Facilitating Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity with Technology:

Challenging "Otherness" and Promoting a Dialogic Way of Knowing

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Abstract

This paper explores how the use of technology may be helpful in teaching intercultural communication, especially in solving problematic issues of "otherness." First, the issue of "otherness" is addressed as problematic to learning about culturally different others, particularly for intercultural communication students. It is suggested that "othering" is a two-sided problem, certainly for those being "othered" but also for those who do the "othering." The challenge for intercultural communication instructors is to ground the pedagogy of intercultural communication in a sound, philosophical framework which relates "self" and "other" in a relational, dialogic manner.

This essay proposes generating online dialogues as an alternative or complementary method to traditional pedagogical practices for teaching intercultural communication. Specifically, the use of an online bulletin board system allows learners to engage in intercultural dialogues both synchronously and asynchronously. Furthermore, the use of an online platform can facilitate one's learning about "others" in a more engaged, open and accommodating manner, which goes beyond the traditional classroom teaching and learning of intercultural communication. Finally, the essay concludes with some potential challenges to incorporating technology into the teaching of intercultural communication.

Introduction

One of the challenges in intercultural communication research and pedagogy is the notion of "othering." That is, individuals belonging to less powerful groups are often differentiated from and opposed to those in power by processes of essentializing and objectifying (Jandt & Tanno, 2001). The power differential may be in the context of gender hierarchy (Butler, 1990; Hegde, 1998), racial hierarchy (hooks, 1990), religious hierarchy (Mazrui, 2002) and/or international/colonial hierarchy (Said, 1979; Shome, 2002). The subordination of a less powerful group takes the form of particular ideologies of identity (e.g., gender/racial) and is reproduced through discourse that constructs the "other." This demeaning discourse often takes the form of prescriptions of the appropriate roles for women, minorities and/or colonized people (Supriya, 1999). Mendoza (1999) argues that the notion of otherness is problematic to intercultural communication. She states:

> A person who lives elsewhere is not (yet) a stranger as such, technically speaking, but she acquires the status upon leaving the primary space (or belonging) and upon drawing "near." In other words, for as long as that "other" person remains in her designated place (i.e., over "there") an "outsider" would normally pose no concern (since one is not then compelled to deal with her). (p. 8)

There has been a great deal of research identifying the problem this confers on the "distant" and often minority persons/cultures being "othered" (Alcoff, 1991/2), resulting in resentment, anger, discomfort (Allen, Orbe & Olivas, 1999; Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama & Yep, 2002) and even conflict (Rosen, 2000). However, one might argue that this process of "othering" is also a problem for those who are doing the "othering." Researchers have identified problems generated for those historically powerful groups who view others only in distant, exotic ways (Rosaldo, 1989). This is particularly true for U. S. whites who study other cultures,

especially cultural groups who have been historically marginalized. First, the invisibility of

power means that whites often don't understand their own cultural baggage and don't really see

themselves as cultural beings (Bahk & Jandt, 2004; Hardiman, 2003) when the gaze is always on

someone else (Ferguson, 1990; Martin & Davis, 2001). And true dialogue and intercultural

understanding are almost impossible because to engage in such dialogue may destroy the fragile

contradictions necessary to maintaining their unearned privilege (DeTurk, 2001; Kivel, 1996;

Orbe, 1998; Steyn, 2002). This problem of othering presents special challenges for instructors of

intercultural communication.

Challenges of "Othering" for Intercultural Communication Pedagogy

The problem of othering for intercultural communication students is often exacerbated by

at least three forces: the reinforcement of stereotypes in popular culture, students' lack of

experience with intercultural encounters and the focus on identifying cultural differences in

intercultural communication courses.

First, U. S. popular culture reinforces the distancing and essentializing view of less

powerful others in many ways, primarily through media. For example, stereotypes of U. S.

ethnic minority groups abound on television, in the print media and in music and movies (Dixon

& Linz, 2000; Henderson & Baldasty, 2003; Merskin, 2001; Miller & Ross, 2004; Paek & Shah,

2003; Perkins & Starosta 2001; Vargas, 2000). Critical scholars have also analyzed how movie

lighting (Dyer, 1993) and camera angles (Shome, 1996) teach us to see marginalized others in

demeaning, essentialist and incomplete ways while simultaneously those in power are often

portrayed as heroic and complex (Dyer, 1997; Madison, 1999).

Second, for many of our students, the problem of othering is exacerbated by a lack of

experience in interacting with people from different races and classes. The finding of a recent

study of student communication at a multiracial campus highlights this general inexperience.

Halualani, Chitgopekar, Morrison and Dodge (2004) discovered that the students in their study

(like most individuals) largely communicate with others in their own racial group, despite living

in an increasingly multiracial/multiethnic society (Brewer & Suchan, 2001; Schmitt, 2001).

Many students enter our intercultural communication classes with lenses of "othering" already

firmly in place, impacting the way both whites and students of color approach the study of

intercultural communication. Some U. S. white students assume that studying intercultural

communication is about studying others while failing to recognize their own cultural

background. For instance, the first author often gets the following response from her white

students on the first day of class, *"Yeah, sounds great. You are from Japan and know a lot of

culture stuff. But you know what? I don't have a culture to talk about, like you do. I am just

here to learn something about other cultures and other people."* So they often somehow believe

that they do not have culture (unless they have traveled abroad and/or engaged in in-depth

intercultural interactions in the past) and therefore that they have nothing to offer to the class.

