

Chapter 4

Models of Telecollaboration (2): Cultura

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Introduction

Over the last decades the relationship between language and culture has become one of the most important issues in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. The teaching of culture, once a subordinate element in the hierarchy of skills we thought students needed as they moved towards greater communicative competence and proficiency, has become a more central element in our pedagogical thinking and classroom practice. Our very definition of culture has broadened and multiplied as we now ponder what cultures we should teach and how we might teach them.

Perhaps Hymes's work in the 1970s might be taken as the point of departure in this reconsideration of the place of culture in the language curriculum. In his critique of Chomsky's model of language acquisition, Hymes proposed the notion of communicative competence. He argued that first language acquisition involves more than just grammatical competence and that chief among the many other competences a learner needs to master is the sociolinguistic, the ability to use language appropriately. Going one step further, Hymes maintained that linguistic and cultural competence develop in tandem:

From a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features, (children) develop a general theory of speaking appropriate in their community which they employ, like other forms of tacit cultural knowledge (competence) in conducting and interpreting social life.

...

From a communicative standpoint, judgements of appropriateness may not be assigned to different spheres, as between the linguistic and the cultural; certainly the spheres of the two will interact. (Hymes, 1972: 279, 286)

Although Hymes's main focus was the analysis of social interaction and communication within a monolingual social group using its first language, his ideas contributed to the development of the communicative approach. Nonetheless, the sociocultural component would continue to play only a secondary role in foreign language pedagogy for quite some time; communicative language teaching turned its attention elsewhere: to speech act theory in the 1970s (van Ek, 1975; Widdowson, 1978), to discourse analysis and notions of social variety in the 1980s (Canale & Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1990) and to task-based learning in the 1990s (Zanón & Alba, 1994). As a consequence, communicative approaches focused more on the sociolinguistic than on the sociocultural, and communicative competence became defined more as appropriate language use rather than competence in the social and cultural practices of the community that speaks the language.

But the profession was to undergo yet another paradigm shift in response to the social and technological transformations of the waning years of the 20th century. The notion of the 'global village' was everywhere palpable, with the internet making cultures immediately accessible and present in everyday life, and with globalisation and new waves of migration rendering societies increasingly multiethnic and multilingual. The importance of intercultural communication and of the profession's need to tackle this issue head-on could not be ignored.

Now, well into the new century, culture has acquired a more central role in the foreign language curriculum. The notions of 'cultural learning', 'cultural studies', 'sociocultural competence', 'intercultural competence' and 'intercultural communication' are present in policy initiatives on language learning in the UK, France, Germany and a number of other European countries, as well as in the USA, Canada and Australia and in documents of international bodies such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO (Roberts *et al.*, 2001). Language learners are often described as 'cultural mediators', 'border-crossers', 'negotiators of meaning' or 'intercultural speakers'. From this new perspective the acquisition of a foreign language is seen as 'the acquisition of the cultural practices and beliefs it embodies for particular social groups' (Byram, 1997), and communication in a foreign language is described as a process that 'involves mediating and establishing relationships between one's own and other cultures' (Roberts *et al.*, 2001).

This new focus on the development of learners' social competence means that foreign language teaching must focus on equipping learners with tools to develop their intercultural understanding. Instead of simply providing factual information about history, institutions, etc. and

descriptions of generalised beliefs, values and attitudes presented in an unproblematic way, as has often been the tradition in foreign language teaching, the objective is to develop the learners' ability to access and analyse cultural practices and meanings.

The model of telecollaboration described in this chapter, *Cultura*, is one whose focus is precisely that of intercultural competence. Its methodology integrates culture into the language classroom by facilitating the direct communication between two groups of learners from different cultures and the comparison of those cultures. We will describe the principles and practices of *Cultura* and examine its implementation in an ongoing exchange between classes at Barnard College in New York and the University of León in Spain.

The Original *Cultura* Model

Cultura is a web-mediated model of telecommunication that, as its name suggests, focuses on the integration of culture into the language classroom. It was created and developed in 1997 by Gilberte Furstenberg, Shoggy Waryn and Sabine Levet of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at MIT, with major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning. It was first used in an exchange between students of French at MIT and students of English at the Institut National des Télécommunications in Evry, France (for more details see the list of weblinks at the end of this chapter) and since then it has been adopted by other institutions, including the two that are the subject of this chapter, Barnard College (USA) and the University of León (Spain).

Principles

The theoretical underpinnings of the *Cultura* project are grounded in thinking about the nature of culture and cross-cultural communication and their relationship to the new wired world.

