

Creating Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Communication through Internet-Supported Student "Exchange" Programs

Charles Elerick

The University of Texas at El Paso

As Todd. M. Davis, editor of the Institute of International Education's (IIE) most recent (1995/96) report on international educational exchange has pointed out, we are seeing the emergence of a new configuration in international education. In this regard he offers the following. "Now in the post-modern era, transnational flows of students occur largely without the benefit of government support. They are driven by individuals who recognize that future prosperity will exist for those who can thrive in the global web of commercial, cultural, and information transactions."

In this paper I will propose that the ongoing elaboration of the new configuration of international student exchanges will inevitably and properly result in even more radical departure from the "classical" model that has prevailed in previous decades. I will describe, motivate, and promote one such radical departure. In the discussion the three major themes that I will elaborate are the following.

- 1) Students who for economic or other reasons cannot participate in long-term, on-site educational exchanges should nevertheless be afforded opportunities to participate in significant cross-cultural experiences as part of their organized academic program.
- 2) The Internet can be used as appropriate technology to support carefully planned and closely monitored dual-site academic exchange assignments. Such collaborative assignments offer a means of including students in meaningful exchange activities that would otherwise not be possible for them to participate in.
- 3) Academic exchanges that are useful as such and which are not perceived by students as promoting cross-cultural understanding in overt or contrived ways may be very effective as a means of promoting such cross-cultural understanding.

The need for more international, cross-cultural educational opportunities

After World War II a model for international educational exchange emerged that had four major components. One of these saw private students from the US participate in semester- or year-long study abroad programs; over the decades, hundreds of thousands of American students spent extended study time in such places as Heidelberg, Aix-en-Provence, or London. A second major limb of the classical exchange period saw hundreds of thousands students from the Middle East, Venezuela, and later East and Southeast Asia study in the US and elsewhere on public scholarships and as part of national development strategies. The third aspect of the classical period involved ideologically motivated student exchange as part of the US-Soviet confrontation. The sponsorship of university studies and shorter-term exchanges for tens of thousands of youth, largely from the third world and especially by the USSR and its satellites, was motivated by the prospect of derivative long-range political advantage. Finally, in the post-war decades, hundreds of thousands of students from all over the world came to the US, and elsewhere, to pursue higher education, financed by family resources and without the benefit of sponsorship.

The current situation is much changed. Of the four major post-war exchange categories, only two survive. The study abroad leg is operative today and still involves, preponderantly, sojourns in Europe, especially Great Britain, by students from the U.S. Un-sponsored students pursuing degrees are in evidence in the universities on Western Europe, North America, and elsewhere. As pointed out by the IIE study cited above, these and other international, cross-cultural educational experiences are predominantly self-financed and therefore available to those students who have access to private financial means. See Barker and Smith (1996) for additional discussion of the current configuration of international education.

There are, therefore, serious deficiencies in the present international exchange picture. These include the following.

- Un-sponsored students are largely excluded from participation.
- Those students who do gain participation, almost always using family resources, constitute a diminutive fraction of all tertiary students.
- There is a lack of exchange symmetry between countries and regions. For example, the numbers of students from Asia studying in the US are not to any extent matched by Americans studying in Asia.
- Countries that find themselves in unfavorable short-term or in chronic civil or political circumstances are simply not viable locations for exchange programs. In addition, it is virtually impossible for most students from such countries to study abroad. It is here that some of the most pressing need for international educational efforts and inter-cultural exchanges exists.
- In much of the world, academically referenced cross-cultural experiences are largely unavailable to students enrolled at smaller regional institutions that are far from a national capital or important cultural center.

All in all, the evolving world order is seeking a new economic and political equilibrium. A new and certain equilibrium is needed to deal successfully with the need to promote a global economic order that will result in a more evenly distributed prosperity. An effective global order is needed to address challenges presented by population pressures, resource depletion, global climate change, etc. In addition there is emerging an increasingly globalized frame of reference for political, social, and cultural discourse. The need for finely tuned inter-national and inter-cultural understanding is without historical precedent. At the same time, opportunities for student participation in programs that serve to promote inter-cultural understanding are sorely wanting. Traditional student exchange programs, which remain a viable mechanism for preparing future leaders to function in a world that requires effective cross-cultural communication, cannot meet all needs in this regard. All these factors call for an increase in attention to, and opportunity for, international and cross-cultural educational experiences. For insight into the need to expand opportunities for international see the cited report of the Council for International Exchange (1988).

