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## Like a Veil: Cross-cultural Experiential Learning Online

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The online discussions are like a veil that protects me and Yang; I feel safe enough to ask the hard questions I could never say to her face. (Social studies teacher in a global education course)

There is extensive literature on the power of face-to-face cross-cultural experience in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of world-mindedness (Brislin, 1993; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Germaine, 1998; Gochenour, 1993; Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Wilson, 1982, 1983, 1986; 1993a, 1998). Multicultural and global educators agree that teachers need face-to-face experiential learning with people different from themselves if they are to develop cross-cultural skills, knowledge, and competence (Chavez Chavez & O'Donnell, 1998; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Dasen, 1992; Deering & Stanutz, 1995; Finney & Orr, 1995; Grant, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1992, Merryfield, 2000b; Powell, Zehm, & Garcia, 1996). During the 1970s and 1980s many universities and other organizations developed opportunities for students and teachers to study abroad or work in culturally diverse settings with American minorities, immigrants, refugees, or international students. And then came the Internet, email, and the possibility for online interaction with people around the globe.

Underwritten by numerous corporations and foundations, electronic cross-cultural projects have promised to increase cultural sensitivity and awareness as they develop the skills and experiences needed in a global society. Scholars have identified positive outcomes, such as perspective taking, critical thinking, increased task engagement, sensitivity to cultural diversity, and social cognition, in some of these projects (Bonk, Appelman & Hay, 1996; Bonk & King, 1998; Daniels, Berglunc, & Petre, 1999; Kim & Bonk, 2002, Sunal & Christensen, 2002). Others who have reviewed such projects

and programs have found the results to be “inconclusive, overly optimistic and even contradictory” (Fabos & Young, 1999, p. 249; Warschauer, 1998). Some researchers have noted that cross-cultural communication online may have little impact on peoples’ misinformation and misperceptions. For example, Garner and Gillingham (1996) monitored online discourse between American children in Illinois and Yup’ik children in Alaska. Despite email that said that Yup’ik do not wear furs and live in igloos, the Illinois children maintained those stereotypes until they viewed a video.

Can online communication be orchestrated in such a way that it is effective in developing cross-cultural competence, appreciation of differences, and global perspectives? For over two decades I have applied theories of global, multicultural, and intercultural education as I have integrated face-to-face cross-cultural experiences into courses, graduate programs, and other professional work. As a former Peace Corps volunteer and advocate for study abroad, I was very skeptical about online communication creating cross-cultural understanding when I began to use the Internet in my classes in 1990. How could email ever compare with physical immersion in another culture, its daily life, languages, and its norms of behavior? Would not online cross-cultural options encourage those who wanted to avoid physical contact with people different from themselves?

Once I started teaching courses totally online in 1998, I found cross-cultural learning taking place that was simply not possible without these new technologies. Although I continue to have concerns about online cross-cultural interaction substituting for face-to-face interaction, I am convinced that online technologies are important tools for teacher educators who value cross-cultural experiences, skills, and knowledge in local, national, and global contexts.

In this article I report on specific instances of cross-cultural learning that I have found to be associated with my use of online technologies. As I illustrate how teachers interact and learn online, I address two basic questions about online learning: How does the facelessness of threaded discussions, chats, and online assignments affect teachers’ learning and teaching about other cultures? About prejudice, privilege, and multiple perspectives? How can specific online tools or strategies contribute to teachers’ development of worldmindedness?

The article is organized in three parts. First is a description of the background and methods of the study and information about the use of WebCt for my course homepages. My use of technology relates very much to my university's choice to use WebCt exclusively for online or web-enhanced courses. Second, I explain the theory and practice of cross-cultural online strategies I use to effect learning and illustrate each with data from teachers' interaction and work in a recent course. In the third section, I report on the results of my analysis of the effects of these strategies on teachers' learning and teaching and discuss why some of the cross-cultural learning taking place is dependent upon the use of online technologies.

## **BACKGROUND AND METHODS**

The study is framed within the constructs of perspective consciousness (Case, 1993; Hanvey, 1975), cooperative learning that is binational and bicultural (Calderon, 1994, Johnson & Johnson, 1992), cross-cultural experiential learning (Bennett, 1993; Brislin, 1986; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Wilson, 1993b), anti-racist pedagogy (Damarin, 1998; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Sleeter, 1995), post-colonial theory (Said, 1978, Willinsky, 1998), and constructivism (Warschauer, 1998, 2002). I have drawn upon the work of Bonk and King (1998), Borgida et al. (2002), Harasim (1993), Lai (1996), Pringle (2002), Riel (1995), Warschauer (1997, 2001), and Zong (2002) for theory and practice in building online communities.