The creators of the project take as a point of departure the idea that cultural competence involves much more than accumulating facts about another culture: history, traditions, holidays, etc. Instead, it entails an understanding of embedded cultural concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of interacting and looking at the world, and is an 'ongoing dynamic process of negotiating meaning and understanding differences of perspective' (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, cultural comparison is the best way to understand other cultures. As different studies and experiences suggest (Byram, 1997; Zarate, 1997), viewing side by side

elements from two different cultures allows the observer immediately to notice similarities and differences embedded in the respective cultures that otherwise might be difficult to perceive.

If cultural comparison suggests an active and ongoing engagement between cultures, then the World Wide Web and web-based tools are natural vehicles for entering into international and intercultural dialogue. The internet allows students in different cultural settings to communicate directly and facilitates immediate and authentic intercultural exchange. The internet provides students and teachers with a tool to understand and analyse a globalised world, develop analytical and critical-thinking skills and communicate directly with their peers in another culture.

A project grounded in the *Cultura* model brings together two groups of students from two different countries who study in similar school settings and who are students of the language spoken in the other country. These two groups share a set of cultural materials, some of which are produced by the students themselves (answers to questionnaires, postings in forums, essays) and some of which are external sources (on-line media and links, films, articles) that are made available at a common project website. This material then becomes the basis for an extended and ongoing cross-cultural dialogue as students compare, analyse and discuss their observations both with the partner group and within the classroom.

Stages of *Cultura*

In *Cultura* the work develops as a gradual process along a series of stages that introduce learners to progressively more complex cultural concepts as they broaden the scope of their inquiry. These are the stages:

Stage 1: Questionnaires (on-line)

Students complete web-based questionnaires that have been designed to reveal basic cultural differences. They deal with topics such as politeness and social behaviour, perceived representative elements of each culture, every-day life, etc. Questionnaires are of three types:

- Word associations. In these students see a list of individual words (police, family, work, etc.) and, in a process of free association, are asked to write the first two or three words (nouns, adjectives or verbs) that come to mind.
- Sentence completion. Students complete sentences of the type: 'A good citizen is someone who. . .'. Students may write more than one answer for each sentence if they wish.

- Reactions to hypothetical situations. Students respond to a series of hypothetical situations (vg.: 'You see a student next cheating on an exam') by stating the first thing they would think, feel or do.

Questionnaires are presented in the native language of the students (e.g. English for the American group and Spanish for the Spanish group) and they likewise record their responses in their native language. After students complete these responses, the results from both sets of students are compiled and presented on-line side by side. These juxtaposed sets of answers provide first-hand ethnographical information about the contrasting cultures and will become the point of departure for intercultural dialogue and analysis, both in the forums and in the classroom (Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2).

Stage 2: Analysis of questionnaires (in the classroom and at home)

Each group of students, under the guidance of their teachers, analyses the juxtaposed lists of responses in order to find differences and similarities between the two groups' responses. They also look for and comment on such features as positive and negative signs of approval or disapproval, contradictions, categories that receive fewer or more responses and indications of basic underlying cultural assumptions. They carry out this work in the target language (Spanish in the American institution and English in the Spanish institution, for example) both individually and collectively in their respective classes.

Stage 3: Exchanges and forums (on-line)

Following the individual and group analysis of the questionnaires in the classroom, students from both groups meet in on-line message boards accessible to all participants. There they exchange observations, communicate their first reactions, preliminary findings and conclusions and address questions and doubts raised by the information. Their goal here is to get a better understanding of the cultural values and beliefs that lie behind the differences they have observed. These exchanges in forums mark the beginning of an ongoing dialogue as the students in both groups engage in a collaborative process of intercultural analysis.

The on-line forums are an essential and central component of *Cultura*. They provide a continuous thread throughout the whole process of intercultural analysis. Forums are where students enter into a real dialogue, exchanging viewpoints and asking and answering questions. In trying to make sense together of the materials they analyse, they cooperatively construct an understanding of each other's culture. The originators of *Cultura* conceived of these forums in the native language



Español	English
Extenso, eclectic, contradiccion	USA
patriotismo, poder, guerra	America, freedom
curiosidad, enorme, desconocido	power, diversity, misguided
diversidad,	dangerous, home, varied
llamativo, diferente, potencia	My home
diferente, grande, desconocido	war, McDonalds, endless roads across the country
enorme, variedad, rascacielos	George W. Bush, democracy, English
yankis, libertad, bush	diverse, eclectic, Americans
poder, globalización	Patriotism, Nationalism
potencia, globalización, exageración	opportunities, patriotism
yankis, michael moore	Major world power, potential to be a more responsible leader
conservadurismo, armas, prepotencia	bush, iraq, unipolarity
	fat, basketball, pizza
	arrogant, powerful
	home, country, flag
	diverse, george bush, rich
	Home, War, Freedom
	democracy, young, strugglin
	arrogant, powerful
	country, america
	mixed, difficult, freedom

Figure 4.1 Cultura questionnaire based on the keyword 'USA'

list of topics/lista de temas | bios/biografías | background texts/textos informativos | images/imágenes
tools/herramientas | data/cifras | media/medios | library/biblioteca | credits | feedback | help/ayuda

CULTURA

Español

A friend of yours who is 25 years old is living with his/her parents.

