

"Electronic Intercultural Communication

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Building a Communication and Interaction Basis through Virtual International Exchanges across Continents"

Abstract

Internationalisation and globalisation are already the reality for everybody that does not close out the world in front of his door. It is becoming more and more important know several languages, countries and cultures. However, knowing about a culture is not enough. When interacting with people from another country it is important to understand the message below the line and to deal with problems that arise when two cultures meet. Equally to this development time is growing less and less to live what one knows already. Company's invest money in their personnel for becoming culturally skilled. Though in the reality of business these skills can hardly be applied as written in the books. Therefore, this paper describes a research that is currently done on virtual intercultural communication that will help to contribute to existing knowledge in this field and bring up new perspectives.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, intercultural communication training, virtual communication, e-Learning

Background

The authors of this paper are students and a lecturer of Health Management in Tourism, a degree program offered by a University, one of the leading universities of applied sciences in the country of the authors. Its campus is situated in small village. This village is a car hour away from the next big city and can only be reached by public transportation within 2 hours. The village has a long history of training tourism experts on non academic level. In the year of 2001 the first 55 students started their education at the degree program. Several facts that predestine this degree program to take part in this experimental approach to intercultural communication can be pointed out:

- Distance to the next congested area
- Students come from all over the country and neighboring countries

Due to these facts, it is not always possible to meet in person for general conversations, meetings or project work. Other ways of communicating and staying in touch had to be found and established. The degree program developed a culture of electronic communication of its own.

During the first years the Moodle platform was introduced to the students in the course of an information and project management class. This process of implementation happened step by step. In the beginning, students were driven to use the platform to manage their assignments for the above mentioned classes. Through this process an ongoing engagement with the subject matter and the tools was established. Soon, this tool was taken over by other lecturers as well to manage their classes, projects or exams. Over the time these tools were overtaken by the students themselves to manage their everyday life. In the literature this process is described as authentic engagement and legitimate peripheral participation. "... authenticity is

unfortunately not a product that can be readily distributed, but is rather a process, the key factor for which is the participant's sense (and enactment) of agency." (Thorne S.L., 2003, p. 48). "... activity is authentic when it realizes a free choice and is an expression of what a person genuinely feels and believes and is intrinsically motivated" (Van Lier as cited in Thorne, 2003, p. 48). This process was described by Lave and Wenger (as cited in Thorne, 2003, p. 48) as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) – "a developmental model contending that participants move from initially peripheral and tentative engagement to full participation...". As the students are already familiar with the tools and use those methods in their everyday life, a positive outcome on the study is expected and can already be seen in the course of the experiment.

The authors wanted to take up the opportunity that is provided by the students unique culture of communication for extended research and took it to an international and global level. The idea of the current electronic intercultural communication project was born.

Facts of Virtual Communication

"Faster than a speeding memo, more powerful than a ringing telephone, able to leap whole continents in a single bound, electronic communication is our super hero of the new age." (Gier, S., 1991, p. 1)

In this section, relevant outcomes of a survey from this degree program are discussed.

General Outcomes

- Even though most of the students are on site, most of the time, more than half of the students (55,42%) assert that the communicate with each other virtually.

Virtual communication Ability

- The number of students who rated their ability of communicating virtually with "very good" rose from 9% at the beginning of this education to 47% after a few months. Whereas the students who rated themselves as poor users in the beginning (19%) were nullified. Almost all the students (96%) now rate those abilities as "Good" or "Very Good".

Messenger Usage

- 74% of all students use Skype
- 58% of all students use MSN messenger
- 25% of all students use ICQ and
- 12% of all students use YAHOO messenger for communicating synchronously
- 29% of all students use messenger systems several times a day, 22% daily and 27% weekly

Communication and work

- 68% of all students use forums for their assignments
- 99% of all students use E-Mail and
- 56% of all students use messenger systems
- Those rates are even higher in the class 03 that will take part in this communication project: 94% of them use forums and 82% use messenger systems for their assignments

For the student's freetime, the rates only change insignificantly.

The Experiment

The main idea behind the experiment was to find out:

- how people from different countries get to know each other in a virtual environment?
- how they discover pitfalls of intercultural communication and overcome them?
- which tools do they use?

Of course, this is not the first intercultural communication project done with the usage of virtual communication tools. But it is the first to be managed by students exclusively! Their assignment is to feel like in a virtual café in which they meet new friends from other countries. How would they start the process of communicating? Who would be the initiator? What would they talk about? These are only a few questions that come along with a project like this.

Design

The first task for the experiment was to find partners to support the project with students from other countries. This was done by the help of an international Moodle forum. Possible participants soon showed interest. Through e-mail, information about the background of the experiment was exchanged with the first nine potential partners. As the definite design of the project could not be determined at an early stage, the partners then had difficulties with the process of acquiring students for the project. Therefore the number of participating countries narrowed down to four.

Lack of student participation, diverging expectations and different semester times of the universities can be named as reasons for the partner drop out. These reasons can also be seen as cultural differences.

The final participating partners listed by the number of students taking part:

Japan – 84 students

Austria – 69 students

USA – 7 students

South Africa – 5 students

As the project start not even lies back a week, results can not be fully provided yet. Though, the process of communication has already started in different ways:

- through email
- through the Moodle platform
- through messenger systems (MSN, Skype)

Different approaches can also be seen already:

- introduction by email
- introduction in the forum, uploaded pictures
- first cultural information exchange

More detailed information about the design, partners and outcome can be provided in the fullpaper since the diploma thesis, which is part and reason for this experiment, will also be completed by then.

Reference List

Gier, S., Association for Veterinary Informatics. (1992). *Communicate for Success: How to Use Electronic Mail and Bulletin Boards Effectively*. Retrieved March 1st 2006, from <http://www.avinformatics.org/newsletter/1992/sepoct92.txt>

Thorne, S.L. (2003). Artifacts and Cultures-of-Use in Intercultural Communication. *Language Learning and Technology*, 7 (2), 38 – 67.

Note: Four more theses have been used for this paper which we don't refer to now, for anonymity reasons.