### **Cultural Consultants**

In all the courses under study I have hired cultural consultants to work with me. Cultural consultants are educators from other countries who demonstrate the ability to work well with teachers and are trained in intercultural skills (Bennett, 1993; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994, Dasen, 1992; Stori, 1994), global education (Case, 1993; Hanvey, 1975; Merryfield, 1998), and post-colonial theory (Ngugi, 1993; Paige, 1993; Said, 1978; 1993). They interact with teachers throughout the courses and ensure that every aspect of the classes includes diverse knowledge bases, experiences, and perspectives. They respectfully challenge American mainstream assumptions and western views of the world.

Without the cultural consultants, some of my classes would be dominated by the knowledge, experiences, and worldviews of middle class white Midwesterners. Although we have some international students, African Americans, and other American minorities in every class, the cultural consultants move the center of the class towards more global frames of reference, because they are given the status of co-instructors, and they take responsibility for getting their ideas and knowledge into the discourse in ways people rarely do if they are in the roles of students (Ngugi, 1993; Tyson Benton, Christenson, Golloh, & Traore, 1997).

### **Population**

In the study I examined the online interactions of 92 American teachers and 22 cultural consultants as they interacted within five graduate courses taught in a graduate program in social studies and global education between 2000-02. In each course, online interactions included discussions and assignments on personal experiences, research, literature, primary resources, instructional materials related to teaching for diversity, equity, and global connectedness and the teachers' plans to use content from the course in their own classrooms and schools.

The courses were all three-quarter-hour graduate courses for experienced teachers:

- 727 Teaching World Cultures and Global Issues
- 807 Teaching About Africans and African Perspectives
- 878 Infusing Global Perspectives in Education
- 881 Multicultural Education (two different classes)

The teachers in the study met these criteria: first they were practicing teachers who intended to apply what they had learned in their own teaching, and second, they agreed that with names and places removed to preserve confidentiality, their online work could be used in the study.

### Places for Cross-cultural Online Interaction

In each class online interaction took place within a course listserv and a course homepage in WebCt. Although they differ in some minor ways, my course homepages look quite similar as I try to provide continuity from one course to the next. There is a place for announcements and reminders at the top of the homepage and icons lead students to sections for the introduction to the course, the syllabus, assignments, a calendar, threaded discussions, chats, mail, grades, resources, content modules, and a student presentations page. In 2002 I added over 3,000 resources through 71 online modules on five world regions. These are available at

[http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/mmerryfield/global\\_resources/default.htm](http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/mmerryfield/global_resources/default.htm)

You may also view an example of [my homepage template in WebCt](#).

In analyzing online discourse and assignments, I organized my inquiry through three dimensions of the teachers' work:

1. **Substantive content.** Questions included the following: How do the teachers make sense of readings, websites, research, etc.? What do they have problems with or find irrelevant? What content do they choose to use in their assignments and how do they pursue this knowledge? What topics or issues appear to engage groups? What effects do the cultural consultants have on the content teachers engage with or use in their work?
2. **Cross-cultural engagement.** What are the qualities that characterize interaction across cultures? How often do people choose to interact with people of other cultures? What topics draw diverse audiences? What do teachers appear to gain from interacting with people of other cultures? What seems to increase or decrease perceptions of meaningfulness of online discussions with people different from themselves?
3. **Exploration of and risk-taking with sensitive topics, controversial issues, conflicting perspectives, issues of special interest.** What appears to be considered sensitive or controversial? How do teachers perceive cross-cultural exchanges on these topics? What are outcomes of sharing and discussing hot or sensitive topics? How do teachers handle conflicts and differences of opinion? How do they seek out topic of interest?

In the overall content analysis (as defined by Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of online assignments and discourse, I looked for relationships between cross-cultural interactions and the teachers' participation, thinking, and planning. Other data analyzed in the study came from the formative and summative evaluations of the course, in which the teachers provided feedback on assignments, procedures, and instructors, including the cultural consultants.

Please note that although I do make reference occasionally to the constraints of online courses or web-based technologies, in this article I do not focus on them. (See articles by Merryfield, 2000a, 2001, for more on the limitations of these technologies.)

