

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Today is more affordable than any time before to arrange for an intercultural communication. This is because Internet with its social media and its potential to bring learners into direct contact with the target culture, allow learners not only gain access to authentic publications from the target culture but they can also take part in online chat rooms, discussion boards and videoconferences, i.e., learners will develop intercultural competence. Becoming interculturally competent will allow the learner capture and understand, in interaction with people from foreign cultures, their specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting. This article is, therefore, about the impact of social media -which make available a context where people across the world can communicate, exchange messages, share knowledge and interact with each other despite the distance that separates them- on intercultural communication. The impact is constantly increasing, since social media has taken a big role in our social interactions where we no longer have to speak to people to know what they are doing, while a mouse-click can do the job instead.

Keywords: internet, social media, culture, intercultural communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social media is making it easier than ever to communicate across cultures on a daily basis contrary to the past where this could only be done by physically being immersed in the communication setting. Today, as Jandt (2001:493) comments, "offices on two continents can communicate as if they were on the same street." Social media, therefore, increases intercultural communication and understanding with its tremendous reach and serves a number of useful purposes for those exploring new places virtually or in their travels. The uses of social media have become so varied and diverse and the amount of communication that takes place using social media is enormous. Facilities such as email, teleconferencing, instant messaging, and so on, enable people to communicate without having to meet physically. This is the case of an online collaboration between the University of Tlemcen from Algeria and ECU (East Carolina University) from North Carolina in USA, where students from both universities communicate with each other

using synchronous tools (Videoconferencing and Instant Messaging) and asynchronous tools (Emails and Facebook). These tools are used with the main objective of developing intercultural competence. This article is, therefore, a presentation of this collaboration under the name of Global Understanding project by focusing on the impact of the social media tools being used on building students' intercultural knowledge, skills, and strategies.

2. GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING PROJECT

The Global Understanding Course provides a format for students from more than 60 institutions members to communicate worldwide and learn about each other's cultures through live video-conferencing and chat technology. One of the main objectives of this project is that multiple cultures provide culturally diverse, direct international experience, where in each session students develop partners and friends in 3 diverse cultures. They meet 14 to 16 weeks per semester, more than 4 weeks per culture, and twice a week for 50 minutes each time. The students, usually 14 in number from each side, are divided into two groups of 7, so that each class session includes video discussions in small groups for group A and one-to-one chat for group B. The discussions are usually about college life, family, the meaning of life, stereotypes, and prejudices.

The main objective of Global Understanding project is to develop an atmosphere of trust that engages students to share information, opinions, values, attitudes and emotions, and most importantly to collaborate effectively. Through one-to-one collaboration, students begin to see similarities among themselves, identify themselves with others, and to attenuate the negative differences.

In other words, we can say that Global Understanding course generates an intercultural dialogue which is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups from different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage. Such dialogue is based on mutual understanding, openness and a genuine respect for and appreciation of diversity, equal human dignity and equal human rights. It involves a positive attitude towards diversity, seeing the meeting between people with different beliefs and cultural practices as enriching for all, and seeing individual identity as being developed through meeting 'otherness'. As such, intercultural dialogue is an important tool for achieving social cohesion within multicultural societies and for fostering a sense of inclusiveness in which no individual or group is marginalized or defined as outsiders.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

New improvements in information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, have made geographical boundaries become irrelevant. They no longer are obstacles to communication the way they were a few years ago. Social media tools such as email, teleconferencing, instant messaging, and so on, enable people to communicate without having to be presented physically. These tools refer to web-based and mobile technologies that people use to share information and ideas online. They represent an ever-growing form of communication in our world today. This communication, most of the time, transcends the boundaries of once culture to engage interlocutors in an intercultural environments, where understanding how to effectively communicate using the different types of social media might represent a challenge. Communication is going to vary cross-culturally and this is something that one needs to take into consideration when addressing social media and communication across cultures other than his or her own.

It is worth to know that culture is not only a concept that is subconscious and represents a set of shared values, but also a concept that manifests itself in the behaviour of a given group when it comes across another culturally different group. This takes us to the realm of intercultural communication. It is a field of study that looks at how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavour to communicate across cultures (House-Edmondson, 1986), i.e., how people from different countries and cultures act, communicate and perceive the world around them. By studying situations where people from different cultural backgrounds interact, intercultural communication plays an important role in anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics, psychology, and communication studies. . It was, first, used in Edward T. Hall's (1959) influential book, *The Silent Language*, and Hall is generally acknowledged to be the founder of the field.

After that, universities across the world were obliged to adopt intercultural and international understanding and knowledge as one of their goals for the education of their students. International and intercultural understanding has become critical to a country's cultural, technological, economic, and political wellbeing. It has become essential for universities to educate their students to possess a certain level of global competence to understand the world they live in and how they fit into this world which is characterized by close and multi-faceted relationships. The shortest way to get to these ends is the use of social media tools.

Social media tools, which represent all of the web-based applications enabling individuals to interact with each other, provide an environment for all varieties of content to be discussed, shared, and negotiated. Chat rooms, for example, are used by interactants to discuss topics of common interest, form communities with compatible visions, find soul mates or short-term relationships, or only chat for the sake of chatting. Though, chat rooms are less popular now than they were in the 90s when texting was the only means available to reach out to the others, people continue to chat online with the possibility of using voice and/or video. They still use chat to converse with friends and family members, conduct classroom lessons, and carry out business negotiations, or even in multiplayer computer games and virtual online worlds.

