

CULTURE CONTACTS: AN EXPERIMENTAL AMERICAN-HUNGARIAN PROJECT IN THE ONLINE LANGUAGE-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the online language-learning environment of a cultural awareness project sponsored by the Fulbright Foundation. Its aim was to foster living contacts among students of the two countries and develop language proficiency in the target language through a variety of coordinated activities. Over a two-year period, groups of students from two colleges, ELTE Teacher Training College, Budapest, Hungary, and Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, participated in a study learning about the respective cultures through online collaboration in small groups, threaded discussions of films from both countries, and individual and group assignments. An extensive web site functioned as the main information ground for the project with detailed information about all the required activities. Rutgers undergraduates minored in Hungarian, whereas Budapest students were training to become English teachers. Participation in the project constituted a component of students' course work in the respective programs, and the online segment was incorporated into the respective syllabi. Although the language of the project was English, the on-site assignments, readings, and films also utilized Hungarian proficiency. The project is noteworthy for its use of computer technology and time management in an asynchronous learning environment embracing two continents.

Introduction

This paper describes an experimental online project sponsored by the Fulbright Foundation with the participation of students from Rutgers University, NJ and ELTE University from Hungary between Fall 2001 and Spring 2003. The main objective of this multifaceted project was to create a collaborative learning environment through a variety of coordinated activities for students at Rutgers learning Hungarian and students in Hungary training to become ESL teachers. The project also aimed at identifying and analyzing potential pitfalls in instructional design regarding an international online collaboration of instructors and students. The purpose of this case study is to describe the implementation of an international virtual learning environment. The role of the researchers in the study was that of the participant-observer. One of the researchers is the associate program director, the other is the forum moderator, and they both actively participated in the four major phases of the project, i.e. planning and recruiting, project design, managing, and concluding the project.

The results are of interest for course designers and instructors working in the virtual learning environment, however, the international focus and innovative use of

technology target wider audiences. The study also helps improve practice in the virtual learning environment in terms of course management, students' online collaboration, and time management in an international setting.

Brief Literature Review

Despite the increased interest in virtual learning environments or asynchronous learning, little empirical research has been conducted on multicultural online collaboration in an international setting. The virtual learning environment has been the focus of numerous research studies in terms of using new technology (Gillespie, 1998, Weller, 2002, Cookson, 2000, Porter, 2004, Restauri, 2004), the effect of new technology on the instructor's changing role in the online learning environment (Gillespie, 1998, Littleton, Phil & Whitelock, 2004) and on various issues of instructional design (Honebein, 1996, Borthick, Jones, & Wakai, 2003, Porter, 2004). Studies have established connections among learning theory, instructional design, and technology in the virtual learning environment (Pellegrino, 2004, Porter, 2004). As for student participation, it has been proposed that students have more chance to identify their own learning needs and explore resources (Bloxham & Armitage, 2003). They also must assume greater responsibilities for their own learning and need to be more willing to communicate and share the results of their explorations (Gillespie, 1998). Students' motivation and engagement levels in the online activities have been reported key to successful learning (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002). The elements to facilitate effective online collaboration and group work have been extensively studied (Borthick, Jones, & Wakai, 2003, Bloxham & Armitage, 2003, Joiner, 2004). It has also been found that instructional techniques will enable effective collaboration (Littleton & Whitstock, 2004). Course evaluation has been analyzed in depth (Benigno & Trentin, 2000), even with a special regard to assessment of group work (Nicolay, 2002).

A logical next step in exploring the online collaborative learning environment is to examine ways of extending the experience overseas. Of particular interest is the impact of a strong multicultural element on instructional design in order to achieve successful online collaboration.

Participants

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick was chosen as the American partner for the project because of its strong connections to Hungarian culture. Rutgers has supported undergraduate studies in Hungarian for over forty years. Besides Indiana University, which offers a Hungarian major, Rutgers is the only other institution with a degree program in the United States. Its Hungarian minor offers over fifteen courses on Hungarian culture and Hungarian as a second language. The Institute for Hungarian Studies also contributes to the instructional and extracurricular content of the Central European Studies major. The Institute participates in joint research projects of the two countries in several areas, and it fosters immediate contacts with Hungarian institutes of higher education. With its public lecture-series, it also shapes the large Hungarian community in the New Brunswick area. Many students at Rutgers are of Hungarian descent from the area, thus they have various levels of proficiency in the Hungarian language (Clark & Ward, 2003, Ward, 2005).

