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Meeting the Challenges of International Online Education

Tim Murphy

Online courses allow students living throughout the world to collaborate in the same class. These courses afford students access to educational resources that might not otherwise be available and create an environment in which students have the opportunity to interact with and learn from students with significantly different cultural assumptions and life experiences. However, such courses also face obstacles that are not necessarily present in either on-campus international or single-nation virtual settings.

This paper aims to identify some of the main challenges faced by teachers of online international classes and suggest ways to address those challenges. The focus of this paper will be post-secondary classes that are delivered online to students of more than one nationality. Although my personal experiences are primarily in teaching writing-intensive humanities courses, the discussion to follow is intended to be broad enough to apply to a variety of different disciplines. Since a full discussion of issues arising for students who are in the process of becoming proficient in English as a second language is beyond the scope of this paper, the discussion will apply only to those classes in which English proficiency is a prerequisite.

1 Obstacles to International Online Learning

Murphy et al (2007) notes that obstacles to the success of online international courses can arise due to differences in place, language and culture. Even among students who are proficient writers and speakers of English, misunderstandings and miscommunications arising from language difference are common. Obstacles of place, i.e., differences in time zone, lack of access to technological resources, etc. can be significant deterrents to a successful class. Finally, a broad range of cultural differences can lead to problems in the online setting. Of these three types of obstacles, those that fall under the broad label of “cultural difference” are perhaps the most complex and difficult to address. This discussion therefore follows brief comments on problems of place and language with a more detailed analysis of the relevance of cultural differences.

2 Problems of place

International online classes often have students participating at great distances from each other and from the instructor. Murphy et. al. (2007) points out that “differences in technological aspects of communication in an intercultural context can contribute to cultural discontinuities in online project-based learning environments due to time-zone differences, access problems, and typing skills.” (53) Of course, these problems are to some

extent present in fully domestic online courses as well, as do the authors' proposed solutions, which include "using a simple, integrated online communication system" and providing "technical training and ongoing technical support." An exception, however, is their discussion of time-zone differences.

While a virtual course in the continental U.S. will need to arrange synchronous course activities with a few hours of time difference in mind, the time differences involved in a class with students around the world will be far more of an obstacle. If a class has students living in both Kansas City and in Shanghai, a great deal of care must be taken to accommodate the thirteen hour time difference. Murphy et. al. (2007) recommend that instructors avoid synchronous activities altogether. Whether this is sound advice is most likely dependent on the value of synchronous communication for an individual course. If real-time communication is an important part of the pedagogical approach in a class, its use could be facilitated through careful scheduling.

Use of proctors for exams may also be more complicated in international courses than domestic ones. Electronic transmission of testing materials and paperwork may facilitate use of proctors, but international students may also have more difficulty finding appropriate proctors than domestic students. Requiring proctor arrangements to be made well in advance of the exams (probably at the very beginning of the class) is therefore advisable.

3 Language issues

Language use and communication are naturally going to be common sources of stress for students taking classes that are not conducted in their native language. Even students with very good language skills may be more intimidated by the prospect of communicating with their classmates or instructor in English than they would be in their native language (see Goodfellow et al. (2001)). Murphy et al. (2007) suggests that asynchronous online communication may offer the advantage of giving such students plenty of time to make sure they are expressing themselves clearly and accurately. Wilson (2001) notes the differences in use of prompts and topic sentences in different languages and suggests that nonnative speakers of English may have more difficulty than native speakers discerning the structure of a lecture, because they are less familiar with schemata common to English writing. This suggests that spoken lectures should be accompanied by outlines or other aids to help students follow the lecture more successfully. When evaluating written work, it is useful to have the option of pen-input, so that minor usage and punctuation errors can be marked quickly and efficiently.

4 Varieties of Cultural Difference

Goodfellow et al. (2001) describes the results of a survey of non-native students in a course offered online by the United Kingdom Open University. The responses from the survey fall into four distinct categories, which are characterized as *cultural otherness*, *perceptions of globality*, *linguistic difference*, and *academic convention*. Cultural otherness refers to comments regarding the perception of differences among the students and teachers discovered in the course of communicating online. Perceptions of globality

covers survey responses that reflect dissatisfaction with the degree to which the course materials have a broadly global scope. Interestingly, some students felt the course materials were too local, while others felt they weren't local enough. Linguistic differences were cited as a difficulty by many of those surveyed, particularly in reference to communications on discussion boards. Finally, many of the respondents described significant differences in academic convention, for both good and ill.