For them, then, cultural diversity and multiculturalism are about "other" people, especially

people of color. As a result, they "other" whatever they hear, read and learn about different

cultures as something that is irrelevant to their college life. Learning that they (whites) do have

culture and that the reason they aren't aware of it is based on unearned historical privilege is

sometimes painful (Martin & Davis, 2001), and we are rather compassionate towards them when

they do realize this. Minority students are often in a defensive "othered" mode, knowing that

they probably aren't going to learn much that they don't already know about their own cultures

and that they may even have to listen to notions of their cultures that are essentializing and

negative (Collier et al., 2002; Martin & Davis, 2001; Martin & Butler, 2001).

Third, "othering" is sometimes unintentionally reinforced in our courses. Cooks (2001) and others have noted that the traditional focus—identifying cultural differences from a social science perspective—tends to reinforce the centering of the majority viewpoint and "obscures the position of the researcher/sojourner/traveler as the center of interaction to which the 'stranger' must conform" (p. 340). This approach seems to imply that the best way to help students become better intercultural communicators is by learning about cultural differences in a rather objective and passive way (Mendoza, 1999*)* with the point of comparison often being white Americans (Cooks, 2001; Martin & Davis, 2001; Moon, 1996)

The impact of this "othering on international or U. S. racial minority students " is quite easy to see. Stereotypes abound: Japanese are indirect, Native Americans love harmony in nature; Greeks live in the present and so on. A very familiar example is presented in many intercultural studies (and textbooks)—that *all* U. S. Americans are individualistic and conversationally direct and *all* Japanese are collectivistic and indirect. Fortunately, recent scholars have protested this all-too-easy essentializing (Hirai, 1987) and have proposed instead a more contextual, historical and relational approach to intercultural communication theory/research and teaching (Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama & Yep, 2002; Cooks, 2001; Nakayama & Martin, 2007).

The goals of teaching about self and others, then, present challenges for instructors of intercultural communication. Mendoza (1999) argues the importance of raising our awareness of the politically loaded ideas on boundaries (i.e., "us" vs. "them"; "here" vs. "there"). Her critique is particularly helpful in guarding us and students against the act of othering in terms of the following two dimensions. First, such an othering orientation is a detached way of knowing; i.e., one will probably not add any significance, relevance, or even a sense of reality to one's own life

merely by obtaining cultural information from textbooks or his/her own cultural informant.

Second, this othering attitude often stems from an unearned privilege due to one's race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc. (e.g., McIntosh, 1998). What is needed is a paradigm that helps students to view themselves in relation to others, or others in relation to themselves. Without such a solid framework, a student may still have a lot of holes in his/her knowledge "container" and, thus, may not build any meaningful, authentic and transformative knowledge.

To summarize, we have illustrated the problematic notion of "otherness" in the teaching and learning of intercultural communication. We have also indicated the importance of experience and dialogue with others from different cultures in order to enhance one's understanding of culture and communication. Indeed, these discussions directly relate to a question we often ask ourselves as we teach intercultural communication: "What should students' learning in an introductory intercultural communication course look like?"

What we propose in this essay is a more relational way of knowing. That is, students should be able to examine, frame and tangibly "feel" the relationship of "self" and "other" as connected, not separate from or independent of each other (Stewart, 1997). As instructors, we are interested in exploring an alternative method of increasing students' understanding of self and others (with differing social and cultural identities) in a relational, dialogic manner. More specifically, we examine how computer-mediated communication (CMC) may facilitate students' learning about others and themselves and, thus, enhance their learning of intercultural communication. In the following section, we review relevant literature on three related notions: (a) the importance of experience and dialogue in pedagogy, (b) discursive construction of one's cultural identity and (c) a dialogic way of knowing.

A Dialogic Approach to Teaching Intercultural Communication

A first step in meeting the challenges of othering is understanding the importance of experience and dialogue.   According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), "experience is -- the starting point and key term for all social inquiry" (p. 414). That is, for one to know something for himself/herself, one needs to have meaningful experience and active reflection on it. Eyler, Giles and Schmiede (1996), for instance, address four meaningful elements of a successful reflective process of experiential learning:

1.   *Connected:* Good discovery "connects" with what the students are learning in the classroom, textbooks and other environments.

2.   *Contexualized:* The content of the experiential learning is an important component of a reflexive process.

3.   *Challenging:* Students should feel "challenged" by critically examining issues discovered through learning. To accomplish this, engaging questions in a safe environment for personal discovery need to be provided.

4.   *Continuous:* The learning must be framed and understood as an ongoing, continuous experience.

A second step is understanding the discursive constructions of identity of self and other. According to cultural identity theory, we come to know who we are through our interactions with others. The theory emphasizes that such a formation of one's sense of self, or cultural identity, is embedded in social, relational, physical, historical and political contexts (Hecht, Warren, Jung & Krieger 2005). Both social psychologists (Hardiman, 2003; Helms, 1994) and communication scholars (Bahk & Jandt, 2004; Martin, Krizek, Nakayama & Bradford, 1996; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Steyn, 2001) have suggested that majority group members' identities are often unexplored on social and individual levels. This seems particularly true for some white students.

