

Giving a Virtual Voice to the Silent Language of Culture: The Cultura Project

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Objectives and Background of Cultura

- Cultura is a computer-mediated, Web-based project, undertaken by language teachers at both MIT (in the US) and INT (a university in France) starting in 1997.
- Two sets of students, 146 in total, who were learning each other's languages compared, analyzed and discussed cultural material placed on the Web.

Characteristics of Cultura

- Side-by-side viewing helps ss see hidden similarities and differences between cultures.
- Cultura aims to synthesize the three uses of technology in an educational setting, namely: inquiry based learning, communication, and constructivism.

The Methodology

- **Step One**
 - Ss respond individually to 3 questionnaires on the Web: Word Association, Sentence Completion, Situation Reaction
 - The program displays their answers side by side on the Web.
- **Step Two**
 - Individually, and then together in a classroom setting, ss make preliminary observations regarding the differences and similarities of the answers to the questionnaires, and then hypothesize reasons for these.
- **Step Three**
 - MIT and INT ss dialogue over the web about their observations and hypotheses. These Web Forum discussions are entirely student run.
- **Step Four**
 - All ss compare and test their hypotheses and observations with a wider range of materials (e.g. opinion polls).
- **Step Five**
 - Ss continue to explore culture by being exposed to additional types of input (e.g. films, magazines, written texts, and ss viewpoints of these).
- The authors claim that this methodology requires a new pedagogy: instead of memorizing facts, ss learn through an interactive process, using different materials and multiple partners.

Components of Cultura

- **The Questionnaires**
 - Questionnaires enabled the students to make insights about the two cultures. For example: Mental representations exist behind words; Reactions to a given situation are often based on culturally different underlying assumptions
- **The Films**
 - SS compared two movies that matched each other scene by scene, where the treatment of each scene was different between the films.
 - Ss analyzed the differences between scenes.
- **The Web Forums**
 - Ss reach a deeper understanding of cultural differences by: Asking for clarification, Checking their own hypotheses, Explaining their understanding of concepts, Debunking common myths, Spontaneously raising social issues

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- **Video Conferencing & Blackboard**

- Videoconferencing was added at the ss' request.
- The Blackboard was an unexpectedly important tool used to reorganized information during classroom discussions.

General Observations about the Forums

- Interactions on the Forum tend to be more profound than “traditional email exchanges.”
- Forums “reinforce cultural traits already observed.”

Language Use

- Ss listened and read mostly in L2, and spoke and wrote in both L1 and L2.
- Language proficiency didn't seem to matter (i.e. 1 year versus 10 years of language study).

The Necessity of the Teacher

- The teacher maintained an important role in Cultura. The teacher started class discussions, pointed out nuances in L2 (i.e. humour, sarcasm), and encouraged ss “to move beyond the most obvious similarities and differences”

How do Teachers Assess/Test Students Understanding?

- Researchers used standard assessment tools and also developed new assessment tools to correspond with the new methodology of Cultura.
- Researchers tested the transfer of skills learned with Cultura to new situations.

Evaluations

- **Usefulness and Interest for Cultural Understanding**
 - Ss found the questionnaires tedious but useful.
 - Texts were rated as the most interesting.
 - Films provoked interesting discussions.
- **General Assessment**
 - Ss “acquired a method for understanding a foreign culture” (p.91).
 - Half of the students were satisfied were the Web Interface.
 - Positive: the method and the direct contact with their partners.
 - Negative: too much computer time and the delays in the forum.
- **Suggestions for the Future**
 - Make Cultura available for high schools in both countries.
 - Expand content (more texts).
 - Make archived material available.
 - Market to the international business community.

Conclusion

- Crucial factors required for the success of Cultura:
 - Partners must have an equal degree of commitment.
 - Culture must be the focus point of the course.
 - Technology must be supported.
- Overall, the authors feel that Cultura has accomplished the goal of providing ss with a more personal approach to language/culture learning.