### **CROSS-CULTURAL PEDAGOGY**

In what ways can online pedagogy maximize cross-cultural learning? What online tools and methods bring people together to process content, share ideas and experiences, collaborate in projects or create teachable moments? Here are four ways I have found to use online pedagogy to make a difference in cross-cultural learning in social studies and global education.

#### **Reflection on One's Culture and Lived Experiences**

In Milton Bennett's (1993) stages of intercultural competence, he described how pedagogy needs to consider the stage of the learner in order to address people's assumptions about human differences and their experiences with other cultures. Although the teachers who enter my classes range in cross-cultural experience from those who have lived for years in other cultures to those who have interacted with few people different from themselves, I have found that most have never articulated their own cultural norms, nor have they analyzed how their experiences and education have affected their worldviews. Along with Britzman (1994), Cole and Knowles (1995), Day (1993), and Scott (1991), I have found that reflection on one's lived experiences is a prerequisite for culture learning. Understanding the relationships between culture, power, and worldview is fundamental to the development of perspective consciousness (Merryfield, 1995, 1998, 2000b; Willinsky, 1998; Wilson, 1993, 1998).

In 1990 I developed a “tree of life” activity that has evolved into course-specific autobiographies, in which my students reflect on their own cultural norms and their experiences with prejudice, privilege, and diversity as a way for them to ground their work in my courses in their own lived experience (Merryfield, 1993). When I taught my first online course, Multicultural Education, in 1998, I asked all 55 people in the online community to send me an autobiography about their experiences related to equity and diversity. Tim Dove, my tech graduate assistant, posted these on the course website for all to read.

I quickly learned that people wanted, actually demanded in subsequent courses, to interact over the content of these bios. Since then I have used threaded discussions to meet the needs of the assignment, because this technology showcases the posting of bios (each bio has its own thread), and interactive responses can take place over time, usually 4-6 days. The cultural consultants and I post our bios several days before the course begins as examples for the teachers of how they can read and respond to get to know us as they enter the course homepage.

Appendix A (Click on the back button in your browser to return to this article) is the actual assignment given to teachers in my online course “Teaching World Cultures and Global Issues.” Appendix B contains illustrations of threads posted in the bios assignment. Most threads have 4-8 messages, but others have twice as many. As you examine the interaction of teachers and cultural consultants, look at how the bios assignment leads to discussions of cultural universals and how the participants approach differences. Think about what the cultural consultants bring to the discussion and course content through their experiences, ideas and insights. Notice the comfort level with which people share their lives and address issues of prejudice and inequity.

The first illustration begins with the bio of a cultural consultant, which is followed by several messages posted as the teachers and cultural consultant interacted during the first week of the course. The second illustration begins with a bio of a teacher and in subsequent messages you can see how the cultural consultants interacted with the teacher.

(NOTE: I have changed the names of all people except the instructor in the illustrations in this paper. However, I did leave the notation of cultural consultant so that you can examine their interaction.)

In the feedback from teachers, there is overwhelming enthusiasm for this assignment as an excellent way for people to begin the course content and become comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences. It is a highly motivating assignment, as many teachers become fascinated with online interaction over the bios. In fact, I have found I have to restrain the teachers, or they will expend so much energy and time on this assignment that they will eventually get a feeling of course overload when they realize a week or two later how much time they invested in what is only one of eight assignments in the course. The assignment takes much more time online for the teachers than does the “tech-free” version. It is also quite complex to assess (see my criteria for assessment in the assignment description, [Appendix A](#)).

In my content analysis I find that the online bios discussion jump-starts cross-cultural interaction, as it provides a tangible way for people to make connections (through common experiences, similar family values) and recognize differences. In a welcoming format (everyone loves to have people respond to the bio they posted), the discussion encourages people to share, ask questions, and take on sensitive issues from the beginning of the course. It is interesting how people’s reflections grow in meaning as they are reflected by other people’s reactions to them.

Another dimension of online discussions is access to insider discourse among people whom the majority of the class would ordinarily never hear talking to each other. In the Teaching World Cultures and Global Issues course, there happened to be three educators from Turkey. One was a woman who was working as a cultural consultant during the course. The other two were men who were living several states away. [Appendix C](#) is the thread that captures what the rest of the class learned about prejudice against minorities in Turkey through their online interaction.