Probablemente sea por causa de la inseguridad laboral no porque el no quiera irse de casa

me parece bien yo creo que es normal

Le digo que espavile y se busque la vida, que ya es hora.

no es muy raro...

si el está contento no digo nada.

si es feliz me parece muy bien

lo vería absolutamente normal, dada la situación en mi país de encontrar un buen trabajo.

Es algo normal en este país, si con 25 años no tienes un trabajo decente ni dinero para marcharte de casa, ¿dónde vas a vivir mejor que estando en casa con tus padres?

le intento explicar que tiene que hacer su vida

la mayoría lo hacen. la vida está muy cara

¿hay alguno q a esa edad no viva con ellos?

seguramente no ha encontrado un trabajo digno con el que gane suficiente dinero para independizarse. no tiene otro remedio.

English

I talk to my friend that he/she needs to become self-sufficient at some point and help my friend if he needs me to get a job or move out.

I would probably be a little resentful that they were being taken care of financially.

I would feel very very bad for him or her.

that person is not independent

I may be in the same situation in a few years so I don't see the big deal.

I would pity them, as they would be doing themselves an injustice by not getting out into the world and living their own independent lives.

There is nothing wrong with that. He's still young, as long as he is working and giving his parents some money.

They need to grow up and move out.

I would feel sorry for this friend--by 25 years old, you should be out on your own, supporting yourself and beginning your own life.

If the parents are good people, I would invite myself over for dinner on a regular basis. I would also do my best to accomodate my friend at my place either permanently or whenever necessary.

its her choice.

I would suggest they move out, unless they can't afford to.

I would understand his circumstances and let him do what he thought is best. He is probably doing it for economic reasons, so its not a big deal.

That's odd but may be explained by circumstances.

I joke with him that he should start his own life.

you annalyze the situation to see if it is necessary and then if not, help them find a way to move out.

I don't judge.

Nothing wrong with that.

Inwardly I would not have as much respect for him/her.

I don't consider this strange as long as he or she has job and is considering moving out as soon as he or she has a steady job and income.

Figure 4.2 Cultura questionnaire based on the theme of living with your parents

of the students (e.g. American students write in English and Spanish students in Spanish). We will discuss the use of languages in forums in further detail later on.

Stage 4: Analysis of the forums/further discussion (in the classroom)

Students bring the messages in the forums back into the classroom for more discussion. There, with the guidance of the teacher, they work on the language and analyse the content of the exchanges. The new questions and ideas that this analysis raises are posted back again to the forums. In this way the dialogue in the forums and the work in the classroom are linked, each serving as feedback for the other.

Stage 5: Broadening the fields of exploration and analysis (on-line and in the classroom)

At a later stage, learners are also supplied with other related target-language resources: polls, surveys, news articles, films, etc. These materials allow them to broaden the scope of their inquiry and re-examine their conclusions. They then discuss their new findings in class and on-line with their partners.

Underlying pedagogical and working principles

The creators of the *Cultura* model have suggested a set of guidelines or working principles that they believe will lead to a successful launching of a *Cultura* interchange.

Perhaps the most important principle is that the two schools involved in the *Cultura* partnership should be similar so that students can work with partners of the same age and with similar life experiences. This makes more possible a choice of topics that will be more or less of equal interest to both groups.

An on-line exchange between two groups whose native and target languages are the exact opposite requires decisions as to which language to use in different parts of the exchange. If, on the one hand, it is a truism that students can write more fluently in their native language, it is equally important to recognise that the reason they are in the classroom is to learn the target language. The designers of *Cultura* thought long and hard about this issue before advising that students use the target language for class discussion and written analytical essays but use the native language for questionnaire answers and discussions in the on-line forums. It is important to understand that there are two languages in use in the forums; Spanish students, for example, ask questions of their American partners in Spanish but receive responses from those partners

in English. In other words, in the forums students write in the native language but read the target language. The creators of *Cultura* explain their choice of the native language in the forums in the following way:

(1) it eliminates possible dominance by a group or individuals with respect to differing proficiency levels in the foreign language (L2) and puts all students on an equal linguistic footing; (2) it enables students to express their views fully and in detail, formulate questions and hypotheses clearly, and provide complex, nuanced information because they are not bound by limited linguistic abilities; and (3) it enables the creation of student-generated authentic texts, which serve both as L2 input for the foreign partners and new objects of linguistic and cultural analysis. (Bauer *et al.*, 2005: 35)

Another working principle that plays itself out in the project is that the interaction on the forums needs to be asynchronous. Unlike synchronous exchanges (chat rooms, IMs), which encourage immediate, if unreflexive, responses, the time delay in the exchange allows for reflection and analysis before posting a response. (And of course, in cases where the partner schools are in different and distant time zones, the asynchronous mode is also the only one realistically available.)

