

Developing Global Connections through Computer-Mediated Communication

Myra Shulman

[mshul \[at\] american.edu](mailto:mshul[at]american.edu)

American University (Washington DC, USA)

The author shares her experiences in developing and implementing a collaborative Internet project connecting American University in Washington, D.C., and the Federal University of Parana in Curitiba, Brazil. Topics discussed include identifying an appropriate partner, designing a viable online environment, setting realistic goals, and encouraging interactive and authentic communication among students.

Introduction

Since September of 2000 my colleague Luci Collin from the Federal University of Parana in Curitiba, Brazil, and I have been involved in a collaborative Internet project. This article will discuss the background of the AU-UFPR project, its development and implementation, the problems and solutions, benefits, and suggestions for similar Internet projects. First, let me define Computer-Mediated Communication. According to John December, editor of *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, CMC is "the phenomenon of human communication and information retrieval on global networks." It is also defined as "human interaction via computer networks and in online environments." CMC is an interdisciplinary mix of communication, technology, education, and journalism. Of course, in education, CMC offers multiple possibilities in terms of distance learning, which is the context for our project.

The project grew out of my participation in spring and summer of 2000 in the U.S./Brazil Fulbright Teacher Exchange, which involved twelve Brazilian and twelve U.S. teachers working in partnerships. This Fulbright program is a direct but non-simultaneous exchange that offers ESL/EFL teachers the opportunity to work in each other's countries for six weeks. The goal of the Fulbright Exchange is to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between the people of Brazil and the people of the United States.

Background

Phase one of the Fulbright exchange involved 12 Brazilian teachers working in the United States with 12 American teachers. On May 4, 2000, phase one ended with a debriefing for all 24 teachers in Washington. At this time we were given training by the expert staff at the US/Brazil Learning Technologies Network (LTNet) at the Academy for Education Development in use of Internet communication tools to establish connections between Brazilian and U.S. teachers and students. The LT staff created a VEE (Virtual Exchange Environment) for us that included features such as homepages on the Fulbright Teacher Exchange section of the LTNet web site, and we were encouraged to develop

future Internet projects. This was our initial experience with using the Internet to enable and enhance communication and was the impetus for the AU-UFPR project.

Phase two of the exchange took place in July and August of 2000, when I taught at the Federal University of Parana in Curitiba for four weeks. One night in Professor Luci Collin's advanced level North American literature class, fifteen students and I were discussing my students at American University, their academic and social activities, and their lifestyles. (I teach advanced level College Reading and Writing courses at AU.) One student suggested that it would be great if the Brazilian students could communicate through e-mail with my students at American University. The others were enthusiastic about this idea. Professor Luci Collin and I immediately agreed that we should develop a collaborative Internet project, and we asked the students for input in conceptualizing such a project. As a first step, two Brazilian students developed a questionnaire that each student would fill out in order to sign up for the project. Thus, the students were the true originators of this collaboration.

Development

After I returned to Washington, Professor Luci and I discussed through e-mail the parameters for our electronic collaboration and decided participation in the project would be voluntary rather than a course requirement. Our students were at the advanced level and were about the same ages. Our challenge was how best to achieve the integration of classroom learning with online experiences in a learner-centered context. Primarily, we wanted to facilitate interpersonal interaction between our students by encouraging the students to share their ideas about what they were reading and writing. The specific objectives were to enhance our students' reading and writing skills, expand their cross-cultural skills, and sharpen their technological abilities. As a general goal, our project would improve our students' English language competence while also improving mutual understanding between people in the United States and people in other countries (which is the Fulbright goal).

Because I had been trained by the staff at the Learning Technologies Network at the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, DC, I turned to them to help set up this online collaboration. They suggested a framework that approximated the format of a course and would allow students to create homepages and teachers to make assignments and monitor the students' work for clarity, quality, and quantity. Thus, the original design for the AU-UFPR project required online courseware. To keep cost low, the free version of Blackboard (www.Blackboard.com) was used. This software program expands the boundaries of a course from the classroom to cyberspace. Using the electronic classroom, teachers can teach part or even all of their courses on the Internet by posting the course syllabus, assignments, and tests on the web site. Teachers and students can communicate asynchronously via e-mail and synchronously in chat rooms. This program demands extensive bandwidth and computer memory in order for participants to use it efficiently.