Because the bios discussion focuses on who we are as a class, our collective beliefs and values and lived experiences, it personalizes the content of my classes in ways not possible without the online sharing and interaction. So concepts such as perspectives consciousness, white privilege, prejudice, identity, anti-racist teaching, and global connections become real as they are shared through Yomna’s experience at the airport, Tyrone’s work in Nigeria, and WenJui’s family values. Constructivist pedagogy is facilitated online when people are able to fuse their own experiences with the content of the course (Lapadat, 2002; Warschauer, 1998; Weaselforth, 2002; Whittle, Morgan, & Maltby, 2000). This threaded discussion provides an easy

transition to readings and group projects as it exemplifies why we need to learn about others' lived experience and culture. In their research on cross-cultural comparisons, Kim and Bonk (2002) found that activities for social interaction are important in the early stages of online communication, and Jaffee (2001) recommended having online learners submit a personal profile to introduce themselves to the class and discuss personal concerns and interests. Bonk and Dennen (in press) have developed a number of such activities.

The public nature of assignments and discussions raises ethical and cultural issues. Although the courses are password protected, there is nothing to stop a teacher from sharing access with a friend or colleague. Culturally, some people feel uncomfortable sharing personal experiences without face-to-face contact. And those who come from oral cultures may never feel they can express themselves well online. As the bio is the first assignment in these courses, there is also the problem of a steep learning curve, because the majority of teachers have not experienced an online course or WebCT before.

In 1998 I painfully learned the lesson of isolates, people to whom others rarely respond in discussions. Since I had let the numbers go up to 55 people, and it was being taught in an intensive 5-week summer session, my TAs and I were rather overwhelmed as we taught our first online course. One student wrote very formal messages in the first two assignments and was almost totally ignored as his classmates chose to reply to others. By the time my TAs and I recognized the problem, the student was positive that the others in the course did not like him. Since then the cultural consultants and I ensure that every student has supportive responses posted to all assignments. At times, we even gently advise people on strategies for building relationships online, because interpersonal skills and social presence are just as important in an online environment as they are face to face (Hallio, 1997; Hanna, 2003; Kiesler, 1997; Lapadat, 2002; Rovai, 2001).

How does technology make a critical difference? First, in a face-to-face environment people in the course could read or hand out their bios, but there would never be sufficient time for them to interact over the bios in the way they can online. Second, the teachers I work with consistently say that they would not share such sensitive information if they "had to look at people and read it," and they would not ask the same kinds of questions if they were discussing the bios in a face-to-face classroom (Merryfield,

2000a). As the title of this article suggests, the online discussion acts as a veil to protect people as they reveal, question, and take risks. Third, when people have only text to respond to, they are attracted to people and respond to them based on what they have written, and that is a profound difference from an oral discussion in a classroom (Sunal & Christensen, 2002). The writing process is also important, as it appears that the teachers think more deeply about the content of the course when they write instead of talk about it (Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Warschauer, 1996; Whittle et al, 2000; Yates, 1996).

### **Evaluating Theories, Content, and Resources**

A major goal of all my courses is dissemination of theories in global education, new knowledge about the world and its peoples, and high quality resources. Some teachers I work with had few courses on other world regions or cultures in their preservice programs. Others want content updates to teach about a changing world - the breakup of the Soviet Union, European unification, the September 11 World Trade Center attack, the economics of globalization, etc. We do some work on theory in every course, as many teachers have only a vague understanding of what it means to teach global perspectives. I address these needs through assignments in which teachers read, synthesize, and discuss content and examine issues of representation and pedagogy in materials and resources that foster multiple perspectives and address prejudice (Giuseffi, 1993; McCarthy, 1998; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Pike & Selby, 1988, 1995).

I have experimented with chats, threaded discussions, and listserv discussions and find that I need to match the topic and goals of the assignments to the strengths of each technology. Chats work well for small groups to plan projects or talk about a specific topic without going into great depth. I have included an example in the next section of the paper. Listserv discussions can be cumbersome with large classes, as most people do not want their mailboxes filling up with messages, so I use them sparingly. (See an example in the next section.) Email within WebCt is effective for sending personal messages or making announcements, but I have not found it suitable for discussions.