The Hungarian partner, the Department of English for Teacher Training of the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest offers programs for prospective teachers of English, namely Master of Arts degrees and Teacher's Certificates in English as a Second Language. This project was made possible by the Fulbright Alumni Initiatives Award given to Professor Miklós Molnár of the English Department, who was a visiting Fulbright scholar at Rutgers in the academic year of 1999/2000. Professor Molnár taught courses in the Hungarian minor program together with the visiting Hungarian professor, Dr. Judit Hajnal Ward (Ward, 2005). During these two semesters, students in the Hungarian Studies program at Rutgers participated in a pilot of the current project, conducted with students of the English program of the Kölcsey Ferenc Teacher Training College of Debrecen. These students then formed the core of participants at Rutgers, among them Dr. Sylvia Csűrös Clark, a professor at St. John's University, who became co-instructor and discussion forum moderator during the project.

The Project

About 15-20 students took part in the project each semester from each country. While the number of students involved remained constant, the specific participants changed throughout the project. The total number of participants reached 105 (54 American and 51 Hungarian students) by the third semester of the project. One third of the students participated in all three semesters from February 2002 to May 2003, while the remainder joined the project for one or two semesters (Molnar, 2004). The participation constituted a component of their college coursework, American Studies in Hungary, and Hungarian Studies at Rutgers. A web site, provided by the generous support of the Fulbright Foundation, served the purpose of unifying students and managing the course (Clark & Ward, 2004). Students were encouraged to take full advantage of the collaborative online learning experience through a variety of activities and methods of communication

An orientation page gave a full introduction to the learning objectives and provided description of all activities, such as group work in large groups, teamwork in smaller groups, and individual projects. Detailed plans, syllabi, and weekly schedules helped to ensure that all activities were well coordinated and accomplished in a timely manner in both countries. It should be noted that the time zone difference between the two countries is six hours, a fact that had to be considered from the very beginning in the instructional design and planning. A very detailed time schedule was established and participants (students and instructors alike) had to adhere to it strictly to achieve the course and project objectives.

Each semester, international teams of four to six students worked on joint projects coordinated by a team leader. Among the topics included were patriotism and national icons, media images of the respective countries, family values, minorities, media and popular culture, differing habits in work and leisure, the school system, lifestyle and national identity, comparison of education systems, and possible reasons for cultural differences. Although the language of the project was English, students were allowed to use texts in both English and Hungarian, and they were encouraged to use and compare resources in the two languages from the perspective of the particular topic.

Students were also required to learn through analysis and discussion of films from the two countries, screened in the original language with subtitles. Films to discuss were

carefully chosen to provide students with a variety of topics to address, overlapping with or complementing the discussion topics. Screenings were held on the same day for both sets of students. Viewing guides provided background for the subsequent online discussions of cultural implications. Films screened included *Coyote Ugly*, *Valami Amerika* (Some Kind of America), *American Beauty*, *Chocolat*, and *Édes Emma, Drága Böbe* (Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe).

A discussion forum was also used to facilitate debates and exchange ideas. Students contributed regularly to the discussion forum as required in the detailed course description. The opening page of the forum was visited 5,509 times altogether (1,052 in the first, 1,923 in the second and 2,534 in the third semester), an average of 52 visits per student (Molnar, 2004). Hundreds of observations and opinions were posted over the length of the project, with equally active participation in both countries. A moderator directed the discussion by introducing topics, whether in connection with the most recently viewed film or with an area of cultural relevance. During the two-week discussion period, she was monitoring student participation and moderating the forum by making minor adjustments or spicing up the debate if necessary. At the end of the discussion, she summarized the observations while also using this occasion as a means of transition to the next topic (Clark & Ward, 2004). Rutgers students in the on-site class then had an assignment to write a summary of the discussion in Hungarian too, obviously at the level of their proficiency. The multitude of perspectives offered was particularly noteworthy, evidenced by a wealth of personal anecdotes used as a means of facilitating cultural understanding.

A variety of links and background pages were provided by the course organizers to serve as points of departure for conducting research or for a better understanding of the ongoing discussion, for example on topics in history, politics, or current affairs. Culture-related terms were explained in their context in both languages. The links included plenty of sources in Hungarian geared toward the American students of the language (Meszaros & Ward, 2003). Additionally, the project also encouraged students to take the initiative and create pages that might be of importance for students in the other country, or provided them with updated information on current events. Pages were then archived and used for later semesters, including a page about Thanksgiving, or Imre Kertész, the first Hungarian writer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature during the project.

Interactive quizzes created by the teams were posted biweekly to reinforce key elements of the topic and to provide a competitive spirit. Group projects included extensive research on a topic and composition of a research paper comparing and analyzing findings in both countries. Papers were posted on the web site and were considered in the competition for the top prize of the project, a one-week trip to the other country to participate in a workshop (Meszaros & Ward, 2003).