Through their journal entries and class discussions, it appears that their notion of cultural identities (vs. personal identities) about themselves as well as about others is not fully discursively developed. Our speculation is confirmed by Bahk and Jandt's (2004) findings that white students do not see dominance, normalcy and privilege as part of their white identities, while these same identity characteristics are very apparent to non-white students. The inability for some white students to see themselves from another cultural viewpoint may be partially due to inexperience with intercultural interaction and also to normal psycho-social ethnic identity development (Hoare, 2003; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992). Consequently, one clear main purpose of an introductory intercultural communication course should be to increase opportunities for student to interact with someone from another culture on a personal, deeper level.

However, does the increased amount of contact with members of another cultural group necessarily result in a maximized amount of learning? Research findings on the contact hypothesis suggest that under certain conditions, intercultural contact can lead to reduced prejudice and positive attitude change (Klak & Martin, 2003; Nesdale & Todd, 2000; Rubin & Lannutti, 2001; Stephan, 1999). If not, what could be a hindrance to their learning? And *how* do our students develop their understanding of intercultural communication and the notion of "others"? As a potential solution to this problematic act of othering, the dialogic way of knowing is a key approach to cultivating deeper understanding of self and others, possible through a dialogic approach to knowledge and communication.

One of the most influential thinkers who advanced our understanding of the dialogic nature of knowledge was Mikhail Bahktin. He underscored the idea that "human beings are interrelated, interdependent, or 'implicated' linguistically, mentally, psychologically, and spiritually" (Bahktin, 1986). His notion of "implicature" was, thus, highlighted when he

emphasized the lived, dialogic experience of otherness, in which *I realize myself through others.*

As such the dialogic experience holds transformative possibilities for human consciousness,

communication, and culture (Dace & McPhail, 1998).

Buber (1958) also emphasized the importance of this paradoxical concept of dialogic

relationship with others, stressing that each being should treat the other as an immediate whole.

In fact, in his "landmark" meeting with Carl Rogers (a prominent scholar in the field of

psychotherapy), they both engaged in metadialogic conversations in which they developed

coherent knowledge out of each other's sharply differing positions and, thus, demonstrated a

possibility of authentic dialogue in role-unequal relationships in moments of meeting (Cissna &

Anderson, 1998). Cissna and Anderson further analyze Buber and Rogers' dialogic moments and

illustrate as follows:

> The basic character of such a dialogic moment, therefore, is the experience of inventive
>
> surprise shared by the dialogic partners as each "turns toward" the other and both
>
> mutually perceive the impact of each other's turning. It is a brief interlude of focused
>
> awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously
>
> transcends the perception of difference itself. (p. 74)

A number of communication scholars have promoted the idea of dialogic knowing in the

ethics of organizational communication (Deetz, Cohen, & Edley, 1997) and also in

understanding issues of diversity and facilitating intercultural communication (Stewart, 1997;

Wood, 1997). Intercultural communication scholar Yoshikawa's (1987) Buddhistic logic--

"nothing in this world exists independent of a web of conditioning factors"--also ties into Buber's

and Bahktin's claims about the dialogic nature of beings. He argues that there are four modes of

intercultural encounter and communication: i.e., *ethnocentric* mode (one-sided communication),

control mode (Party B's cultural uniqueness is manipulated in order for Party A to achieve

his/her objective), *dialectical* mode (the prime motive of A and B is fusion so that the differences

between the two can disappear); and *dialogical* mode (the differences between A and B are

recognized and respected; the emphasis is on wholeness and mutuality; thus, A and B each

maintain a separate identity).

The notion of finding oneness among differences through a dialogic orientation is very

natural and in harmony with how the first author, as a Japanese, has been socialized to see social

realities (specifically speaking of the human level of experience, not the spiritual realm): e.g.,

masculinity and femininity, day and night, and black and white. For her, the two contrasting

ideas within each pair are interconnected and inseparable. However, such a seemingly

contradictory way of seeing things may present challenges for some students of intercultural

communication, especially for students who come from cultures where (a) the autonomous,

independent sense of self-concept is cultivated through the socialization process and (b) a linear

and "logical" way of thinking, rather than circular and affective ways of thinking, is emphasized.

For these students, a dialogic way of knowing may be viewed as irrational, too paradoxical, too

relative, or even too "politically correct." However, even in such resistant responses, one, as an

instructor, can acknowledge and understand their standpoint and yet frame their ontological

perspective in relation to a contrastive paradigm (as Yoshikawa, 1987, suggests in his double-

swing model).

One creative way of implementing the dialogic approach in intercultural communication

courses is by using computer-mediated communication technology. Specifically, we propose

using Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in teaching intercultural communication, to (a) facilitate a

dialogic learning about self and others and (b) get students involved experientially. The

particular focus in this paper is on intercultural communication instruction, and we propose that online discussions on a BBS may be employed as a complement to classroom instruction or as part of a completely online course. Our ideas about using technology in teaching intercultural communication are based upon our experiences as instructors of intercultural communication courses, as facilitators of intergroup discussions and workshops and as users of bulletin board discussions, both as a complement to classroom instruction and as part of a totally online course.