Implementation: Problems and Solutions

On September 18, I announced the project in my two College Reading and Writing classes and asked interested students to fill out questionnaires in preparation for participation. Sixteen students signed up for the voluntary project. On October 10, I sent an e-mail announcing that the Blackboard environment was ready, so students could enroll in the "course." Most students enrolled themselves, but I helped those who needed support. As the weeks passed, my students in College Reading and Writing were communicating with me and with one another on Blackboard and some had developed homepages, but there was no communication from our Brazilian counterparts. Fortunately, Eric Rusten, from LTNet, was going to Brazil and arranged to meet with Prof Luci and her students to discuss the project. At the meeting at the UFPR, Eric discovered that the Brazilian students were unable to access the Blackboard web site because of insufficient bandwidth at the university in Curitiba. (Bandwidth refers to the speed and volume of information that goes from one computer to another.) Although the students had tried repeatedly to get online, they had failed to do so, with one exception. Thus, Eric and Gini set up a simple listserv, the AU-UFPR Virtual Exchange Discussion List (AU.UFPR@listbot.com), which made it possible for the seventeen U.S. and twelve Brazilian students to communicate through e-mail and a simple chat room. Now the project became viable.

One minor problem arose in the area of cross-cultural communication skills. Although it only involved one Brazilian student, Prof Luci and I realized that students in a global Internet project like ours need a brief introduction to intercultural communication. In December 2000, I had sent an e-mail praising a book I had just read titled *Brazilian Adventure* by the Englishman Peter Fleming (published in 1942). This book describes Fleming's journey into the rivers and jungle of central Brazil. A Brazilian student replied to me that Brazil was not just an uncivilized jungle. Since I had spent six weeks in Curitiba, Brazil, which I assumed this student knew, I certainly did not think that Brazil was an uncivilized jungle. Thus, I was somewhat surprised by his peculiar comment. Luci then suggested the need for training in cross-cultural communication for students participating in our project. On reflection, I saw that she was right, and the intercultural awareness and competence of the students and teachers should be raised through brief lectures and assigned readings on this topic before beginning the project.

Currently, we are in phase two of the AU-UFPR project, and 23 students in Professor Luci's classes in Anglo-American Studies at the UFPR and 32 students in my College Reading and Writing classes at AU are communicating through e-mail and discussing a variety of topics, with the focus on comparisons of cultural customs and values. This semester we have twice as many students participating, so the AU-UFPR project is expanding, and our students are accomplishing the major goals of this project: to improve their English language skills, to broaden their cross-cultural understanding, and to sharpen their technological abilities. We are still using the listserv, but if funding to federal universities in Brazil is increased, and if the bandwidth is expanded in Curitiba, perhaps we will return to the Blackboard context.

Assignments and Evaluation

In College Reading and Writing, I allocate ten percent of my students' final grade to class participation and attendance. I told students that their participation in the AU-UFPR project would be counted in this ten percent, based on my evaluation of the quality, quantity, and clarity of their email messages and assignments.

In addition to the informal e-mail communication, there were three assignments in phase one:

- an opening task of creating a homepage,
- a prediction of who would win the U.S. presidential election, and
- a final assignment of writing a condensed report on a book or article, including summary, evaluation, and recommendation.

The project this semester, which began in March 2001 because of the school schedule in Brazil, will last for one-half of the semester at American University. Thus, we do not plan to expand the number of assignments. The first assignment was a personal profile done at the LTNet web site. The second was to discuss a cultural value or tradition. The third was to write about cultural differences with North Americans. Future assignments could include writing reports in partnerships, peer review of these documents, publishing these documents on the LTNet web site (using Blogger), reading an article from the Internet and writing a reaction paper on it, and creating group web pages. Long-term goals are to integrate the course content and assignments into the online collaboration so that students would take the course through long-distance learning.