Individual papers, written voluntarily many times for a special occasion, also qualified for the competition. Rutgers students had the option to write the course paper either in English or Hungarian. In order to write a paper in Hungarian, students were also instructed on how to insert Hungarian diacritical characters, and how to set up a computer to handle more than one keyboard layouts. Papers of Rutgers students then were also preserved in print in the Library and Archive of the American Hungarian Foundation in New Brunswick for possible future research (Ward, 2005).

International Workshops

Two workshops were planned during the two years of the project, one in each country at the end of each of the two years. The workshops provided a showcase for the students to present the results of their individual and teamwork and share their observations. Selected students traveled to the host country to represent their peers.

The first workshop was held at Rutgers at the end of the first year of the project. The three-day program, called “Hungarian Days at Rutgers” was opened by the Professor Gerald Pirog, Head of the Department of Slavic and Eastern European Languages and Literatures. The keynote lectures included a presentation on Hungary joining the European Union by Deputy Consul General Péter Sárközy and one on Hungarian theater by András Márton, Director of the New York Hungarian Culture Center. The conference also hosted over twenty student presentation among them two given by visiting students from Hungary. Student group projects were displayed during the conference in the form of posters and bound papers, while other posters presented the history of the project and gave an overview of Hungarian Studies at Rutgers. Cultural and sport events demonstrated the presence of the Hungarian culture in the area, such as a dance show and a party including the learning of Hungarian songs, contests, and raffles and a soccer game between American and Hungarian-American participants. A roundtable discussion with the representatives of the local American Hungarian organization was held to promote cooperation. The farewell party attracted over one hundred guests (Meszaros & Ward, 2003, Clark & Ward, 2003, Clark & Ward, 2004).

The second workshop was held in Budapest, Hungary with American and Hungarian cultural awareness as the main topic (Molnar, 2004, Ward, 2005). Student presentations were followed by roundtable discussions attended by many Hungarian students outside the project. Three Rutgers students presented their papers in Budapest comparing two cultures from one particular perspective. Participants at each workshop posted reports on the events on the same day for their peers in the other country. The discussion forum was also very active during this time. The workshop also featured a book exhibit of titles published in Hungary about American topics and the extended history of the project, including the most interesting discussions from the forum. Since the project had been sponsored by the Hungarian Fulbright Commission, the workshop in Hungary also attracted some illustrious presenters. Among these were Péter Medgyes, Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, who presented on the importance of institutional cooperation; Huba Brückner, Executive Director of the Hungarian American Fulbright Commission who gave a briefing on the history of the organization, and Daemon Anderson, Regional English Language Officer at the American Embassy in Budapest, who discussed Hungarian-American cultural contacts.

Conclusions and implications for further study

In sum, the success of the project can be attributed to the excellent online collaboration of students, instructors and course organizers by utilizing the elements of the most up-to-date learning theories and best practices of the virtual learning environment.

The discussion forum was reported to be the most enjoyable part of the students’ learning process in the evaluation sheets filled out by participants at the end of the project (Molnar, 2004). The 147-page log file of the Discussion Forum provides excellent

empirical material for further research, especially in the field of language use and argumentation style of native and non-native speakers of English.

The course organizers expected that collaboration would be a challenge for most participants, since neither the Hungarian nor the American system of education seems to favor joint efforts by students (Molnar, 2004). Students' collaborative activities showed an improving tendency throughout the project. The collaboration of the students fell far below expectations in the first phase, but after new students got involved in the following semesters, the quality of group work improved. This change can also be partly explained by re-organizing team collaboration, nominating team-leaders from the participants of the previous semester, and partly by peer pressure and competition between students of the two institutions.

The course managers have also concluded that the continuous updating and modification of the web page throughout the entire project served as an important factor in the project's overall success (Molnar, 2004). The design had to be refreshed after the first semester in order to better attract students' attention. In the following two semesters new sections were added as new ideas emerged and were realized. The logical arrangement and effective design of the web page as well as its easy accessibility also contributed greatly to the success of the project. The webmaster, an experienced language teacher himself, also assisted the course designers and the moderators daily to facilitate the activities of the virtual community.

The two workshops, functioning as on-site forums for all participants, confirmed that well-established virtual contacts can be easily reinforced by real-life experiences. If the Discussion Forum on the web page was labeled as an 'agora', the workshops had the function of a 'powwow', and used personal encounters to make the intercultural experience more real and lasting through roundtable discussions and shared activities (Molnar, 2004).

The final conclusions drawn by the Project Management, partly based on the moderators' input, partly on the student questionnaires, imply that intercultural experiences supplement on-site courses and provide students with experiences that prepare them to cope with challenges in the international arena. It should be noted that international online collaboration of this scale cannot be implemented without proper funding.

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