Technology for Facilitating Intergroup Dialogues Between Self and Other

According to Scalera (1994), the participants in her face-to-face intergroup dialogue reached the realization that there are multiple truths and differing realities which are constructed rather institutionally, not merely personally. Likewise, in intercultural communication courses, one of our goals is that students start viewing their way of being in the larger context of the multiple, complex ways of being of others.

An alternative or complement to face-to-face intergroup dialogue is possible with an online platform, i.e., computer-mediated communication (CMC). While there are other types of technology available, the most effective method to build dialogues among participants is the bulletin board system. In this essay, we refer to two particular course management software packages: "FirstClass" and "Blackboard." These are software programs that allow both delayed, asynchronous communication (e.g., a bulletin board system) and immediate, synchronous interaction (such as today's popular online system of private or group "chat")**.**

Tiffin and Rajasingham (1995) state, "Bulletin board systems (BBS) can be set up where messages can be posted for periods of time so that they can be read by anyone who is interested, and it is possible for readers to add their own messages" (p. 115). Thus, the BBS creates a community that is available to registered students**.** Further, online communicators can also view

who else is online and, thus, can more tangibly feel a sense of "social presence" and community

forum (Gunawardena, 1995).

Below we will explore how online computer-mediated communication can facilitate

students' learning about themselves and culturally different "others" in a more engaged, open,

flexible and "dialogic" manner—either as a complement to classroom instruction or as part of a

totally online course. This approach transcends some of the limitations faced by traditional

intercultural communication instruction. That is, the use of online dialogues can better facilitate

students' understanding the diversity of other students' backgrounds, identities, learning styles

and communication styles in the process of a dialogic inquiry about self and others (Lauzon,

2000). Specifically, we outline five ways in which online discussions can facilitate dialogic

learning.

Lived Experience as a Dialogic Point

Online discussions can provide a dialogic starting point for connecting with students'

lived experiences— their own and others'. Aitkin and Shedletsky (2002) suggest that the

computer "enhances or helps to bring awareness of information processing aspects of

communication, the assignment of meaning, the use of implication and inference" in a manner

not available in face-to-face interaction (p. 327). That is, the computer serves a kind of "second

self," engaging the student in self-exploration not available in other kinds of communication.

Online discussions (specifically, bulletin board systems) strongly encourage students'

examination and incorporations of their own real-life examples in learning. Much of the

interaction and conversations happen outside the classroom setting at all hours of the day or

night. As McComb (1994) describes it, "When I receive an assignment marked 10:30 p.m. from

a Capstone Course group, I know they have been thinking and working. When I read a

conference comment that a student wrote at 9 p.m., it is obvious that the student has been

pondering [a film shown] long after the 8 a.m. class viewing" (p. 164). These kinds of discussion

not only make their educational experience engaged and intimate instead of "distant" but also

invite students to fully describe and interpret the intercultural world and experiences in which

they live.

The act of writing of one's lived experience can be very empowering (Martinez, 2000) to

students whose cultural voices have been historically silenced. In the online forum, students

have unlimited opportunities for relational learning, by asking each other questions for

clarification or by offering their own experiences that may be similar to or different from others'.

For example, one of our students, Sara, posted the following message in response to one of the

assigned readings on self-identifications and labels:

> After reading the article, I realized that there is one thing that I have in common with the
>
> author. We are both repeatedly asked the same question: "What are you?" For some
>
> reasons, customers at the restaurant I work at always ask me the same question. I know
>
> they, the customers, are waiting for me to say Italian or Spanish. (People always say "I
>
> look like" one of the two.) I usually respond with the same answer, "I am Jewish,"
>
> assuming people are familiar with other ethnicities beyond their own. The most popular
>
> response is, "I am not asking your religion."
>
> Saying that I am Jewish, to me, explains a lot. It is not only a religion, but also an
>
> ethnicity, a culture, and a huge part of history. Most Jews originate from the Middle East.
>
> I then assume that would explain my coloring, hair color, etc. I usually have to expand
>
> by saying, "I am Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, etc." That usually satisfies them.
>
> Another student responds to Sara's posting as follows:

Sara, your response reminds me of a paper I wrote last semester with part of the title

being, "what are you?" A lot of people I come across seem to be so consumed with

labels b/c they think labels mean answers. I do not participate in Christmas and many

people ask me, "Well, what are you then? Jewish?" I have to admit, I have many times

told them I was, just to get them off my back. Being Jewish is an easy answer for them.

What is not easy, however, is my REAL explanation…. We celebrated Christmas as

children and kind of "grew out of it." There is, of course, a lot more to story, but I don't

feel I owe that explanation to strangers simply b/c my cultural traditions are different

from theirs. People have called me "Grinch," "Scrooge" – simply b/c my traditions aren't

theirs. Difference is scary to a lot of people. Thanks for your thoughts. I enjoyed them.