When I want everyone to think deeply and synthesize ideas, threaded discussions are best. Over the last 5 years I have seen more complex thinking about course content in threaded discussions than I believe is ever possible in an oral whole class discussion in a conventional classroom. In some ways threaded discussion combines the best of classroom interaction — the person-to-person interaction, the public view and sharing — with the best of writing assignments - incorporation of academic content, references, and time to reflect and organize ideas. When people have the time to refer to references, compose and edit their ideas, and then interact with others over several days on their work, some amazing learning takes place (Flynn & Klein, 2001; Lapadat, 2002).

Appendix D is my assignment on class readings. Appendix E contains a discussion of a reading on global education using threaded discussion. Note the ways in which cross-cultural interaction affects each discussion.

In comparing these kinds of assignments with their equivalent in a face-to-face classroom, I have come to the conclusion that the online threaded discussions are measurably more substantive in addressing the goal of teachers' analysis and synthesis of readings. They also take more time (Larson & Keiper, 2002).

In this case, technology makes a critical difference, first, because it allows people to join the discussion from across the country and the world, so every course can have cross-cultural learning taking place. People from diverse backgrounds often make a huge difference in what is learned, as they provide new ideas, perspectives, and interpretations that expand the discussion of readings or the evaluation of resources. The illustrations in [Appendix E](#) are cases in point that included teachers, content experts, and cultural consultants participating from several countries and states. Guests can also be invited into a single discussion. In my multicultural education course I always have “guests” enter one discussion and interact with the teachers. Last winter Valerie Pang, professor at San Diego State, joined my students to discuss the element of caring in multicultural education after they had read her work.

Second, these technologies allow people choices that they can never have in a face-to-face discussion of readings or resources. Teachers can select particular topics of interest and go for depth in discussing or researching them with others who share their interest. Threads grow based upon the choices of the teachers to engage in the topic under discussion.

Third, in online discussions I set a minimum and maximum number of messages each person posts. After they reach their maximum, they can use the private email in WebCt to continue a conversation. There is no possibility of a few people monopolizing a threaded discussion; nor is anyone left out. Everyone participates equally. And when everyone in a culturally diverse class participates equally in course discussions, the course is qualitatively different from one in which some people participate a great deal and others very little (Merryfield, 2000a).

### **Discussion of Difficult, Emotional or Controversial Issues**

Global education and the social studies have many prickly topics and controversial issues (Schukar, 1993). In teaching multiple perspectives and global interconnectedness, teachers have P-12 students examine the experiences, beliefs, and ideas of diverse cultures. Some Americans do not want children to be exposed to ideas or values of people different from themselves (Lamy, 1991). Ethically, I find it critical that teachers examine the controversial nature of global education before they make decisions to teach something that is controversial within their own school or community.

I use chats for small group discussions of these topics and threaded discussions for the full class. Although I have tried listserv discussions for such topics, I find that the email messages frustrate people since they do not have all the messages readily available, and it is harder to respond at one time to particular points made by several people.

I often make the chats and threaded discussions on controversial topics optional. Choices help teachers identify topics that small groups would like to discuss. [Appendix F](#) is the transcript of such a chat that grew out of several teachers' interests in bicultural and biracial identities and how they are influenced by perceptions of the other. As you read the chat, note the interactions across cultures. [Appendix G](#) is the Assignment on Optional Chats.

For topics I want the whole class to think about that have an immediacy about them and do not require long messages or depth, I find listserv discussions provide excitement, emotion and intimacy. Below is part of a discussion through our course listserv on the Fourth of July and other

national holidays. I've found that when people across the country and world discuss the Fourth of July on the day when fireworks are going off and families are gathering together, there is a poignancy that brings home the power of online communities in reflection and meaning making. By sharing our thoughts on this very special day, we think more deeply about nationalism, identity, and history. Of course, reading these messages in this article is different from experiencing them coming in from people you have worked with intensely for several weeks. I've used this assignment several times, as it works very well in the contexts of global education. It was even more meaningful in July 2002, 9 months after 9/11 (September 9, 2001) when people in my class were still dealing with the World Trade Center tragedy and its aftershocks. [Appendix H](#) is the assignment and illustration from a listserv discussion on the Fourth of July and other national days.

Most Americans have questions they would like to ask of people in other cultures, religions, and world regions. Some are the obvious ones based on perceived differences, such as a Russian being asked about life under communism or a Muslim woman being asked about covering her body. Other questions evolve as people get to know each other and develop a working relationship. Almost all of the teachers in my classes say that they find it easier to ask personal or sensitive questions online rather than face to face.