Internet-supported educational and cross-cultural exchange

What can be done to meet the need for students to be involved in inter-cultural experiences as part of their tertiary education? As suggested above, departures from the "classical" model will entail radical innovations. One radical solution and that which will be suggested and discussed here is the development of carefully structured and closely monitored virtual exchanges that are supported by the Internet and which do bring real, individual students almost face to face with real counterparts. An early and successful experiment involving an assignment designated "Training and Human Factors in the Service, Commercial, and Light Industrial Workplace: Looking for Cross-Cultural Perspectives." This exchange assignment linked students at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce and The University of Texas at El Paso. It is described in Elerick and Pradubponse (1996). Additional experimental projects that have evolved into demonstrations of the patent feasibility of Internet-supported cross-cultural instruction have been elaborated by the author, also involving classes at The University of Texas at El Paso, and colleagues teaching classes at Singapore Polytechnic and led by Singapore Polytechnic Lecturer Lilian Lee. This sequence of four exchange assignments is characterized in Lugg, Lee, Cheong, and Tan (at appear). For more general background material on the effective use of the Internet for language instruction see Hawisher and Moran (1993) and Warschauer (1995).

The participating students at the University of Texas at El Paso were all enrolled in an advanced ESOL classes, either English for Science and Technology or English for Business and Finance. The preponderance of UTEP students had an Engineering specialty, Computer Science, Marketing, or Management as their major. The overwhelming majority of the UTEP students were from Mexico with scattered representation from various Asian and European countries. All the SP participants were Business Administration majors. Participants on both sides were of traditional college

age. In brief, the exchange exercises that SP and UTEP students have participated in have been of two sorts. Some involved simulations of dual-site communications between transnational corporations with operations in both Singapore and North America. Other assignments followed single-site role plays. Students represented roles that were essentially consistent with their prospective professional occupations. i.e., engineer, computer specialist, administrative specialist, etc. Areas of concern in the scenarios supporting the assignments included a range of human factors issues (employee motivation, training, safety) as well as issues at the technical/finance interface (justifications of repair or replacement of malfunctioning equipment). One successful exchange assignment that had especially obvious cross-cultural content involved communications preparatory to a site visit.

Taken simply as ESP assignments, all the exercises met the high standards for integrative, high-context, text-to-text, scenario-based teaching that should characterize instruction in advanced English for Business and Technology courses. As mentioned above and elaborated below, an important thesis of this paper is that academically referenced cross-cultural opportunities must be, in the first instance, academically purposeful and sound. The following is an example of a UTEP-SP micro-twinning exercise. The materials consist of four documents: 1) The assignment distributed to the participating students, 2) a role play memo from an SP student to a UTEP counterpart, 3) the UTEP student's reply, 4) The SP student's response to the UTEP reply. The student-generated copy has been reproduced without editing, leaving all minor infelicities of form, language, and content as submitted. The discussion of the assignment and the student responses will follow and will be re-engaged in the section on cross-cultural education.

1) The Assignment Distributed to Students at Singapore Polytechnic

Equipment Replacement Memo Assignment:

Prepared for Singapore Polytechnic students by Prof. Charles Elerick

Following a schedule to be determined by your SP instructor, you will complete the assignment that is detailed below. You will address your role play memo to an individual within a workplace context that you will devise. Use the sample memo as a guide but follow the format specifics that you are familiar with.

The assignment involves much more than writing. It calls on you to think about how you would handle a situation that does occur in the workplace. It requires you to reflect on the range of information you may need to command and the importance of being prepared to support a decision that you have reached with good data. The assignment also gives you room to invent your own particular situation while giving you very clear instructions, which you must follow, regarding the sequencing of specific information. Since you are being taught management skills, you will probably be most comfortable writing about office equipment such as copying machines or computers, etc.

Your memo will be answered by student colleagues at the University of Texas in El Paso. You will receive instructions regarding addresses and routing.

Further Instructions From SP Instructor:

You will work in groups when you are planning your answer.

Work through the CAPO principle as you decide on the contents of the writing task.

When you are doing the writing, you will have to work on your own.

Each student will at the end hand in his/her own assignment.

You will be given the address of the UTEP student that you will be writing to.

You must cc. a copy of your work to your SP tutor, Miss Lee Lilian: LLilian@sp.ac.sg and to the UTEP Instructor, Professor Charles Elerick: Celerick@utep.edu

The Assignment

Scenario: You have supervisory responsibility for an office or work site involving an industrial, financial, commercial, consulting, or construction function. A piece of equipment that is critical to your operation has failed. You have informed your immediate supervisor (plant or site manager, consulting or engineering firm president, etc.) of the situation. He or she has instructed you to determine an appropriate course of action and to forward your suggestion in an e-mail.