While these results describe a range of distinct concerns international online students may have, they largely fall under the very general category of “cultural difference.” Since talk of “cultural differences” among students from different nations encapsulates a broad variety of different concerns, it is useful to draw some distinctions among different types of cultural difference. Flowerdew and Miller (1995) usefully distinguish among *ethnic*, *local*, *academic*, and *disciplinary* cultures. Broad national differences in religion, political attitudes and sense of humor fall under the first category. Ethnic differences would also include apparent cognitive differences across cultures. For example Nisbett et al. describe significant differences between Americans and East Asians when it comes to observation and problem-solving.¹ Narrower geographical differences would be categorized as local. For instance, Flowerdew and Miller (1995) cites the example of Hong Kong students becoming confused or frustrated when their English teachers made reference to European landmarks rather than local ones. (360) The academic category includes differences in how the relationship between the instructor and students is perceived, variations in the emphasis placed on memorization or on original analysis and different ideas about the role of collaboration among students. Different methods of lecture and assessment across majors and programs fall under the disciplinary category.

This categorization recognizes two different kinds of distinctions: those that exist between narrower and broader cultural groups, and those between national and university cultures.

	broad	narrow
national	ethnic	local
university	academic	disciplinary

Obviously, it will not always be possible to clearly delineate between these categories. Presumably the broader categories effect the narrower ones and national culture influences university culture. However, it is still worthwhile to try and distinguish academic differences from broader cultural ones, if only because normative rules specific to discipline are far less likely to lead to controversy than those specific to nationality or geographical origin. It is generally taken as a given that a biologist, for instance, should teach her students the right or wrong ways to pursue biology. There is no obvious reason that this should be taken also as advocating the superiority of one culture over another in any broader sense. Analogously, different universities may be expected to have different priorities and policies. These differences are not necessarily problematic in and of themselves, provided that they are recognized and clearly communicated to students who are not familiar with them.

¹The authors draw a number of contrasts, including “field vs. object,” observation and “dialectical vs. logical” cognitive processes. The former is intended to explain a variety of experimental results suggesting that East Asians tend to be more perceptive of context than Americans. The latter refers to a variety of empirical evidence that seems to show that Americans tend to choose one side over the other when faced with an apparent contradiction, while East Asians are more likely to find an intermediate position that resolves the conflict.

One difference in academic cultures that may lead to problems in an international course concerns standards of paraphrase and citation. It is therefore important to very clearly state class policy on plagiarism and improper citation. It may be useful to establish these expectations both in a lecture at the beginning of the class and as part of the assignment description of early written work. Use of a formal citation checking program like Safeassign can be helpful as well, especially if it is set to allow students to submit drafts for their own review before handing the assignment in to their instructor. This allows students to see how much of their paper registers as taken from a source and provides a direct comparison of their paraphrases and the original text. Determining whether a paraphrase differs from a source text significantly enough to leave out quotation marks is frequently an area of difficulty for native speakers. Dealing with that task in a second or third language is bound to be more difficult. By examining their drafts with Safeassign, students can get a clear picture of possible problem areas and bring them to the attention of the instructor before the matter becomes an issue of academic misconduct.

5 Overall attitudes toward ethnic cultural difference in academia

Dealing with differences in ethnic culture is a far more sensitive problem than dealing with differences in academic culture. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes this task in terms of the need to find a middle way between two opposing “vices,” which she calls “descriptive chauvinism” and “descriptive romanticism.” *Descriptive chauvinism* is “recreating the other in the image of oneself, reading the strange as exactly like what is familiar.” (Nussbaum 1997, 118) Nussbaum discusses number of examples of this sort of mistake, ranging from 19th century European misinterpretations of Aristotle to Western musicologists misunderstanding of the Indian music and Christian misinterpretation of Jewish services. Examples of descriptive chauvinism in a classroom setting would include instructors failing to realize that their students were unfamiliar with the format of assignments or making unexplained references to culturally specific examples.