Closed online environments provide a secure place for people to take risks, share personal experiences, admit to the realities of prejudice and discrimination (a family member's racist acts, a colleague's bias against gays, one's own prejudices) or ask politically incorrect questions ("Why do Asians stick to themselves?" was asked in one online class). When people feel safe and comfortable, they tackle topics that often lead to information that counters stereotypes, ignorance, or misunderstandings. Important learning takes place that often is inhibited in a face-to-face classroom.

### **Work Plans**

In these courses I ask teachers to apply what they are learning to their own teaching. Some develop lessons or unit plans. Others organize resources for whole courses to infuse multiple perspectives and primary sources into instruction and assessments. I find that teachers are better able to use ideas

and resources from my courses in their own classrooms if they can work on their plans within a supportive and caring learning community.

I have experimented with student presentation pages for this assignment but I find threaded discussion offers some important advantages, as it allows interactivity over several weeks. And I love the way we can watch projects grow and change as the author receives feedback and suggestions, engages in new resources, and fleshes out ideas. Within threaded discussions cultural consultants can interact as projects develop. The “conversations” between teachers and cultural consultants over their plans demonstrate how online communication and cross-cultural learning complement each other.

In [Appendix I](#), look at how threaded discussion is used to help teachers at three stages: posting a proposal of the work plan, posting work in progress approximately half-way through, and posting a final work plan. After the proposal and work in progress are posted, several people respond with suggestions, questions or other feedback. These responses usually have the effect of improving the final plan in substantive ways. ([Appendix J](#) is the Assignment on Work Plans.)

Without the technology I know of no way the whole class could share ideas, plans, progress, and resources on their projects over several weeks or months. In threaded discussions there is a place all can go to see what new resources Musa has found this week for Sarah’s unit on African literature or read what Yasemin and her family in Egypt sent to Mario’s students for their project on the Arabs. The technology increases resources, questions, and feedback that result in reflection upon and improvement of projects.

This interactive feedback process has had another outcome for me as instructor. Since I know anyone in the class can read my feedback as I respond to every project, I have improved the way I assess student work and how I respond to problems. I find I am much more detailed in my suggestions and much “nicer” when I am correcting someone. I reply privately to postings when a person is not doing well or obviously did not read the assignment, as I don’t want to embarrass anyone. I am much more consistent in my grading and have really improved my ability to give clear directions on an assignment and its assessment.

The downside of all this interaction and feedback is time—time to read, time to post, time to grade. In general, all the technology discussed in this article

triples the time it takes me to teach a course. It does get more manageable after a few online and web-enhanced courses. But it will always take a significant increase of my time, in part, because I am not particularly adept with technology and in part because I have to work considerably harder to personalize my online pedagogy. Teaching online is a challenge because it is not standard practice, at least not in my college of education where I am one of three professors (out of 160) who consistently teach online. It is an incredible commitment. And given that there are no criteria related to technology in my college's tenure and promotion documents or its annual reviews, none of this extra work in infusing technology into campus courses or teaching online is rewarded.

### **EFFECTS ON LEARNING**

What cumulative difference does it make when teachers interact with people from other countries in online assignments like the ones described in this article? As I have taught these same courses online and on campus, I have come to understand that online technologies create some new kinds of learning that are simply not possible without the technology. I have organized these differences in four overlapping categories:

#### **Online Technologies Diffuse Triggers of Difference**

Gone are the powerful catalysts of visual and aural clues that make people want to listen, ignore, hide, or respond in a face-to-face classroom. People respond to text instead of a person's physical presence, personality, accent, or body language. I have found that American teachers interact differently online with people of other cultures than they do face to face. Teachers have explained this phenomenon to me as "triggers of difference." When they hear a Chinese accent, see a Jordanian woman's head cover, observe a Brazilian's body language, smell curry on an Indian's breath, some Americans automatically register a consciousness of difference that may trigger discomfort, stereotypes, xenophobia, or recognition of their own ignorance of other cultures. The triggers of visual and aural differences often subconsciously make people uncomfortable or otherwise constrain people's abilities to listen, interact, and learn from others.

The facelessness of online interaction frees people to interact without at least some of the inhibitions they have in face-to-face classrooms. Online we all focus on what people write. What people learn changes significantly when they are more able to get beyond triggers of difference and engage in discussions on cultural commonalities and differences, learn from the experiences and knowledge of people from other cultures, and work with them in assignments and projects. When cultural consultants work online, they are better able to counter stereotypes and misinformation and provide easy access to good resources.