These students' narratives clearly illustrate how an online platform creates a discursive

space for one's articulation of significant cultural meanings. And these meanings are vividly and

richly described with one's lived experience, which in turn invites others to explore and

articulate their own experiences and to generate some feedback.

Another student's online posting here also illustrates the significance of one's lived

experience as an entry point for a dialogic means of understanding differences. Referring to his

own experience within his household, the student engages, very self-reflexively and honestly, in

describing perplexing opinions which his family members have expressed towards interracial

relationships:

Interracial relationships have always been an interesting topic of discussion in my

household because my parents have always been against them and my siblings and I can't

figure out why. They aren't racist in any stretch of imagination, as far as I've seen, but

they were adamantly opposed to my sister even considering marrying a black man when

it came up in discussion one time in sixth grade. Since then, she's bugged my dad about

it, but he won't say anything more. His reasoning is that it would just be too hard for

them because the world isn't ready for interracial couples. His main concern was for the

kids, who would be teased a lot. But it seems like such backwards thinking. I mean, how

else are you supposed to overcome stereotyping if you live in fear of it all the time?!

What's really odd to me is that … we lived in South Korea for a while, where there were

tons of American GIs married to Korean women. And my parents didn't seem to have a

problem with that at all. I wonder if it is a reverse thing when guys are involved. Or if

it's just a black and white issue for them. I'm real curious about this now.

Hoping to have answers next time,

Matthew

More Equitable Power Dynamic

A second way that technology facilitates dialogic learning is by addressing the power

dynamics that are often present in traditional face-to-face classroom discussion, where the

instructor controls the interaction. That is, in face-to-face discussions, shy students may fear

speaking up, and students who aren't necessarily shy may be hesitant to speak their mind on

sensitive intercultural issues such as diversity or multiculturalism. One of our students described

the challenge of making sure that everyone's voice gets heard in class discussions:

I also realized that being on the spot and going in a circle, one after another, was really

the only way to get the people who did not speak much to contribute and to limit the

people who spoke too much.

This same student also commented that she is a reflective thinker who hesitates to say

something casually off the top off her head. And important issues such as diversity, prejudice or

racism require further cognitive and affective processing for students like her. This fear of

speaking up in face-to-face interaction contexts is further confirmed in our experiences

facilitating intergroup dialogues. Shyness, cultural differences or power dynamics often

determine who is or is not "courageous enough to speak up."

Interestingly, communication scholar Stan Deetz (1997) provides a similar, valuable

insight from his own experience. When he was in Sweden as a Fulbright scholar and making a

presentation, he was one day asked "whether I thought that by speaking so well I might be

silencing others" (p. 129). He states that a participative mode, rather than a control mode, should

be taken seriously as a communication goal, especially in today's multicultural society.

In contrast to the traditional classroom interaction, computer-mediated communication

(CMC) is a "status leveling" form of communication where traditional "gatekeepers" between

interactants are eliminated (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). That is, students can initiate

communication directly with professor and with each other without waiting for permission or

addressing the professor (McComb, 1994). And second, CMC is a "lean" form of

communication. It filters out the nonverbal cues that that may intimidate (but also provide a

metamessage about how to interpret the communication, which presents challenges in online

interaction—addressed in the next section.

Both these characteristics of online discussions result in a more equitable context and a

forum for those students to speak who may not speak up in a traditional classroom discussion

(Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2001; Woods & Fasset, 2003). In an asynchronous BBS forum,

those "reflective thinkers" have time to compose their thoughts and write them down. In a

synchronous online chat, those who are shy can contribute their ideas without seeing the

instantaneous nonverbal reactions of an audience. We have both been amazed and gratified to

see the extent and insights of contributions from students when they are given the opportunity to

share their thoughts and ideas with others in online discussions. And our experience is

confirmed by others. Aitken and Shedletsky (2002) note that shy students are more likely to

contribute to online discussions than in classroom discussions and in a related study, Kelly,

Duran and Zolten (2001) found that reticent students preferred communicating with professors

through CMC over face-to-face communication.

For instance, one of our students was consistently quiet during classroom meetings

throughout the semester. One time, she responded to the following question in the online

platform: "How has this class thus far and the article on whiteness changed your perspective? If

it hasn't, what is your perspective and why has it stayed the same?" The student wrote:

My perspective of whiteness and what it means to me has not changed. The article was

interesting in how we differentiate our races and ethnicities. However, I still do not

"feel" white. I tried, after reading the article, to analyze whiteness, but it is very difficult

for me. I know there are a lot of benefits to being white.

In her response you can see that, despite the ambivalence she feels about her cultural

identity, she made her voice heard, thus participating rather than silencing herself, which opened

up a discursive space for herself and others. In a BBS forum, such uncertainty or "grayness" in

one's thoughts and emotional reactions can be delved in and articulated:

Multi-Directionality of Dialogues

The third strength of an online dialogue format is that it promotes multidirectionality of

discussion—as opposed to the typical uni-directional (teacher-student) interaction of a traditional

face-to-face classroom discussion. Computer-mediated interaction allows for more opportunities

for students themselves to initiate discussions on new topics or to ask curious questions, and

student-centered and culturally relevant learning become more possible. And most students are

open to a collaborative community; most are "interested in learning, doing and interacting not

only with the instructor, but with other students" (Dahl, 2004, p. 5).