Descriptive romanticism, on the other hand, “consists in viewing another culture as excessively alien and virtually incomparable with one’s own, ignoring elements of similarity and highlighting elements that seems mysterious and odd.” (123-124) Nussbaum points to the example of the implausible scholarly claim that “Indian women are not capable of thinking about their own well-being as distinct from the well-being of the rest of their family.” (Nussbaum 1997, 124) This claim paints a picture of Indians as alien and far-removed from our lived experience as Westerners. It is also, Nussbaum notes, demonstrably false, since there exists “ample empirical evidence that women who are hungry while other in their family have food do take note of this fact, that women who are forbidden to work outside the home do view this as a constraint on their ability to feed themselves and their children.” (ibid) Similarly Zhang (2005) provides vivid examples of this attitude in his discussion of Western literary critics’ analyses of Chinese poetry. (19-22) A number of Western critics have operated from an assumption that Chinese culture is so wedded to the concrete and the particular that Chinese writers are literally incapable of abstraction and metaphor. Zhang (2005) notes that “from this basic assumption follow a number of significant consequences that have exerted a strong influence on Chinese literature studies in the West and have helped shape a notion of that literature as some-

thing fundamentally different from what is usually understood as imaginative or fictional creations.” (21) He goes on to argue that, contrary to this claim, it is possible to draw significant parallels between Chinese and Western literature.

In order to avoid the errors of descriptive chauvinism and descriptive romanticism, Nussbaum recommends we keep in mind five points:

1. Real cultures are plural, not single.
2. Real cultures contain argument, resistance, and contestation of norms.
3. In real cultures, what most people think is likely to be different from what the most famous artists and intellectuals think.
4. Real cultures have varied domains of thought and activity.
5. Real cultures have a present as well as a past.

(127-128)

In defending 1 and 2, Nussbaum notes the fierce and wide-ranging disagreement in the U.S. over what constitute “American values.” She suggests there is no more reason to think that there is a single, monolithic description of “Chinese values” or “Indian values.” She makes a similar point in relation to 3, noting that “it would be bizarre to treat Karl Marx as representative of “German values,” or James Joyce as representative of “Irish values.””(ibid) 4 is inspired by her concern that “cultural studies” is dominated by religion, philosophy and literature and does not adequately address other relevant fields. 5 addresses the tendency in academia to associate modern cultures with their historical forbears. Past eras, which experienced far less intercultural interaction, often present far starker contrasts between cultures than modern societies. Nussbaum warns against the temptation to associate these historical cultures as the “true” or “pure” examples of culture. Such essentialism can obscure important connections across cultures and foster misleading exaggerations of cultural difference.²

6 Questions that arise during instances of apparent cultural difference

If a problem arises in a classroom that seems to be related to cultural differences, a number of questions can be asked. As noted above, it is useful to consider whether the cultural difference is relatively narrow or relatively broad, and whether it is primarily a difference in university culture or a difference in national culture. It is important also to avoid overstating or understating the degree of difference between cultures. In addition to these considerations, other questions of significance include:

1. Does the problem arise as a result of the delivery of the content of the course, or is caused by the content of the course itself?

²One of the least convincing aspects of Nisbett et. al. (2001), for example, is the authors’ attempt to account for the origin of the phenomena they discuss by reference to ancient Greek and Chinese culture, because they are forced to admit that the vast gulf of history between the ancient and modern eras include a variety of distinctive cultures that do not fit their model.

2. How clearly are you distinguishing values that are genuinely significant from preferences that are merely cultural or disciplinary conventions?
3. Is the problem a result of different expectations about the course itself, or does it result from a more general difference in assumptions or underlying systems of belief?

The answer to question 1 should significantly impact how an instructor approaches the relevant problem. If some aspect of the delivery of the course is impacting international students' ability to comprehend the course content, it seems likely that most instructors would want to adjust those aspects of the course delivery to better serve all of their students. So, for instance, if international students were having trouble grasping a point made using a culturally-unfamiliar example (such a reference to an American television program or sports team) there would be every reason for the instructor to choose a more broadly familiar example.

Cases in which the content itself seem to put international students at a disadvantage are far less straightforward. Anita Pincas notes that, in American courses, "online discussions are set up specifically to promote critical discourse among collaborating students. In both formative and summative assessment, evidence of independent thinking is expected, sought and encouraged." (Pincas 2001, 35) She then suggests that the expectation of this sort of interaction, which she calls *criticality*, is not necessarily present in other cultures. This claim is echoed in Gunawardena and LaPointe (2007), Chen (2000), and Bates (2001). Pincas suggests this raises a problem of assessment in international courses.

Performance criteria can be defined in terms of expected learning outcomes when these can be expressed as precise knowledge. But when outcomes are defined in terms of attitudes to learning, and cultures differ as to what is worth learning, the criteria may not be based on universal conceptual categories.

(37)

Similarly, Bates (2001) writes:

We reward through grades students who participate actively and work collaboratively through discussion forums, and this will seriously disadvantage students for whom this is an alien or difficult approach to take, even for those willing to work in this way. I therefore find myself wondering to what extent I should impose "Western" approaches to learning on students coming from other cultures, while acknowledging on the other hand that this "new" or different approach may have attracted them to the courses in the first place.