The creators of the original project also underline the principle that *Cultura* be completely integrated into the very core of the course curriculum and that a large part of the work take place in the classroom. *Cultura* is not simply the proverbial Friday-afternoon add-on activity but at the very core of the class. Teachers are exhorted to find connections between the work done in the on-line exchange project and the rest of the class syllabus.

Finally, as *Cultura* is a process and not a product, the project needs to take place over a sufficient period of time to develop fully and to produce valid analyses. The minimum recommended time is eight weeks.

Roles of teacher and student

In *Cultura* students themselves construct their own learning and understanding of another culture. Once the teacher has set up the tasks students take centre stage. They are the ones observing, inquiring, investigating, hypothesising and interpreting, tasks they undertake jointly with their cross-cultural partners. In this process the teacher is not the authoritative storehouse of knowledge. Instead (s)he learns with the students and becomes another participant in the process.

However, at the same time, the teacher's role is crucial. It is the teacher who chooses the questionnaire topics, sets up the calendar, establishes the rhythm, organises class activities, chooses outside sources of supplementary data and ensures that everything stays on schedule. The teacher has an important role as a guide and facilitator who helps, encourages and further challenges students in their construction of hypotheses and cultural understanding. The teacher who uses *Cultura* must be flexible, as the set syllabus of the traditional classroom is replaced by a dynamic and fluid process that can take many turns. As the intercultural dialogue and new themes develop, or as issues or misunderstandings between the groups arise, the teacher must find ways to guide and arbitrate without intruding or usurping student initiative.

Language and culture

While culture is the explicit focus of a *Cultura* exchange, the linguistic component does not disappear; students learn the language as they learn about the culture, not the other way around. Throughout the project, students work on thematic vocabulary appropriate to the topics under discussion. In like manner, linguistic functions and grammatical features of the target language are examined not abstractly but within a cultural and communicative context for the purpose of improving communication and understanding. Students thus perceive an immediate practical purpose for improving their language skills, as they see that some language errors can lead to misunderstandings or be mistaken for slights or attacks on the other culture.

In the original *Cultura* model, the questionnaires and forums are a source of authentic target language readings. And as we shall see, in cases such as ours where students at times also write in the target language and where clear communication is essential, the need to be understood can spur them on to improve their linguistic skills and, when achieved successfully, help improve their confidence.

Adapting the Original Model: *Cultura* at Barnard/León

Exchange background

The Department of Spanish and Latin American Cultures at Barnard College and the Department of Modern Languages at the University of León, Spain, have been engaged in a *Cultura* exchange since the start of the 2003–2004 academic year, in which Barnard students enrolled in an intermediate level Spanish course are paired with León students studying English in the fourth and final year of their major in English Philology.

A number of decisions had to be made before this interchange could get under way. The first, and most immediate, was how to manage the different academic calendars of the two schools. Barnard, like most American colleges, works on the semester system, with little if no continuity of students between the Fall and the Spring semesters of a course; the University of León, on the other hand, follows the European model of year-long courses. Additionally, the American academic year starts in September, breaks in December, and then starts with new classes in January, while León classes start in October and have different intersession breaks. On the purely technical side, technicians on the Barnard/Columbia side were still constructing the *Cultura* engine and adapting the original interface used at MIT and Brown so that it would mesh seamlessly with the existing Barnard/Columbia networking system.

We were able to turn these issues to our advantage by launching a trial run of the project during the month of November. During those four weeks students in a Fall semester Barnard class and students from León engaged in a limited exchange of a few questionnaires and subsequent forums. This allowed instructors from both schools to identify and work out issues they had not foreseen and fine tune some elements of the project before a full-fledged exchange would begin in January, the start of Barnard's second semester.

Changes in model application

The trial period made clear that while the original methodological foundations of the *Cultura* project were sound, some changes and additions were in order both to meet the needs of our institutions (for example, León students had less access to computers at home, making it necessary for some class time be used for questionnaires and forum responses) and to test what would happen if some of the original methodological assumptions were modified.

