“I don’t think about religion deeply so it’s very hard for me”*

*“Religion: It is difficult that we talk about religion. Most of Japanese have a lot of religion and culture. But recently, people are seldom attached to religion. They believe not in one religion but in much religion.”*

*“Religion: I think recently, most Japanese is no religion. But, Japanese is important religion. And other countries important religion more than Japan.”*

The bulletin board postings served as an effective “feedback loop” for all of the chat sessions and in turn enhanced further communication. For instance, students commented:

### **American Students Comments**

*“ . . . we had a conversation going constantly and we all verified or supported each other’s views and questioned anything unclear . . . ”*

*“ . . . I hope I will be less sleepy since it will be earlier in the night. Also, it is sometimes hard to understand the slang words/terminology used by American students and the way Japanese students grasp it. And with a chat, sometimes not all questions are answered. If any of you Japanese students have questions you would like to ask me before or after the chat please feel free to e-mail me at . . . ”*

*“In the second chat, I was actually more sick and it was 1:30/2:30 am in Colorado so it was hard for me to continue on. But I learned that the same society concepts regarding religion and marriage are also in Japan and here in America.”*

*“ I think that the last two chat sessions have gone pretty well. Although at times it is hard to fully understand what the Japanese students are trying to say. I think that the topics were good discussion topics and it was really interesting to see how different everything is in Japan.”*

**Japanese Student Comments**

*“I really enjoyed it! I could learn about American family by them, so it was very good for me. I want to try to chat with them about hobby or fashion, etc. next time. I’m looking forward to chatting with them again.”*

*“It was very nice chatting. I had a good time, and I could learn about differences between American and Japanese thought of family. I thank American students for sitting up late. I’m looking forward to talking to them on chatting soon.”*

*“Today’s chat was good! However, I couldn’t participate it too much. I’m looking forward to chatting with American students again.”*

*“I enjoyed today’s chatting. I could know about American family. I thought American family and Japanese family have similar {similar} ideas. Whoever has family, whoever needs family, family is important for our life.”*

From the feedback in comments such as these, we as instructors and the class as a whole learned that although the chats are continuous and lively, the late hour was troublesome, as was American slang and English as a second language for the Japanese students. The Japanese students acknowledged the American students for staying up late and the American students acknowledged the Japanese students for participating in the chat sessions in English even though it was their second language – otherwise communication

would have been impossible since not one American student this particular semester spoke Japanese!

### *E-Mail Partnerships*

The intimate community of learners and hyperpersonal communication were further extended through paired e-mail partnerships. After reading introductions and viewing photographs, students “paired” themselves with an e-mail partner from the other country. Students engaged in an e-mail exchange through out the semester. Unlike the bulletin board discussions and the chat room sessions, no broad topics were assigned for the e-mail content. Students were allowed to write their e-mail partners as they would write to any “friend.” Students were required to turn in 10 e-mails for the class grade, but they could determine which ten they turned in. We as instructors believed that allowing the students a degree of privacy in their communications was important for establishing a friendship between the e-mail partners. If their communication was of a personal nature, they could keep it to themselves and hand in less personal e-mails. Many students requested that their e-mail content be kept private. For instance, in one partnership the students discussed relational development differences between Japan and the U.S. as well as intimate details of their own relationships with significant others. Another student pair discussed drinking problems. Although these students turned in their e-mails, they did not want this information to be published in an article or read by anyone besides their e-mail partners and the instructors. E-mail partners discussed a broad range of topics – past times, hobbies, jobs, job hunting, family, local events published nationally (weather, holidays), detailed descriptions of where they lived and highlights of their town, Japanese anime, drinking and dancing, ID checks in clubs, school year differences, travel

experiences, and personal questions about information provided. Many of the students discussed in their e-mails an appreciation of programs that allowed them to communicate across cultures, develop new friendships and new understandings. For example, one Japanese student wrote:

*“By the way, how is your study ( I mean Thai)? Since I was junior high school, I have been studying English but it is very hard for me to learn practical English from textbooks. However the experience like what we are doing gives me a chance to learn it. So I want to treasure this experience.”*

The same student also commented on the benefits of a physical exchange program that he experienced in high school. The common denominator that keeps emerging from student perspectives to the Department of Education is that if there are avenues for students around the globe to connect and communicate, cross-cultural understanding is enhanced. In a recent message announcing Activities for International Education Week – November 15-19, 2004, Secretary Colin Powell stated:

. . . Celebrated worldwide, International Education Week provides an opportunity to highlight the benefits of international education and exchange; to express appreciation for students and scholars who study and teach here; and to commend the millions of people who build and strengthen bridges of international understanding by organizing and participating in exchange programs. . . . Meeting the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges that confront all countries requires an unprecedented degree of understanding and cooperation among nations and among leaders in every field. The professional partnerships and lifelong friendships that result from international education and exchange help build a foundation of

understanding and lasting partnerships. These partnerships are important for a secure, prosperous future, not only for the United States, but also for the world as a whole. . . . The more we learn about and understand each other, the more effective we will be in creating a world of global citizens, and the better our chances of achieving peace in our increasingly interdependent world. (2004)

Many students indicated that they would continue to e-mail their partners even after the class was over. Several students indicated that they were going to try to arrange a meeting with their e-mail partners. For example, one student commented:

*“I’m keeping in touch with both {partners} and planning on going to San Diego to try and meet up with Denise this summer. Yukari wants to keep in touch and possibly meet up sometime down the road if possible.”*

These four interactive assignments move this online class from a “publish and post” to focus on communication and connectivity.

In conclusion, this online Global Communication course offers one example of how it is possible to expand the boundaries of CMC and focus on the medium itself and its maximum utility – in this case, communication and connectivity. This course and its outcomes stand in stark contrast to Zemsky and Massy’s assertions regarding a “bust” in e-learning mentioned earlier:

- 1) If we build it they will come – if we build something the students want and are interested in, *then* they will come. When asked, “What first interested you about this course?” many students responded with answers about the opportunity to communicate globally. One student commented, “The global aspect of it and the idea of being able to correspond with students from another country,” Another

- student noted, “For something different and to expand my realm of focus. Opportunity to “travel, see the world without leaving home and work.” Yet another student said, “The global interaction, within the country as well as outside to other countries. This gave a clear example of how connected our world can become.”
- 2) The kids will take to e-learning like ducks to water – students in both countries have definitely taken to this course. In addition, extensive data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, “Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions 2000-2001 confirms that student demand for distance learning is increasing,  
[Http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003017](http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003017).
  - 3) E-learning will force a change in how we teach – “force” is perhaps the wrong word here. E-learning *has* certainly altered the way we teach. However, if we are to fully capitalize on the benefits of E-learning we need to spend less time on debating its justification and more time on studying the medium itself and how it can be used to its maximum potential. We need to move past Zemsky and Massy’s proclamation that e-learning is “merely correspondence courses distributed electronically” to using e-learning and the Internet for it’s ultimate purpose – communication and connectivity.

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