Benefits of the AU-UFPR Exchange

Luci and I are eager to let our students explore alternative pathways in our courses, which is one reason we have set up the AU-UFPR collaboration. Diverse learning techniques are necessary to meet the need of our diverse students. We believe that it is essential to provide students with a variety of learning opportunities to enhance the chances of successful learning.

Overall Luci and I are satisfied with our initial venture into virtual collaboration through the Internet, and the students have benefited in both tangible and intangible ways. The following are specific benefits that resulted from this project:

- **Adding a new dimension to a traditional course**
Just the small addition of this Internet exchange had an impact on my traditional approach to College Reading and Writing. I was excited to be attempting a new activity, and the students joined in my excitement about our electronic collaboration. We spoke about the progress of the project in nearly every class for a few minutes. Learning and teaching in cyberspace results in a reconsideration and review of classroom teaching methods since the contexts present opposite

- teaching environments. I have reflected on my face-to-face teaching in light of what I have learned from this brief venture into distance learning
- **Creating an alternate pathway to learning**
Using the Internet as part of my course created a new way for my students to improve their reading and writing skills. They benefited from this experience in different ways, according to the degree of involvement in the project, but overall their learning was accelerated by this virtual collaboration. Their e-mail discussions offered students the chance for real communication, which enhances language learning. As Zane Berge and Mauri Collins write: "In using emerging computer-based technology as a resource, students are encouraged to explore their own interests and to become active educational workers, with opportunities to solve some authentic problems. . . . Computer-mediated communication (CMC) promotes a type of interaction that is often lacking in the traditional teacher-based classroom. It allows learners the freedom to explore alternative pathways to find and develop their own style of learning."
 - **Accommodating students' different learning styles**
According to Berge and Collins, "In combination with other media, computers can utilize an instructional design that teaches to the multiple intelligences that Gardner (1983) speaks of in Frames of Mind (linguistic, logico-mathematical, intrapersonal, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, and interpersonal)." I believe that as teachers we have to try different strategies to find what will help each student, and this project accommodated different learning styles and intelligences. Those students who were quiet and reluctant to participate in class were the most active participants in the Internet project. One student who never spoke up in class created an extensive home page and was the most active participant in the discussion list. Several other students who appeared shy in class were enthusiastically sending e-mail messages. Because Internet communication is only in written form and lacks all visual cues, this context gives anonymity to students, often freeing them from their usual constraints. Therefore, students can express themselves more directly than they otherwise would. For some of my students, this online experience proved liberating, and it gave me a greater understanding of their competence in the informal writing style of e-mail.
 - **Building a community of learners**
The students in my classes and Luci's classes have blended into a community of learners through their involvement in this project, and this community was truly a multi-national group with 16 countries represented. The students seem pleased to be members of this group, as evidenced by their end-of-semester messages. The benefit of forming a group of learners is that learning is more fun when it is social, as students feel they are part of a social process rather than learning in isolation.
 - **Supporting American University's goal of global education**
The president of AU has stated that AU is aiming to become a leader in global education. This type of Internet project supports such a goal and certainly will become more common as the university moves in the direction of distance learning through global networks. Although the AU-UFPR project is small, it is a step in the right direction of global education.

The Process of Developing Collaborative Internet Projects

Although every Internet project is different and has unique characteristics, some common parameters exist. The following are the basic steps for establishing successful collaborative Internet projects.

- **Identify an appropriate school, teacher, and students.**

This project grew out of my teaching experiences in the U.S. Brazil Fulbright Teacher Exchange. Thus, I did not have to search for an appropriate partner school. However, it is not difficult to locate schools that would be eager and able to take part in such a collaboration. The easiest way to identify possible partners is through the LTNet web site (www.ltnet.org) if you are interested in schools in Brazil. Other organizations that link schools are IEARN (www.iearn.org) for K through 12 schools and Classroom Connect's Connected Teacher (www.connectedteacher.com/home.asp). Also, you can go to the web site <http://www.teaching.com/iecc/> to find international partners.

Finding a teacher with whom you are compatible in terms of teaching philosophy and techniques is equally important. In this case, Luci Collin and I share similar philosophies toward education and employ similar pedagogical techniques. We are in agreement about the goals of this project. We are both teaching advanced reading and writing courses with similar course content, objectives, and assignments. Moreover, I had the advantage of teaching her students, so I could see that her Brazilian students and my ESOL students are at the same advanced level of competence in English.