Thus, the Barnard-León project includes various features at the start of the exchange not present on the original MIT *Cultura* model. One is a section of student autobiographies, in which students at each school write personal narratives (in the target language) with accompanying photos to present themselves to their partners. Another new section is entitled 'Background texts' where students create short texts and videos (also in the target language) on topics such as their local town, home university and educational system. The aim of these new sections is to help the participants get to know their partners more personally at the very beginning of the exchange and to make each group more aware of

the sociocultural environments in which they and their partners live and study. Also, as the type of work they will be doing in *Cultura* will most likely be new territory for our students, during the first days of classes they engage in preliminary activities designed to introduce and sensitise them to the notion of cross-cultural understanding.

As in the original model, students answer the questionnaires in their mother tongue. But while the MIT model prescribed assigning 10 items for each questionnaire category – words, sentences and situations – we reduced this number with the belief that the exact quantity mattered less than the choice of items in each category. It was also evident from the trial run that there would not be enough time to work in depth with a large number of topics. We took care to choose items that we hoped would elicit a range of varied, and maybe even unexpected and contradictory, attitudes, values and beliefs within the target culture, provoke lively dialogue and discussion in the forums and challenge preconceived cultural stereotypes.

The next step closely follows Stage 2 of the original *Cultura* model: once the students have completed the questionnaires they begin preliminary analysis of these data. Their examination is both cross-cultural and linguistic as they focus both on the content (cultural values and assumptions) and the language (vocabulary, expressions, structures) of the responses of the two groups. As in the original model, this work is carried out in the target language in and outside of class, individually and in groups.

The observations, questions and preliminary conclusions drawn from this comparison and discussed in class are then posted to the on-line forums, marking the beginning of Stage 3 of the original model. And it is here that our use of *Cultura* differs markedly from that model and its insistence on the use of the mother tongue for all forum entries. Our decision to swerve from this directive was dictated at first by institutional concerns. As León students of English had little access to home computers and, consequently, had to use class time to post to the forums, the León instructor was under pressure from the university to justify the allocation of instructional time for students writing in their native language. This pragmatic concern led to a solution that has given surprisingly rich results: half of the forums were to be in English, with both groups communicating in English, and the other half were to be in Spanish, with the common use of that language from both groups.

Contrary to the concerns of the creators of *Cultura* that the use of the target language in the forums would inhibit students from responding freely and with nuance and lead to the domination of one group over the other (see 'Underlying pedagogical and working principles'), we found

that the use of the target language did not significantly change the level and quality of participation in the forums. At the end of the first trial semester we administered a questionnaire to determine how participants evaluated the use of native and target languages in the forums. An analysis of their responses indicates that a significant majority of American students supported the option of writing and reading in Spanish (66.7%), while in the Spanish group 88% reported preferring the option of writing and reading in English. Clearly, both groups felt comfortable writing and reading in the target language on the message boards. Moreover, some Barnard students in the final interviews and evaluations of the course reported that their confidence grew upon discovering that their counterparts understood them and that they were able to keep a discussion going in Spanish.

Another change that we have introduced is to group topics of the questionnaires into four general categories: 'This is me/This is my life', 'Here and There: Attitudes towards USA culture/Spanish culture', 'Moral and Social Behavior' and 'Rights, Duties and Citizenship'. And rather than having a forum for each item in the questionnaires, we only have a discussion board for each of these general categories. In this way, from the very beginning students have to look for wider patterns and identify new and unexpected relationships. We have also begun to use on-line voice forums alongside the written ones. Here students can hone their oral communication skills as they record and listen to messages related to forum topics (Figure 4.3).

Supplementing the on-line *Cultura* exchange: Live class visits abroad

A unique feature of the Barnard-León *Cultura* exchange has been our incorporation of a live exchange into the project. In the early stages of conception of our project, we were able to secure a commitment of support from both institutions in the form of a formal agreement to explore ways to promote the exchange of students, faculty and resources. Part of that support was the allocation of some limited institutional funding to allow for a live exchange of some students participating in the *Cultura* project. With this funding six Barnard students and six León students, along with their respective instructors, travelled abroad to spend a week with the students of the partner school. The visits occurred in mid-semester after the on-line interchange had long been under way, with each group making its visit during its Spring break (mid-March for Barnard students and late April for the León students).