You have determined that:

- 1) The equipment cannot be (economically) repaired and returned to a condition of long term serviceability. To determine this you have done one or more of the following:
 - a) Your service personnel have diagnosed the failure.
 - b) Personnel sent out by the company that services the equipment in question have determined this to be the case.

OR

- 2) The equipment might be repaired but it is obsolete, or obsolescent, and a state-of-the-art replacement is indicated.

You have also determined what the down equipment should be replaced with. You have determined this by conferring with people in your division who have special expertise in this regard and by consulting with sales representatives from potential suppliers.

Now write an e-mail memo to your supervisor that contains the following sections.

- I. An introductory sentence or two in which you reiterate the basics of the situation.
- II. A precise identification of the equipment including model and serial

number and then a brief review of the equipment history. This will include date of acquisition as well as use and repair history.

III. Confirmation, with specifics, that the equipment cannot, or should not, be repaired. Recall 1) and 2) above.

IV. Specification of the equipment that you are suggesting as a replacement. Motivate your suggestion by referring to features and productivity-supporting capabilities. Note the purchase cost and, if applicable, installation charges. Mention other appropriate factors in your decision such as warranties and available servicing. Mention acquisition and/or installation time and logistics, as appropriate.

V. A request for instructions from your supervisor.

A Singapore Polytechnic Student's Memo to his UTEP Counterpart

Memorandum

To: Mr Juan Osuna, Supervisor

From: Mr Federick Foo, Assistant Supervisor

Date: 9/23/97

Subject : Replacement of new fax machine

Present situation:

Faxing of documents has stopped because the fax machine has broken down. This greatly affected our current operations as documents cannot be fax to or receive from customers.

Investigation:

The model of the fax machine that we are currently using is Hewlett-Packard FX404 and its serial number is d8989331x. From the accounting side, I found out that it was purchased on the 4/9/91. This six-year old machine broke down once in 1993 and twice in 1995. After the technician's investigation, I learned that although the fax machine can be repaired, but it would not last very long before it would break down again. Moreover, its speed is slow and it is also unable to send and receive fax to and from customers at times.

Recommendation:

To overcome this problem, I suggest that we should purchase a new fax machine. Through an investigation, I found out that the new Epson FX2010 whose serial number is z0001177v is the most suitable model. Reasons for purchasing this machine:

Faxes at a much faster speed

Ability to store up to 20 addresses

Special energy-saving device installed

2 years warranty and aftersale services provided

Priced at only \$1699 net (inclusive of GST and Installation charges)

I await your prompt reply.

Federick Foo

Assistant supervisor (Mr) Federick Foo

UTEP students were instructed to analyze the memo that they had received and respond, asking for clarification, elaboration, or additional work on the part of their "employee." The participating UTEP students had previously completed a non-distance assignment that required them to write a memo similar to that produced by the SP students to start this exchange. This had sensitized the UTEP students to the various difficulties inherent in formulating such a document.

3) The UTEP Student's Reply to his SP Counterpart's Memo

To: Federick Foo, Assistant Supervisor

From: Juan Osuna, Supervisors

Date: 09/25/97

Re: Replacement of fax machine, ref. your September 19 communication and your memo of Sept. 23.

Thank you for your prompt analysis on the fax machine malfunction. Evidently, this situation represents a damper on our productivity, and should be resolved as soon as possible. The replacement fax unit that you suggest is a likely candidate, but there are some points that I would like to clarify before making a final decision.

I. Approved technician.

In your memo, you did not specify whether an independent technician diagnosed the fax machine or a Hewlett-Packard certified technician. If the latter is not

the case, I would like for you to get the opinion from a Hewlett-Packard certified technician.

II. Life expectancy and maintenance costs.

What is the service-life expectancy of the proposed replacement and what do you estimate as the maintenance cost during that period.

III. User-friendliness.

According to your memo, this new unit has lots of great features. Is this new unit too complicated for our staff to use? If it is complicated to use, how long will it take for our staff to learn how to use it?

IV. Serial number.

I was surprised to see the serial number of the new fax machine in your memo. Is there any particular reason as to why you are providing me with that information?

Please provide the requested information ASAP when you have the information available. We need to reach a conclusion and implement a solution as quickly as possible.