- **Choose a viable on line environment**

Before embarking on the project, check the technology environment in your partner's school/city/country. It was only after we had configured this project using Blackboard that it became apparent that the technology network in Curitiba was not able to support this heavy software, so the students in Brazil were feeling frustrated as they attempted to participate. The solution of a free listserv was easy to implement although it is less appealing in terms of the options it offers. However, creating a hybrid online environment using a combination of low bandwidth demanding tools can allow you to do the same things as Blackboard.

- **Decide on realistic goals for the project.**

Luci and I decided on the general project goals of improving English competence and cross-cultural understanding because we wanted to begin with a simple design and then, after testing it for one or two semesters, to expand our vision. Specifically, we believed that our students would improve their reading and writing skills in English by designing home pages, sending and receiving e-mail, and doing assignments, would learn about each other's cultures, and would become adept at using technology through participation in the project. We chose

to make the project an add-on to the course rather than to integrate it in this first trial.

- **Encourage interactive communication.**

Students are extremely busy with their academic schedules as well as their social lives. Sometimes their good intentions exceed their abilities to carry out their plans to participate in "extra credit" projects. Of course, they are already e-mailing friends around the world. Knowing this, Luci and I drew their attention to the benefits of participation in the AU-UFPR project by stressing that they would enjoy making new friends and exploring the cultural values of another country.

Our three assignments in Phase one and Phase two, which were simple, topical, and relevant to their lives, were chosen to spur discussion. Besides expecting students to complete the assignments, we encouraged the students to e-mail one another for any reason and on any topic for the purpose of building global friendship, cooperation, and understanding. We emphasized that students could use an informal style in writing e-mail messages. We also explained that publishing their writing on the Web through Blogger would be quite an accomplishment. Although we have not used the chat room, we plan to in the future because the ideal environment is a combination of synchronous (chat room) and asynchronous (e-mail) tools.

- **Establish a connection with high tech experts.**

It is good to have a source of support for a collaborative Internet venture such as this one. Even in a small-scale project, things can and will go wrong. Being able to turn to experts for help makes all the difference between enjoying the cyberspace adventure and regretting the time and effort that it demands. Thanks to the staff at the LTNet, this experience has been consistently positive for Luci and me.

Conclusion

According to Stephen R. Acker, of the Center for Advanced Study in Telecommunications at Ohio State University, "As telecommunication networks begin to saturate the physical environs, we have entered a period of social transformation." This transformation is also occurring in education, and we are all a part of it. In fact, in light of the globalization of education, long-distance learning projects such as these will become more common and more comprehensive. Luci and I hope to continue with the AU-UFPR project because we believe that a collaborative Internet project has value on many levels, from the pedagogical to the political, assuming access to computers and software exist. Experience is the best teacher, and I have learned a great deal since I first entered into the VEE (Virtual Exchange Environment) almost one year ago at the LTNet. Based on my experience in this project, I offer the following suggestions.

- Find a school and a teacher that are compatible with you and your school and your school schedule.

- Check the computer environment and the bandwidth limits in both countries if you plan on using Blackboard or a similar heavy software program.
- Consider using a hybrid mix of tools rather than a complex approach like Blackboard.
- Work closely with your partner in the other location to develop realistic expectations, objectives, assignments, and guidelines.
- Give students a short introduction to cross-cultural communication skills.
- Establish a relationship with high tech experts who can support your efforts and solve problems when they arise, which they almost certainly will.

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Other Sources

- The December List: a comprehensive collection of information sources about the Internet and computer-mediated communication:
<http://www.december.com/cmc/info/books/html>
- *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/>)

Project Information

- US/Brazil Learning Technologies Network
 - Fast Version - Low Graphics
 - <http://www.ltnet.org/TextOnly/T-English/Home/E-LTNHomeBase.htm>
(However, there is still a frame and Java applet.)
 - Slow Version
 - <http://www.ltnet.org>

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VII, No. 6, June 2001

<http://teslj.org/>

<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Shulman-CMC.html>