Another example of social media tools used for interaction is email exchange with an estimation of 200 billion emails sent every day (Radicati Group 2012). Like the telephone which represents a significant technological advancement, email technology quickly moved from governments' and institutions' property to being a part of everyday life in developed countries, to the level of generating a growing dependency on technology. Why not if this has made face-to-face communication as no longer very important, as far as you can communicate through a simple email which in itself is a channel that makes online personal communications possible.

A third example is that of videoconferencing technology. It is a set of interactive telecommunication technologies which allow two or more locations to see and hear each other at the same time, via two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously. This rich communication technology, called also visual collaboration, offers new possibilities for schools and colleges to connect with guest speakers and experts, multi-school project collaboration, professional activities such as meetings and interviews, and community events. A video call is like a telephone call, except when you connect, you see the other person in colour video and may be able to transfer files. The call can be between two people in private offices (point-to-point) or involve several sites (multi-point) with more than one person in large rooms at different sites.

A videoconference system must have audio-visual equipment. This includes: video input (video camera or webcam), video output (computer monitor, television or projector), audio input (microphones), and audio output (usually loudspeakers associated with the display device or telephone). It needs, also, a means of transmitting information between sites (analogue or digital telephone network, LAN or Internet).

Among the benefits of a visual connection, is that it is an interactive communication medium. It is almost like being there. The visual connection and interaction among participants enhances understanding and helps participants feel connected to each other. It supports collaboration among traditionally isolated institutions and builds relationships in a way that e-mail, telephone, or online chat systems cannot. The excitement of using new technology and interacting with other students or adults increases motivation, as students perceive video guests as important and are more conscious of their appearance and oral communication.

Videoconferencing makes, then, a face-to-face visit possible, when a live visit is not. By removing the need for students to travel, yet still providing a two-way audio and video link, videoconference is providing educational opportunities for interactions that would not otherwise exist, saving then time and resources. This allows students to have a greater opportunity to form meaningful relationships with others who may be very different from them. They learn, as well, important communication and management skills, e.g., when they see themselves on screen and realize that is how others see them; this may lead to dress change, posture change, and poise change, all for the positive.

From sending a text message to being engaged in a videoconference, there are endless uses for social media (Wooley, 2013). One most important use is creating new forms of multicultural relations (Piechota, 2014). Social media and intercultural communication have become inseparable by affecting and shaping each other. This can be clearly seen in our aforementioned Global Understanding project. Through social

media used in the form of Mirc (software) for chat, email, and Polycam or Zoom or Skype for video, the course provides a format for students from all the institutions members to communicate worldwide and learn about each other cultures. The main objective of Global Understanding project is to develop an environment of confidence that involves students to share facts, thoughts, morals, attitudes and emotions, and most importantly to work collaboratively. By collaborating with each other, students begin to identify resemblances among themselves, identify themselves with others, and reduce the undesirable differences.

Our conception of an intercultural perspective for our online classes is behind using the social media technology we have already described. The learning goals that we base our conception on, and which have already been detailed by Byram (2008) and GeofAlred, Mike Byram, and Mike Fleming (2006), can be summarized in three essential elements: attitudes, knowledge and skills.

First, students' attitudes are supposed to change. They tend to develop an interest in the others' experience of daily life and not only what is presented through the media and are more willing to look for opportunities to engage with others in a relationship of equality. Likewise, they adopt the others' perspectives in order to contrast and compare with the dominant evaluations in their own society. During the video link which places them in a context of phases of acceptance and rejection, these students will be able to cope with their own different kinds of experience with a different culture, and try to conform to the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction of the others.

Secondly, students are expected to acquire certain knowledge. They learn about events, significant individuals and various interpretations of events about both countries and the traces left in the national memory as well as about contemporary political and economic factors surrounding each country. From the technical space they use, they learn how to use social media and telecommunications that facilitate interpersonal and cultural partnerships across frontiers. They, also, learn about conventions of communication and interaction in their own and the foreign culture, and about alternative interpretations of shared concepts, gestures, customs and rituals. Furthermore, they learn about the national memory of their own country and how its events are related to and seen from the perspective of other countries.

Finally students learn skills. They learn when observing a social phenomenon to identify ethnocentric perspectives in an event and explain their origins. They learn, as well, how to identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems, and how to use their explanations of sources of misunderstanding and dysfunction to help interlocutors overcome conflicting perspectives. Finding compromises, seeking consensus, accepting majority decisions, tolerating minorities, promoting encouragement, balancing rights and responsibilities, and showing trust and courage are on the list, too. They, also, learn how to take seriously the opinions and arguments of others by putting oneself in the position of others and start to accept criticism and listen. Additionally they learn how to make their own opinions (needs, interests, feelings, values) clear, speak coherently, explain clearly, and abandon every kind of violence, humiliation, or insult.

4. CONCLUSION

Through this article, we tried to show that the uses of social media have become so varied and diverse and the amount of communication that takes place using social media is enormous. By using Global Understanding project, as an example, we stressed on the impact that social media have in building a cross-cultural environment where students get the chances to use technology to increase their cultural awareness through building knowledge, embracing new skills and strategies, and reconsidering -if not changing- attitudes. With social media becoming an ever-growing form of communication we still need to understand its meanings, uses and its impact on cultures.

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