(129)

In both cases, the authors are concerned that basing assessment on students' abilities to formulate and respond to arguments in papers or online discussion illegitimately presumes the value of such abilities. Here question 2 above comes into play. Both writers seem to assume that the fact that a particular skill might be valued less by another culture

is reason to reconsider its appropriateness as an aspect of assessment. This may be a reasonable enough attitude, but surely we should leave open the possibility that such reconsideration will result in an affirmation of the value of that skill. The question of whether something is valuable is separable from the question of whether something is universally valued. In the circumstances described by Pincas (2001), Bates (2001) and Chen (2000), there is a strong argument to be made that the skills being assessed are valuable regardless of the disciplinary culture with which the students in the class are accustomed. The ability to critically evaluate an argument and formulate one's own viewpoint on a position is emphasized by many instructors in no small part because those instructors believe it to be a useful skill, central to one's ability to function as an informed citizen and wise consumer. If instructors can defend the assessment of critical thinking on substantive grounds (and I believe they can), then there is no reason for them to apologize for including those assessments as part of their courses.

The obvious follow-up to that point is that instructors who *can* explain the reasoning behind their assessments *should* do so. If international students really are unfamiliar with the sort of critical thinking assessments that are common in American courses, instructors should do as much as possible to explain their expectations and acclimate their students to unfamiliar types of assignments. This highlights the importance of finding answers to question 3.

7 Expectations, basic beliefs, or something else?

Problems that arise because international students have different expectations about their interactions with instructors or how they are going to be assessed can plausibly be avoided if instructors are careful to explain the goals of the course and how the assignments and class interactions are intended to further those goals. The reflection on goals and methods this requires is likely to be beneficial to the instructor independently of its usefulness to international students. Differences in beliefs other than those about course expectation might be harder to avoid. Mason (1998) cites the example of a test administered by an English institution in a distance education course in Africa. The students were to listen to a tape in English which included the comment "it is raining again" and later answer the question "What was the weather like, good or bad?" The African students, who all judged rain to be a good thing, answered "incorrectly," despite their accurate understanding of the content of the tape.

Misunderstandings of this type may be hard to predict, so the most significant thing an instructor needs to do is foster a relationship with his students such that they will be comfortable bringing such problems to the instructors attention as they arise. In a traditional classroom setting, it is often possible to read misunderstanding or discomfort in the faces of students and respond accordingly. In the online setting, we must rely on such students' willingness to speak up and explain the problem.

One approach that has been proposed by a number of commentators (see Mason (1998), Goodfellow et al (2001), Murphy et al (2007)) is to regard the students of international online courses as the creators of a "third culture." Mason (1998) describes this as a process in which "material from both the interacting cultures is used to fill locally and temporally defined functions outside both cultures but intelligible to partici-

pants from both who are involved in the particular interaction.” (156) Ultimately, this is a technical (and somewhat grandiose) way of making a fairly simple point: what goes on in a classroom, virtual or otherwise, need not perfectly meet the expectations of any one culture. Aspects of different cultural approaches can and should be integrated into a class based on the degree to which they facilitate the goals of the course. This approach both suggests ways to address cultural differences and emphasizes the great advantage of international education. Insofar as there are significant differences across cultures when it comes to educational practices, it stands to reason that no one culture has a monopoly on good ideas. An open-minded approach to cultural diversity offers the possibility of finding new approaches that improve learning and make one’s class stronger.

8 Conclusions

While international online education presents some unique obstacles, they are neither insuperable nor completely unique to the international online context. Instructors in domestic classroom courses deal with issues of language preparedness, misunderstandings of assignments, and disagreements over the value of course goals. Where these problems occur, there may be a variety of actions that can be taken to resolve them.

The discussion above suggests a few general guidelines for approaching international online courses;

1. Clearly state course goals and explain how assignments and assessment relate to those course goals.
2. Encourage an environment in which students feel comfortable communicating any questions or problems they have to the instructor.
3. Be flexible. Recognize that some aspects of the course as planned may need to be adjusted to meet unexpected needs or address unforeseen problems.

Obviously, these guidelines are easy to state and often hard to put into effect. The wide variety of obstacles that can arise in different courses cannot be overcome merely by keeping a few broad rules in mind. Creativity and sensitivity on the part of instructors will likely play a far larger role in such problem solving than easily codified prescriptions. Hopefully, however, some of the discussion in this paper will provide some useful context for instructors of international online courses as they seek to make their classes as successful as possible for all of their students.

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