And this requires more student initiative. In the traditional classroom, students don't

have to take the responsibility for communicating. The teacher initiates and regulates the

interaction, doing most of the work. With CMC, students are required to take the initiative—they

need to learn how to ask questions and seek clarification. Writing their questions and ideas can

help them to sharpen their critical thinking abilities (McCloud, 1994).

For instance, during the final session of a dialogue group including both U.S.-born and

international students, the first author and her co-facilitator asked the participants what they

would do differently if they were going to be co-facilitators in the future. Several of them stated

that they would make each session less structured. They felt that meaningful dialogues were

sometimes hampered due to the tension level and also time constraints. For the co-facilitators,

this was an eye-opening insight because those were the moments when the facilitators thought

dialogues were stagnating and not going anywhere! Kearsley (1995) confirms this "shortage of

peer-to-peer initiated dialogues" in his examination of different types of instructional interactions

(i.e., teacher-student, student-content, and student-student). He claims that a course design that

maximizes interactions among students is an important component to enhancing cooperative and,

we would add, dialogic learning. CMC allows for many participants to communicate with

multiple people at their discretion.

An example of this is illustrated below. Here, a student takes an initiative in raising and

posing questions to her classmates, following other students' postings. It is noteworthy that the

entire process of synthesizing, sense-making and reframing the discussions into a different

direction and question took place solely among students, without any intervention by an

instructor:

> While the notion of the difference between race and ethnicity may be simplistic, I think
>
> it is difficult to have experienced this difference enough in order to COMPLETELY
>
> accept the defined differences. This is evident in many of our postings. … This led me
>
> to wonder about our, as Americans, feelings about the racial and ethnic identity of
>
> Cristina [a classmate and a friend]. As a Mexican immigrant who has spoken about her
>
> perceived whiteness, she has thought most about what people consider people like, a
>
> White. So, I would like to know if you would say she is white, or as in the case of the
>
> Brazilian, if you would consider her Mexican? Although it is inherent that race is not
>
> ethnicity, it is perceived as equal, leading us to have learned opinion regarding her
>
> race/ethnicity. Any thoughts, questions, or words of new found wisdom?

Relatedly, multi-directional online discussions not only require more student initiative

but are also highly interactive. Students get involved and can be surprisingly frank in online

discussion compared to conventional classroom discussion (Aitken & Shedletsky, 2002). As

described by the first author during an online multicultural education course she took as a

graduate student:

> People share their thoughts on culture in their postings, and wait for others to respond.
>
> People post their writings not only to be heard but also to make their opinions and
>
> experiences available for others to hear. The process is open and continuous. It is like
>
> playing catch, non-stop. You throw a ball, and you don't run away there. You wait to see
>
> how others respond. Or, how others don't respond....

Open Discussions to Explore Controversial Issues

A fourth way in which online discussions facilitate dialogic learning is that they provide a

comfortable venue in which students can explore controversial and/or ambivalent feelings about

intercultural topics. Students may not offer their true voices and experience on these issues in

face-to-face discussions due to the fear of creating incommensurable or irreconcilable

differences or because of a social desirability issue. However, as noted above, the filtering out of

nonverbal cues, not being able to see the reactions of others, or the identity characteristics (age,

gender, race etc) that may hinder communication—makes everyone feel more at ease (Kuehn,

1994).

One such example occurred when an Asian-American student, who participated in a

dialogue group including Asians and whites, shared such a dilemma in his journal. Having

emigrated from Korea at a younger age and having made tremendous efforts to assimilate into

the dominant, white U.S. culture, he found himself very disoriented in the Asian/white

dichotomy. He could not see himself "fitting in" either group and so experienced quite a

dilemma during the face-to-face, intergroup dialogue sessions. In an online format, however, the

discussion can be more open, and students like this one are able to acknowledge and welcome

the sometimes paradoxical natures of one's identity/identities.

Another example which illustrates this is the following posting written by a Mexican

student in one of our online BBSs. In one of the discussion threads, she and her classmates

explored the question, "What does it mean to me to be an American?" In contrast to the majority

of the postings which preceded. identifying America as the United States and its "freedom,

democracy," pop culture, etc., she articulated her own view, creating a unique tapestry of

existing multiple cultural meanings in this online forum:

For me, America means the mysterious continent that had great civilizations such as

Mayan, Aztecs, Incas, and Ancient Native Americans. American means new life that is

reborn every time I discover something new around me. America is, to me, a

naïve/innocent, free, generous, wild, diverse, green, vast, pure, endless, colorful and

tasteful continent.

Another posting shows a different student's take on what it means to be an American.

Her posting sheds new light on the discussion question, consequently inviting two other students'

responses.

Being an American means that my chances of being a victim of a violent crime is very

high. I must double-lock the doors on my house to keep intruders out who may kill "just

because," or someone thinks I have something they need to survive so they justify their

killing.