4) The SP Student Replies to his "Supervisor's" Memo

To: Juan Osuna, Supervisor

From: Federick Foo, Assistant Supervisor

Date : 06/10/97

Subject: Replacement of Fax Machine

Dear Supervisor

I refer to memo dated 26/09/97 on the replacement of fax machine, I had come up with the following answers:

1. Approved technician.

The Hewlett-Packard fax machine was being diagnosed by a Hewlett-Packard technician when we sent to their headquarter for repair.

2. Life expectancy and maintenance costs. Servicing of the fax machine will commence once every two months. For the first two years, maintenance cost will be extremely low and not significant enough to be estimated as it is still under warranty. For the subsequent years, the maintenance cost would be about \$200.00 monthly which is still quite low.

3. User-friendliness.

Although this new fax machine have a lot of great features, but the use of it is quite simple as most of the features are already been programmed and stored in it. In addition, each employee will receive a copy of user-guide book and short training will also be provided.

4. Serial number.

Regarding the serial number of the new fax machine, I just gave it to you as additional information. There are nothing special about it.

This is a very urgent matter and I will be waiting for your approval on the purchase on the new fax machine.

Federick Foo

A few notes on the mechanics and general operation of Internet micro-twinning are appropriate though no attempt will be made to detail all particulars here. First, micro-twinning can only be successfully undertaken by instructors who are committed to the concept and prepared to bring resourcefulness and flexibility to the enterprise. It is a given that administrative support and encouragement will improve the chances for successful micro-twinning. More specific considerations include the following. 1) compatible academic calendar, 2) appropriate student/class matches, 3) reliable e-mail and the capacity on both sides to handle the other's uploaded or attached word processed documents. It bears repeating that the academic portion of the micro-twinning model does not involve the exchange of messages composed on screen and in the less-than-formal mode of utility e-mail.

Taken solely as a vehicle for the enhancement of EBT instruction per se, Internet-supported micro-twinning represents a use of technology that one must agree is compelling. But beyond the narrowly defined academic outcomes, the potential for additive cross-cultural dimensions is a further reason for employing and elaborating the model.

Distance Exchange and Cross-Cultural Communication

One constant in the micro-twinning projects and individual exercises that have been characterized or exemplified here is that they have involved academic activities that would be well worth implementing regardless of any effect they might have in enhancing cross-cultural awareness. But given this operative constraint, it should be immediately noted that cross-cultural awareness followed as a natural and contextualized outcome of the independently motivated assignments. Some individual aspects can be mentioned as a list.

- The UTEP students (mainly from Mexico) that participated in the various exchanges with Singapore Polytechnic consistently remarked on how similar the SP students responded to professional-type issues.

- UTEP and SP students were encouraged to follow up their collaborative assignment with informal contact. Some message exchanges occurred but apparently no continuing e-mail friendships were established. Several UTEP students remarked that cultural differences were more in evidence in their informal contacts. This insight in turn occasioned in-class discussion about the dangers of over estimating similarities across cultures based on the emergence of personal and corporate style similarities that mask real cultural differences that are more resistant to globalization.
- A number of UTEP students exchanges messages that involved clarification of how family and given names work in their respective cultures. It seems clear that in some contexts a follow-up semi-formal assignment to explore names would be appropriate.

An over-arching purpose of all of the exchanges between Singapore Polytechnic and UTEP was to test the assumptions put forth in Elerick (1995). In this paper it is claimed that the effective negotiation and accurate representation of three transactional variables are key to professional communication. These are *initiative*, the relative power or authority that is a prime in a professional relationship between any two individuals, *responsibility*, issue-specific accountability, and *expertise*, knowledge that is issue-specific and typically of a gradient nature. A further assumption of the paper is that these are transactional universals that will tend to find expression and/or are teachable.

The UTEP-SP exchange assignments were designed in such a way that the students on both sides had to negotiate these variables. The illustrated assignment, for example, involved communication between subordinate and corporate superior. The charge from the superior had to be clear and the subordinate had to respond in such a way that was consistent with this hierarchical fact. (An earlier assignment had done the same with UTEP-SP roles reversed. Two assignments involved communication between counterparts, requiring both to find ways to quickly establish role play collegiality.) The illustrated assignment required the SP subordinate to accept specific responsibility for devising a solution to a problem, but to encode into his/her communication an expressed recognition that the manager had the responsibility, deriving from but not identical to the differential of initiative, to make a final, and more to the point, correct decision. In the assignment seen here, the subordinate had the responsibility of enlisting and using borrowed expertise, and to report his/her findings confidently (a function of expertise).