Tema/Topic 2: Aquí y allí / Here and there		
Attitudes towards the USA culture / Spanish culture		
Questionnaires / Cuestionarios		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spain / España - USA / Estados Unidos - Hispanic / Hispano - Bull fighting / Corrida de toros - Family / Familia - The biggest problem of my country is... / El principal problema de mi país... - The best thing of my country is... / Lo mejor de mi país es... 		
Foros / Forums		
 Written Board in English (Group 1)	 Foro escrito en español (Grupo 2)	
 Voice Board in English (Group 1)	 Foro hablado en español (Grupo 2)	
España	Estadísticas / Statistics	United States
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CIS: Imagen de Iberoamérica en España - Gallup: Interés por las corridas de toros 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - American polls about the war in Iraq
Artículos / Articles		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time Europe: Cinco españoles hablan sobre España 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Iraq pushes Bush support to all time low - Iraq makes terror 'more likely'

Figure 4.3 Resources and tools for Spanish-American Cultura including both written and oral message boards

The trips were designed to be very intensive periods of field work in the target culture rather than simply fun trips abroad. Students chosen for the trip were expected to interact fully with the host culture and gather new material and insights to be used in class on their return. As these visits would be relatively short, we had to be sure that each group would take to the new cultural setting relatively quickly and here the on-line biographies, texts about the respective cities and universities and, above all, weeks of on-line exchanges in the forums were key. On their arrival at the host institution participants were greeted as old friends; Barnard students lived with the families of the León students who would be visiting New York (León students were later housed in Barnard dormitories) and bonding between partners was immediate.

The visit of the partner group became the focus of classes during the week of the trip, as the visiting students gave cultural presentations about their country and engaged in group discussions and class debates. (As we would be working in two languages a set of rules had to be established: all

work in class would be in the language of the visiting group, while all other exchanges, even those among members of the visiting group, would be in the language of the host country.) Activities outside of class time focused on interviews with natives of various ages and experiences (these were arranged beforehand by the host instructors) for the purpose of gathering ethnographic and cultural data that would later be used to question and explore further the data culled from the on-line forums.

On their return to their home classes, these students then became resident 'experts' as they presented – via formal presentations, essays, blogs, videos and photo journals – the results of their interviews and experiences to their classmates. Thus, these visits abroad enriched the cultural input of the project with first-hand observations which, in turn, became the subject of further on-line and in-class discussion, questioning and analysis.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Model

Challenging cultural stereotypes

Our overall experience using *Cultura* has been very positive. The dialogue between the two groups of students has been fluid and the results in general encouraging. The exchange has helped our students in many cases to change previous ideas and attitudes towards the other culture and to think differently about it. The following examples from student exchanges on the topics of bullfighting, terrorism and politics illustrate such a process.

The discussion in the forums on bullfighting led the American students to question their stereotypical images of the Spanish fascination for the *corrida* as they read comments such as the following from the Spanish group:

A mí es que esto de los toros siempre me ha dado bastante vergüenza ajena, vamos que no es lo mío, y creo que España sería un país mejor si nos desprendiéramos ya de una vez de esta costumbre paleta . . . Nunca me ha gustado que el torero y los toros sean uno de los principales símbolos españoles de puertas hacia fuera.

This bull fighting thing has always made me quite ashamed for other people – I mean, it's not my thing – and I think Spain would be a better country if we unhitched ourselves of this provincial custom once and for all . . . I've never liked the idea that bullfighters and bulls are one of the main symbols of Spain for the rest of the world.

Such postings obviously surprised the American students, as this response clearly indicates:

Estuve sorpresa [sic] que algunos estudiantes de León creen que la corrida de toros es crueldad. Yo creía que todos los españoles estaban a favor de este tema, pero yo estoy contento que hay algunas personas que no están a favor de este tema.

I was surprised that some students from León believe that bullfighting is cruel. I thought that Spaniards were in favor of this topic but I am happy that there are some people who are not in favor of this topic.

In their final essays, American students made frequent references to how the exchange had challenged their ideas about Spain. One student explained that she '...was surprised with responses in the "bullfighting" topic. I thought all Spanish people liked the idea of bullfighting but it turned out to be the opposite'. Others referred to the emphasis which the Spaniards had placed on the issue of terrorism in the Basque country, a topic about which our students had been virtually ignorant. One American wrote that he had learned a lot about 'nationalism – País Vasco, terrorism and how Spanish people are affected by this', while another suggested that she had '... learned about what it is like to live in a country with terrorism' (this in post-9/11 New York!).

On the other side, the Spanish group was surprised by Americans' reactions to political themes such as 'If I could change one thing about my country...' and 'Your government does something immoral'. Comments like 'I would also change "the president" of the US George Bush sucks and he is dumb. Yes, I know, a very sophisticated observation. He and his administration have absolutely ruined US foreign relations' made the Spanish students reassess their attitudes to Americans in general.

In their final feedback, the Spaniards concluded that their partners were '... leading a change towards changing traditional American stereotypes' and that '... not all Americans are the same – New York students are tolerant and open-minded'.

The potential of such *Cultura* exchanges to further cross-cultural understanding and contest cultural stereotypes might best be summed up in this final observation from the Spanish side:

There were a lot of things about the USA that I didn't know, talking to the young people there cleared up many things for me such as their way of thinking and the difference between the reality over there and how we see them.