I must also be careful on the highway because I might drive too fast or slow or the most

dangerous act of cutting someone off in "their" driving lane, which could result in getting

my head blown off. The color of your skin, your religion or sexual preference could

easily set someone off on a tangent to destroy those who don't match their expectations

of American. American means the freedom to kill. Ann

Two other students, Jeff and Shelley, respond to Ann's posting:

Ann, this is a great take on American culture. It is great to see that someone has a

different view of America. Most Americans have a brainwashed, distorted view of

America that was fed to them through our great public school system!   Jeff

I challenge you to name one country where this does not hold true. Shelley

In an intercultural dialogue, incommensurable worldviews and different views of realities often manifest. And our students are learning the importance of not merely how to argue against each other but of how to at least try to hear and understand one another as citizens in today's global and multicultural world.

Social Presence of Online Community

A final strength of online discussions is that they allow for students to experience a sense of continuous dialogic community on a day-to-day basis, as opposed to the quite limited two or three times a week classroom meetings during a typical semester. Bulletin board systems allow participants to (a) post a question or response *anytime* they choose, (b) see if someone else is online and (c) upon agreement, invite others to a group/private chat and develop further understanding of each other. Computer-mediated learning can thus create a setting in which students tangibly experience the "social presence" of a community (Gunawardena, 1995) where multicultural discourses are taking place twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Research findings seem to support this assertion, that students are "able to develop a sense of belonging and connection through online discussion" in a way that they do not do in traditional classrooms (Aitken & Shedletsky, 2002, p. 330). In this way, student learning communities are created through interactions in student-to-student, student-to-group, student-to-instructor communications—providing students with the opportunity to learn from each other to become more involved in the learning process in the more flexible online environment (Kochtanek & Hein, 2000). The one-to-one relationship bonds that form online are sometimes stronger than those in the traditional classroom (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2001).

For example, one of our adult working students, Chris, was once assigned to be a moderator for a weekly online discussion. One Sunday night at 11:20 p.m., a couple of days after the in-class meeting, he posted the following message, referring back to Thursday's face-to-face discussion:

The concept came up in class the other day about people not wanting to give up their own ethnicity, but also wanting to be equal. Someone in class wanted to know why they were fighting, that if they are treated "the same" they should be happy. But that's the point… no one wants to be treated "the same" as everyone else. They want to be treated "equally," which is a much different thing. If I have five apples and five oranges, they are equal but not the same. They have different tastes, different colors, but are both healthy and tasteful fruits.

I seem to be getting off the topic. As a moderator, I would like to add to question two on how to reach for unity. Is it better to offer others your culture, or to try to partake in theirs first? How do you keep from imposing your values in either case? If everyone wants to keep their own ethnicity, is unity possible?

The social presence of the online community also creates a space in which students are encouraged to think continuously, if they choose to, and consequently share their ideas by posting. This can occur without a wait of a few days (or sometimes a week) until the next class session. One student wrote a nine-paragraph message, which ended, "Okay, I am done rambling. Sometimes I just have too many thoughts racing around in my head that is next to impossible to follow a steady course throughout my discussion. I hope you were able to understand my thoughts. See ya!"

We have also witnessed a significant "light-bulb" experience for the student who posted a

six-paragraph message at 3:17 am, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

I pride myself on my open mind. Often I talk about the unwillingness of many to see

another's point of view in order to accept their thoughts and opinions. Some already

have their mind made up and refuse to change it when they are given the opportunity to

see what others know. I am not one of those people.

As many of you have noticed, I have strong opinions as to whether or not we should see

color. I have talked about my own experience in my "biracial" family. Because my

mother is white and my step-father Mexican, I grew up in a home where I saw both

cultures. However, due to the upbringing I received in society, I saw my family as white.

[When I watched a video in class and saw a man of color] begin his tirade about being

"color-blind," my eyes, mind and heart opened. I plead guilty to acknowledging my

family's whiteness and ignoring their color.

I remember the day that someone asked me if I was Mexican. And I realized after the

video that I had taken offense to this question. It put me in a lower class than my skin

color allowed. Often I have said that my sisters don't look Mexican, they look white.

Talk about denying the skin. . . .

If you don't know it's broken, how can you fix it? Throughout my 25+ years, I

have prided myself on not being a racist. I mean, how could I be when my own sisters

are Mexican? Oh, but I am. In subtle ways . . . It isn't until I realize these subtleties that

I am able to correct them and change my thought process. . . .

The general strength, then, of the online dialogues discussed above, is that they

encourage students to engage in a more intersubjective and dialogic manner of learning about

others' differing realities, the worlds they live in and the impact of histories, which leads to

learning about their own standpoint, privilege and assumptions. However, we would be remiss

to not admit that there are serious challenges one must consider before incorporating computer-

mediated interaction into intercultural communication pedagogy. We identify several such

challenges in the following section.