The memoranda authored by the SP initiators of the exchange showed almost universally high efficiency in expressing the three transactional variables; the continuing exchange of communications reflect the interplay and negotiation of all three. In the memos that reply to the initial memo, the writer must express his/her initiative while maintaining downward solidarity. This was accomplished in the illustrated reply in ways that are evident upon inspection. The writer then expresses, covertly, his responsibility to have his subordinate redo or extend certain aspects of the

original analysis. One attempt at (cultural?) subtlety, when the UTEP asked how his employee knew the serial number of a piece of equipment he was not yet authorized to purchase, was unsuccessful. The third memo continues to show compliance with the assumptions of the scenario and communication that is directed by the three transactional variables.

What does this extended episode tell us about cross-cultural communication? It tells us that between tertiary students from two quite different cultural traditions, Asian and European-North American, who are functioning as part of technically advanced economies, shared proficiencies in the essentials of professional communication represent a common ground. It also suggests that to promote cross-cultural communication and awareness between other paired groups of tertiary students, similar or analogous academic assignments would be useful as mechanisms of engagement. It is true that in different micro-twinning configurations one may find that the transactional variables are immediately manageable by both sides, by one side but not the other, or by neither. This in itself would be an interesting research question. The instructional effort needed to make students aware of the importance of the three variables, which, one will recall are claimed to be transactional universals, and the instructional strategies that could effect this awareness are important questions. Effective approaches to teaching the requisite linguistic forms are still another issue.

Establishing communication between tertiary students of different cultures using serious exchange assignments which involve relatively culture-neutral dimensions can serve as that important first step. The first step, academically significant in itself, has been shown to provide a platform for continued exploration of cultural issues. Students who learn that they can understand each other in one repertory and in one register can proceed to a productive exploration of issues and communicative styles that would be unlikely without the confidence and collegiality that results from the initial academic collaboration.

Conclusions

The underlying assumption of all traditional educational programs that enabled students to cross cultural frontiers to study is that such experiences should involve serious academic work and that significant cross-cultural experiences would yield significant positive outcomes with regard to both. Similarly, the model that has been discussed here integrates the fundamentally academic and the cross-cultural, with demonstrated positive outcomes. This model, obviously with extensions and modifications as necessary, is available to help meet the need for exchange opportunities that cannot be met through travel and residence. One can only hope that it will be appropriated by numerous practitioners and to the advantage many students.

The experiences reported here resulted from assignments in just one of many academic areas that could be the basis for exchanges. Areas such as political science, public policy, urban planning, for example, in which discourse and notions of the feasible differ from country to country and culture to culture would be likely

disciplinary candidates. But any disciplinary area for which it is possible to construct an assignment that requires an initiating document and a response can be employed. Ultimately, though sooner rather than later, we should see the wide spread use of the Internet to support variously configured distance exchange programs. They will provide many students in a range of locales the opportunity to participate in otherwise impossible or problematic academic exchanges. These exchange programs will change what we think of as a "classroom", and more importantly, what the participants think of as a "classmate"

References

Barker, Thomas and Howard W. Smith.

1996 A New Taxonomy for International Education. *International Education* 26.1; pp. 40-55.

Council for International Exchange.

1988 Educating for Global Competence: The Report of the Advisory Council for International Exchange. *CIEE Report* no. 141.

Davis, Todd M., ed.

1996 *Open Doors 1995/96: Report on International Educational Exchange*. Institute of International Education. New York.

Elerick, Charles.

1995 Teaching the Pragmatics and Semiotics in Initiative, Responsibility, and Expertise as Variables in Professional Communication in the ESP Curriculum. in Gill, Saran Kaur, ed, *Proceedings of INTELEC '94* (International English Language Education Conference: National and International Challenges and Responses). UKM Press, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Elerick, Charles and Supatra Pradubpongse.

1996 Internet Supported Micro-Twinning: A New Dimension in English for Business and Technology. *Asian Journal for English Teaching*. 1.1, 52-58.

Hawisher, Gail E. and Charles Moran,

1993 Electronic Mail and the Writing Instructor. *College English*, 55:3, 627-43.

Lugg, Manee, Lilian Lee, Delonix Cheong, and Serene Tan.

to appear Send them an e-mail!

Warschauer, Mark.

1995 *E-mail for English Teaching*. Alexandria, VA. TESOL.