Institutional constraints and logistics

Cultura provides a flexible yet very structured model of telecollaboration. The carefully calibrated series of stages (questionnaires, analysis, forum discussion, etc.) prescribed by the model's creators serve as a step-by-step guide for teachers and students, taking much of the guesswork out of how an institution might put into practice such a collaboration. Their guidelines map out ways to set up the programme, the schedule and the activities, and are particularly helpful for the early stages of the exchange.

However, at the same time this structure requires a great deal of coordination between the two participating institutions. Instructors must collaborate on the construction of the questionnaire topics and on the timing of each stage well before the first class begins. And all during the exchange, the instructors must make sure that their groups stay on schedule as a missed or delayed response on one side will have repercussions for the progress of the whole exchange. The process of collaborative investigation that is the essence of *Cultura* can easily come to a halt if one side does not participate in the discussion forums fully, or if it does not respond on schedule. Instructors must also be in regular communication with each other to deal with any unforeseen technical or scheduling problems.

Institutional constraints such as academic calendars (the two institutions will most surely construct their semester start and end dates, vacation and exam periods differently), instructor teaching loads and other duties, material that must be 'covered' in certain classes, and accessibility to instructional technology must all be taken into account before embarking on a *Cultura* exchange. How the participating institutions sort out and resolve these constraints could, as O'Dowd (2005) and others have pointed out, determine the success or failure of the entire undertaking. Therefore it is essential that participants on both sides – teachers and institutions alike – be equally committed to the success of the project from the very beginning and throughout its run. (O'Dowd (2006) explains in detail the process of negotiation and adaptation that took place in the Barnard-León exchange. Furthermore, Bauer *et al.* (2005) also describe the logistics involved in establishing a Russian/English *Cultura* exchange.)

Another important aspect when deciding whether to implement *Cultura* is the time element. *Cultura* interchanges require a minimum of several weeks. Therefore, whether *Cultura* be its own course, as in the Barnard-León setup, or part of a pre-existing course, it cannot be relegated to the proverbial 'Friday afternoon' class filler. It is necessary

that students and teacher dedicate a considerable amount of time, in and out of class for the project to bear fruit.

From the point of view of logistics, then, *Cultura* is more demanding than other models of telecollaboration. At the same time it is a flexible framework open to adaptations that suit particular academic contexts. Its success or failure depends much more on effective faculty collaboration, well planned scheduling and invested classroom interaction than on its technology.

Interpreting culture: Risks and remedies

Our initial research findings into *Cultura* have also shown that students' initial analysis of the *Cultura* materials can lead to facile cultural misinterpretations, particularly in the early stages of the project. The problems are of three types:

(a) Students run the risk of over-generalising and forming quick and ready interpretations of both the target and native cultures that can become rigid and difficult to undo, as these two examples illustrate:

Student 1:

Of the surveys I thought the one defining a polite person showed the biggest differences between the Spaniards and Americans. In Spain a polite person is, in general, someone who respects others and knows how to behave. Whereas, in the US we believe that a polite person is well mannered and says 'please' and 'thank you'.

Student 2:

Me interesa que los estudiantes norteamericanos dijeron que una persona bien educada es una persona que dice 'por favor' y 'gracias' pero los estudiantes españoles no lo mencionaron. Parece que a los norteamericanos les importan los costumbres sociales, pero a los españoles les importa los sentimientos que motivan las acciones.

I think it is interesting that the American students said that a well mannered person is someone who says 'Please' and 'Thank you' but that the Spanish students did not mention this at all. It seems that Americans give importance to social customs while Spaniards give importance to the feelings behind the actions.

(b) Knowing that their objective is to compare and contrast cultures, students may be tempted to overemphasise the differences between the cultures and pass over the similarities, thereby creating an artificial binary between the two:

Student 1:

Cuando leí los cuestionarios los semejanzas no me sorprendieron mucho, pero las diferencias me interesaron.

When I read the questionnaires I was not very surprised by the similarities but I found the differences interesting.

Student 2:

I have read your answers about the questionnaire we all had to do, and I have found it quite interesting, because of the different answers we, the Spanish, and you, the Americans have written.

(c) The fact that the students act as informants and perceive themselves as representatives of their culture could influence the sincerity and spontaneity of their answers. In our project some students mentioned in the forums and in their final essays the concern that their awareness of their role as cultural ambassadors might have affected their answers and that, for example, in some cases they eschewed answering from a personal perspective and responded with what they considered to be a more widespread or positive position. As one participant commented, 'I think that sometimes when I respond (and possibly when others respond as well), I am trying to overcompensate for the stereotypes that Americans tend to have (for example, that Americans are materialistic)'.