There is a downside to diffusing visual and aural triggers of difference. In the real world we want teachers with the cross-cultural competence to teach Chinese children and work with Muslim colleagues and with the positive attitudes and motivation to welcome the Japanese family who moves in next door or the Russian family who joins their synagogue. Online communication is valuable, but it cannot replace collaborative learning face to face.

Recently, I held a workshop on Somali culture for a group of social studies teachers. They all work in schools with immigrant and refugee students, although several had not had Somali students. Before the workshop they had all read refugee and immigrant experiences, and they had participated in threaded discussions on educational inequities, prejudice, and white privilege. In the workshop three Somali women talked with them for 90 minutes about Somali culture and norms, the Somali experience in Columbus, and strategies to help Somalis with school, in general, and social studies, in particular. Then they taught the teachers the table manners they would need to eat supper at a nearby Somali restaurant: eat with your right hand and never use your left hand, eat from the food right in front of you in the common dish, don't put your hand in your mouth, and so on. We explained about the restaurant having a separate place for women so that they can choose to dine away from men. Then we visited our local Somali Mall, so the teachers could experience a place where Somalis own all the businesses from clothing shops to video, jewelry, repair, and grocery stores. At the restaurant a young Somali high school student did not feel comfortable eating out where the men were, so she and two of the female teachers went back to the women's area for their meal.

In the online debriefing later that night the teachers discussed what they had learned compared to previous work in the course. They were impressed that they could learn so much by being immersed for only 4 hours with

Somali places and people. Some of the men remarked on what it was like to enter the Somali Women's Association offices when they knew they were not to offer to shake hands with the women. They discussed how sitting and talking with women who were covered from head to toe helped them overcome the associations they had had of Muslim women being oppressed. Others spoke of what it felt like to wander around the mall when they were the only white people there. Was this what it feels like to be The Other?

A woman noted that she would never have believed that there were so many Somali-run businesses in Columbus. There were several messages about the communal eating, what went on in the women's eating area, and how delicious the spiced tea, pasta, and goat were. Observing the experience through their eyes reminded me again of the power of cross-cultural immersion experiences that bring people together physically. Unlike the readings and online work, the workshop experiences increased their comfort levels with Somalis and motivated them to learn more.

Although online interactions have special strengths, they can never substitute for face-to-face collaborative work and immersion experiences if teachers are to develop intercultural competence in working with others. Teachers need both vehicles for learning across cultures.

### **Online Technologies Increase the Depth of Study and the Meaningfulness of Academic Content**

The asynchronous nature of most online pedagogy also effects student learning across cultures. First, there is substantially more time to think deeply and react purposefully. Discussions take place over several days so that people have time to look up references, share resources, or add URLs as they discuss a reading or work on a project. They take time to think, analyze, and synthesize ideas and, undoubtedly, are affected by the online interaction with others. In comparing the same discussion held in a classroom and online I have been amazed at how asynchronous discussions increase both depth of content and equity in participation.

Judith Lapadat (2002) has called this process "thinking by writing" and suggests it is the asynchronous communication that creates "a learning-focused textual environment" (p.5). The process of writing encourages

higher level thinking and leads people to “think things that we could not, or at least have not, said and thought without writing” (Olson, 1995, p. 288 as quoted in Lapadat, 2002, p. 5). Other scholars have noted similar findings (Harasim, 1992, Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Warchauser, 1999, Whittle et al, 2000).

The asynchronous communication that online course environments support is especially important for people whose first language is not English (Hanna, 2003). Many second language learners cannot keep up in a fast-paced discussion in a college classroom. The colloquialisms and slang obfuscate meaning. By the time they have thought of something to contribute, the discussion has moved on to another topic. I have found that international students and my cultural consultants are better able to share their ideas and work much more equitably with Americans when assignments or discussions are online.

Online technologies support student-centered learning. It is easy to have a student-directed discussion online. I find that teachers take off and run with a discussion in ways they never do in a campus classroom. Online courses can de-center a class, moving authority and control from the instructor to the students (Damarin, 1998; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995). Some teachers feel frustrated with this loss of control (Larson & Keiper, 2002). The familiar instructor-student-instructor-student rhythm in a classroom discussion totally disappears in chats, threaded discussions, and listserv discussions.