<div align="center">Challenges of Computer-Mediated Communication in the</div>

<div align="center">Teaching and Learning of Intercultural Communication</div>

In her recent article on intercultural communication, Gajjala (2004) points out the

challenges of using technology in an intercultural realm. She states that the power dynamics in

the virtual realm may be no different from the way they are in the real world. Gajjala claims that

"a new demographic Utopia in the global village" is a myth. Therefore, challenges to the idea of

egalitarian online dialogue format do exist, due to power-related issues. For example, students

from backgrounds with less political, socioeconomic or other cultural privilege than others may

not find the online environment as egalitarian. Scholars have warned about the growing "digital

divide" that differentiates middle-class, computer-experienced students from their less

technologically savvy working-class counterparts (Lenhart, Horrigan, Rainie, Allen,

Boyce,Madden, & O'Grady, 2003; McIsaac, 1993; van Dijk, 2004), and so one's access to the

Internet (e.g., whether the student has Internet access at home or has to wait in a computer lab for

an hour to use the Internet) can create a much different learning environment among students.

Also, students with high anxiety about computer-mediated communication or those who are slow

typists may feel apprehensive about participating in online discussions (Althaus, 1997).

Cultural minority students may also find themselves feeling just as vulnerable in an

online discussion as they do in a traditional classroom discussion, depending upon the level of

cultural diversity within the class (Sujo de Montes, Oran, & Willis, 2002). If there are few

minority students, they may encounter the same burden—that they are expected to be *the*

"minority voice," to serve as spokespeople for their groups and/or to explain their backgrounds

and perspectives on related assigned readings in order to "educate" other students. The instructor

incorporating computer-mediated discussions needs to be mindful of this expectation and create

an atmosphere that lessens this expectation (hooks, 1993).

Wood and Fassett (2003), in an autoethnographic analysis of their experiences with

online courses, question the assumption that CMC redresses the imbalance of power between

teacher and student. They suggest instead that "student empowerment" through CMC might give

the illusion of equality while the overall educational power hierarchy remains firmly in place.

They call for a more nuanced understanding of how instructional identities interact.

There is also the issue of online identity management and politics. Gajjala (2004)

sarcastically poses an interesting question: "Who knows who you are as you claim to be?" A

number of scholars have discussed the ethical issues inherent in Internet interaction—where one

has more freedom to manipulate one's identity than in real life (because of the absence of

nonverbal cues). This choice presents an opportunity for *identity tourism*, i.e., taking on the

identities of people of other races, gender, classes or sexual orientations for recreational purposes

(required in some virtual games like *Dungeons and Dragons*). One might argue that this provides

an opportunity for individuals to develop intercultural empathy by taking on other identities: for

instance, females might take on the virtual identity of males, participate in male-only online

discussions and come to understand better what it feels like to be a male (Danet, 1999).

However, this presents serious ethical issues (Turkle, 1995).

A major advantage of CMC communication also presents a final challenge: the status

leveling and filtering out of cues that cause students to feel comfortable in contributing to

discussion may also be taken to the extreme. That is, in online dialogue participants may share

their anger, frustrations and hostility more openly than they would in face-to-face

communication. Research seems to suggest that that students monitor their communication less

in online discussion and are more often assertive and rude than they would be in classroom

setting (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2001). Experienced online instructors have observed that

students behave in "disturbingly crass, prejudicial and hurtful ways" in online discussions,

especially if they can be fairly anonymous (Aitken & Shedletsky, p. 329).

The tendency to self-monitor less combined with the often controversial topics under

discussion can lead to more open conflict than might occur in other communication courses or in

a traditional communication classroom. Discussion topics often involve values and issues of self-

concept or identity, potentially threatening or uncomfortable subjects for college undergraduates.

And the fact that the written message cannot be taken back may intensify the conflict. Whereas a

student may storm out of a classroom when angry, the nasty written message stays on the

bulletin board for all to see long after the student sends the message (although it can be removed

by the instructor) (Aitken & Shedletsky, 2002). These challenges point to the necessity of the

instructor having a basic understanding of the unique characteristics of computer-mediated

communication and how it differs from face-to-face communication. While some instructors

take a hands-off position about intervening in online discussion conflict, one could argue that the

nature of the intercultural online discussion requires the professor to be more hands-on (Sujo de

Montes, Oran & Willis, 2002). For these reasons it seems important that the instructor set

ground rules for online discussion behavior and may have to intervene in some cases if conflict

becomes intense.

Conclusion

Since its foundation as a discipline in the late 1940s, the field of intercultural

communication has always grown dramatically. Its importance has indeed always reflected this

increasingly global world we live in. When Marshall McLuhan coined the term "global village"

in the 1960s to characterize the technologically connected world, he must also have been

foreseeing other factors such as economic interdependence among nations and peaceful co-

existence of different groups. Globalization has also highlighted the need within the U.S. to deal

with its changing demographics. "Multiculturalism," "diversity" and "immigrants" are among

many words that create important social discussions and controversies. Here, again, the central

issue is on how to co-exist with and understand culturally different others (Fox, 1997).

Katriel (1995) suggests that more intercultural communication researchers should

examine "a newly emerging context for the discursive production of 'virtual community'" (p.

284). She primarily considers a transcultural world "where cultural differences grounded in

participants' real lives are neither celebrated nor surmounted. We, on the other hand, propose

that more intercultural communication research and education look at the designs and paradigms

that allow for diverse voices to be heard and understood relationally. A dialogic learning

community using CMC technology can create such a framework for relational, dialogic learning

about self and others through intercultural dialogues and create "intercultural alliances" (Collier,

2002) among intercultural communication students.

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