Such concerns argue strongly for the need to allow the *Cultura* project to unfold and develop as a process over a sufficient period of time. When this process is given sufficient time to develop, it becomes clear that the *Cultura* model can, instead, overcome or at least minimise the risk of stereotyping and over-generalising.

For one thing, *Cultura* offers an environment where the students from both countries collectively construct their own learning and understanding of their cultures over time. Participants help each other by posting reflections, comments and questions in the forums in an ever-expanding dialogue that goes beyond first impressions. This constant dialogue, the analysis that takes place in the classroom (which includes the teacher in the role of Socratic gnat) and the iterative process of reassessing conclusions in the light of new information help directly counteract the risks of cultural misapprehension, as all observations are open to ongoing scrutiny and critique. In other words, conclusions are always provisional and never fixed. The cross-pollination offered by outside sources is also important here, as more 'objective' or 'author-

itative' texts (articles, polls, movies, etc.) bring in new elements to enrich and problematise their new assumptions.

The results of our Barnard-León exchange and those of the American–Mexican partnership described in Bauer *et al.* (2005) indicate that *Cultura* can foster an increasingly complex sense of national identities and cultural heterogeneity. It can also help make learners aware of the fact that they constitute a group with particular characteristics within their own native culture that in some ways might be different from other sectors of their culture; in turn, this may provoke students to question to what degree the partner group can stand in for its culture as a whole.

Thus, messages like the following, taken from the Spring 2005 Barnard-León exchange, are quite common:

I also worry about our making generalizations about 'Spain' and 'Spaniards' based on the responses of a few students. Take the business of cutting in line – does the fact that a lot of people said they would speak up really tell us anything about Spanish or American culture? Or do we just happen to have a group of people here who are either particularly gutsy or particularly conscious of injustice?

The point is that, as you say, America is huge and if there's one thing one cannot definitely do is generalizing. Maybe some people are very religious and put in practice their strict beliefs, but other people may do this together with crazy parties every night, or not, or are not religious at all, or, or ... there are so many ways of life within the 'American way of life' that it's impossible to state firmly anything.

With regard to the danger of overemphasising cultural differences, many students in their final essays concluded that there are more similarities than differences between the two groups of students and between the two cultures than they thought before the exchange began. As one student wrote, 'As we have seen, there are some cultural differences between both countries but we also have some things in common'.

To conclude, the dynamic process of negotiating meaning and understanding differences of perspective over time that is central to *Cultura* can counteract the problem of cultural misconstruction. *Cultura* does not ask students to reach definitive conclusions but to engage in a process of investigation and understanding. In the words of one student in her final evaluation of our project: 'I learned a lot about Spaniards in terms of having a place to start thinking about how different issues are perceived in another country that otherwise I wouldn't have thought about'.

Conclusion

The development of intercultural competence in language learners has become one of the top priorities of the language curriculum. The *Cultura* model of telecollaboration described in this chapter constitutes a powerful tool for realising that objective.

The notion of culture fostered by such a project challenges the traditional concept of culture as it has been framed in the traditional foreign classroom, replacing a static series of facts and generalisations about the other country and its people with a process of discovery of a living culture mediated through direct, if virtual, intercultural exchange. In the *Cultura* class culture is positioned as a dynamic, unstable and sometimes contradictory set of values and attitudes. And as participants construct their own learning environment, both individually and collectively, they become independent and critical learners whose goal is not to arrive at fixed and definitive conclusions about another culture but to learn to interpret and analyse.

In contrast to the *Tandem* model, which does not prescribe a particular structure or imply any particular content (see O'Rourke, this volume), *Cultura* clearly establishes a series of stages that the exchange should follow. On the one hand such a structure could serve as a guide for the development of a syllabus grounded in a *Cultura* project. On the other hand, the need to follow the stages of the model poses problems of coordination, requiring clear timetables and the synchronisation of calendars and tasks between the participating classes and instructors. But in spite of a structure that on first examination might seem overly to guide and restrict, results are not foreseeable or predictable. No two groups of students approach their investigation in the same way and conclusions, and even the success of the exchange, many vary widely from one group to another.

The essence of *Cultura* lies more in the process than in the contents or the results. It sets in motion a process very similar to that of ethnographic investigation – the compilation of first-hand cultural data and its organisation, analysis and interpretation – and then guides learners through a process of discovery and investigation. In such an environment students can actually interact in a meaningful way with their peers in another culture.

To return to the words of the creators of this project:

No one academic experience will 'produce' interculturally competent students. However, a project like *Cultura* can affect this process substantively. (Bauer *et al.*, 2005)

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The MIT Cultura website: <http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/>

The Cultura Community site: <http://www.culturacommunity.org/drupal/>

The Cultura Teacher's Guide: <http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/guide/index.html>

The Barnard– León Cultura Website: <http://www2.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/cultura/login.pl>