The teachers in my classes particularly like the ways in which online discussions allow them to make content choices and follow their interests. In an online asynchronous course, teachers from across the country can find others who are teaching similar courses or are interested in the same issues and work together on curriculum projects or resource databases \_ one of the outstanding benefits of online courses.

#### **Online Technologies Facilitate Immediate and Detailed Feedback, Extended Discussion of Ideas, and Resources**

Back in the early 1990s I began using cultural consultants to work with teachers as resource people in curriculum development. A teacher is revising

her unit on the USSR in light of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union. She interacts in class with a Russian and a Pole who share their experiences and knowledge and provide feedback on potential resources. Her knowledge is strengthened through their interaction and insights, and the unit is enriched with numerous ideas and resources she would never have found on her own.

Bring in online technologies, and a teacher's interaction and learning with cultural consultants can move to a new level. Since they do not have to wait for face-to-face meetings, the teachers and cultural consultants can interact as needed online, and additional resource people from around the world can be brought into the conversation. When teacher post outlines of what they want to develop or post resources they have found, the cultural consultants can make suggestions later that day. They can also post URLs, email addresses, excerpts from newspapers or articles, and video suggestions. I find the only drawback is information overload, as sometimes the cultural consultants can overwhelm a teacher with their ideas and resources.

An important strength of the online version of this teacher/cultural consultant collaboration is that all teachers have access to everyone's projects as they develop. If one teacher's project is on African literature for her colonization unit, she can still learn from and even interact with the projects underway on the same historical period in Japan and China. Teachers have the option of not only reading about other people's materials and resources, they can print out copies of lesson plans, reviews, or references lists. Unlike face-to-face sharing of projects in a classroom, teachers can go into the course homepage and select topics of interest, read as needed, post questions, offer feedback, and share their own strategies or resources anytime night or day. Online tools strengthen the cultural consultant collaboration in another important way. They allow anyone in the class to interact with any cultural consultant at any time.

### **Online Technologies Can Create Communities of Diverse Learners and Connections to a Larger World**

Professional learning communities can enhance teachers' lives with the stimulation of new ideas and resources, shared problem-solving, and access to experiences across school buildings and districts. Since 1991 I have

belonged to such a learning community that includes middle and high school social studies teachers from across nine buildings in six districts in Central Ohio. These teachers work in different environments that include urban, suburban, and rural populations. Together the schools represent much of the economic, ethnic, linguistic, political, religious, and racial diversity of Ohio. Two are members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, one is a vocational school, and another is an alternative school that draws from 17 school districts.

Not only have we all learned about each other's teaching and areas of scholarly expertise, we have shared the occasional crisis, the ups and downs of our institutions' reforms, and the joys of watching each other's children grow up. As online technologies came into the schools in early 1990s, we started a listserv to increase our communication between face-to-face meetings. Today, as I write this in late January 2003, five of our members have sent messages about last week's article in *Education Week* that expounded on the turf wars between teaching history and teaching social studies.

Online technologies are the perfect tools for social studies and global education, as these fields focus on learning about the world and its peoples. Online technologies provide opportunities for teachers to experience a more global community than is possible face to face. In my course last summer I had a total of 65 people from 18 states and 12 countries. Although we were not in any way representative of the world's people, the diversity affected the course and its content in many ways. There were different, often conflicting, perspectives and ideas posted on every topic. Resources were viewed through many lenses, as people recommended favorite websites and shared ideas for lessons and units. Knowledge and assumptions about "the truth" were questioned, as people reacted to course readings and articles posted by some teachers who felt the need to share related work or challenges to conventional wisdom. After the course was over, most of the people in the course continued our learning community through *world727*, a listserv for global educators that grew out of the course. Since then other teachers have joined, and we continue to share resources, discuss issues, and learn about the world.

Perhaps these qualities lead to learning that is not possible without the technology of asynchronous communication. Let me close with this tentative recipe for worldmindedness:

Add teachers from across the U.S. to people from other nations of the world through an online course. Mix well through bios and discussions of lived experience, culture, privilege, prejudice and perspective. Infuse that rich brew with collaborative work on cultures, histories, literature, and issues from diverse world regions. Stir with chats on topics of special interests to the teachers. Cook over the low heat of threaded discussions of pedagogy and curriculum. Sprinkle gently with the spice of controversial issues. Bake over time with personal attention, responsiveness to people's concerns, caring, and positive feedback. Serve hot topped with chunks of enthusiasm.

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