

Enhancing intercultural understanding using e-learning strategies

Corinne Meier

meierc@unisa.ac.za

Intercultural understanding is a prerequisite for peaceful local and global citizenship, especially in South African society where prejudice and negative stereotypes were previously the order of the day because of official separatism. It is therefore crucial to teach intercultural understanding in South Africa. I report with commentary on a tripartite initiative, between SchoolNet South Africa, the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) and Unisa's School of Education, to implement an Internet-supported education programme entitled 'Intercultural understanding — e-learning application in education'. The project comprised an encounter in the form of electronic correspondence between learners from five previously disadvantaged South African schools and learners from seven schools in Finland. The objectives of the project included critical scrutiny by learners of the cultures of South Africa and Finland with a view to finding ways of fostering intercultural understanding. Learners in South African schools exchanged messages with their Finnish counterparts online and then published articles on their experiences in an eJournal. Analysis and interpretation of the content of these articles showed that the project obscured rather than improved intercultural understanding.

Keywords: *cultural diversity; culture; eJournal; e-learning; intercultural; learners; South Africa*

Introduction

Owing to the unprecedented global mobility of the world's populations, cultural diversity has become an increasingly prominent feature of all societies. Globalisation has brought the need for intercultural understanding sharply into focus because intercultural understanding will henceforth determine whether countries, including South Africa, where prejudice and negative stereotypes were previously the order of the day, will become integrated with the global community. A growing number of organisations are embracing e-learning as an approach to training, to establish and maintain the international connectivity required to promote the tolerance, interest and trans-cultural knowledge required to deal with cultural diversity in any context (Kok, 2004:17; Sowetan, 2005:30).

The obvious question arising here is whether intercultural understanding can be achieved through e-learning. To find an answer to this question, a tripartite project between SchoolNet South Africa, the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) and the University of South Africa's School of Education was undertaken to implement an Internet-supported education programme entitled 'Intercultural understanding — e-learning application in education'.

Project outline

The first phase of the South African project entailed the determination of the broad aims and more specific objectives of the project. The aim of the project was to develop e-learning contents and educational applications in order to enhance intercultural understanding and awareness among learners in South Africa and Finland. More specifically, the objectives of the project were to plan and implement an Internet-supported education programme through which

- teachers and learners would learn to use web-based pedagogy, in this case with the assistance of eJournal software. (eJournal software allowed participants to access resources and to discuss the context of the problems they were studying.);
- teachers and learners would become familiar with different concepts and theories concerning culture, cultural differences, intercultural communication and intercultural relations; and
- learners would learn to examine South African and Finnish societies critically from a cultural viewpoint.

The second phase involved the development of a theoretical outline for the project. To ensure the scientific integrity of the process, one cultural research specialist from South Africa and one from Finland were appointed to develop a theoretical outline for intercultural understanding. The concepts of 'culture', 'intercultural communication' and 'intercultural understanding' were used to provide a basis for the theoretical outline. From the theoretical outline, the cultural specialists from Finland identified several themes related to intercultural understanding, which were used for group discussions by learners in order to enhance their understanding of 'culture', to build awareness of their own culture, and to familiarise them with a foreign culture.

Once the theoretical outline had been developed, a technological environment for online learning and collaboration between the partner schools was established as a third phase. Five historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa (selected from North West Province) and seven in central Finland were selected to participate according to the following criteria: secondary schools; different language groups; age groups (13–16 years); computer laboratories with connectivity; and some basic multimedia tools. Because the use of ICT was essential for the project, schools used a publishing and communication tool, the eJournal, as their main project platform. The eJournal is an electronic periodical for producing and publishing articles (answers to the set exercises) on the Internet, and it can be used both online and offline. It is possible to publish articles, photographs, pictures, voice clips and video clips in the eJournal. The eJournal is linked to a media library in which learners can search for content on any theme they need to refer to. A further link from the eJournal is to 'course material' that consists of the actual content on which the exercises have been based (therefore the theoretical outline). The idea is to make publishing on the Internet (by using the content at the link 'course material') so easy that anyone who can use a web browser can produce and publish an article. The learners in both cultures were given different

kinds of exercises (developed in phase 2) about different aspects of intercultural understanding. They discussed the exercises in groups and reported the results, ideas and thoughts in the eJournal in the form of articles. Anyone logging into the eJournal (using a password) can then comment on the content of the articles, offer more information or express feelings. This project therefore established intercultural communication through a non-verbal medium. Because of the geographic distance between the Finnish and South African learners, they were not expected to apply the principles of intercultural communication in practice. Five selected teachers, one in each South African school, were trained as tutors to supervise and evaluate this process.

The fourth phase involved an evaluation process. Data-based techniques were applied to learner interactions and to feedback on the themes in the eJournal in order to capture the levels of involvement, creativity, commitment and interest of the learners as well as identification of needs emerging from the process. The evaluation process was planned to run parallel with the monitoring process so that the project could be improved and refined as it went on.

Development of the project

The project started when two cultural specialists from Finland visited South Africa. With the assistance of the South African schools' co-ordinator, they held a two-day workshop for the five selected tutors on the use of the eJournal as a tool to develop intercultural understanding. Each school made a choice out of the three given themes, namely, 'culture', 'intercultural communication' and 'intercultural understanding'. They then worked through the theory (provided in the eJournal at the link 'course material') and subsequently attempted the exercises based on the themes (as described in phase 2). Content relating to the themes could be researched in the 'media library', which is a link in the eJournal. No training was offered to tutors regarding the themes encompassed by intercultural understanding because it was believed that exposure to the information on intercultural understanding as contained in the eJournal (at the link 'theory for teachers') would be sufficient to equip the tutors to instruct the learners on the subject.

Visits to partner schools were also planned. Participants were selected from the general school population, on the basis of the enthusiasm and involvement they displayed and the contributions they made to the eJournal, to visit their partner schools in either South Africa or Finland. The aim was to meet the counterparts personally and to plan the future of the project together. Seven tutors and six learners from Finnish schools visited South Africa. Unfortunately, a lack of funds made it impossible for the South African learners to visit Finland.

The findings of the research are directly linked to a theoretical framework that elucidates the concepts within intercultural understanding with special reference to e-learning in the context under review. The theoretical framework will now be discussed.

Intercultural understanding: theoretical conceptualisation

Intercultural activity, as noted by Sen Gupta (2003:159), is generally understood to be any encounter between people of different cultures. According to the Standard Dictionary of the English Language (Funk & Wagnalls, 1970: 1368), 'understanding' means "the sum of the mental powers by which knowledge is acquired, retained, and extended; the power of apprehending relations and making inferences (deductions, conclusions) from them". It can also mean "an agreement between two or more persons; sometimes an arrangement or settlement of differences, or of disputed points". In the present context, intercultural understanding included close acquaintance, empathy and appreciation between people of different cultures. The concept of culture needs to be explored in detail before the full meaning of intercultural understanding can be considered to best advantage.

Culture and its processes

Culture refers to the consistent ways in which people experience, make sense of, and respond to, the world around them; it represents the collective 'ways of doing' of a given population; it is common to all human groups; it is shaped by historical, social, political, economic, and geographic factors (Marshall, 2002:8); it is learned in the sense that it is acquired knowledge that people use to interpret their world, and from which they generate social behaviour; language plays a critical role in its transmission (Campbell, 2004:42-43; Marshall, 2002:8). Culture is therefore a continuous, dynamic process, which indicates that we reinterpret and modify our assumptions as we grow and learn from our contact with external influences (Hernandez, 1989:20). It is manifest in material goods and artefacts (e.g. food, dress, and arts) as well as in fundamental beliefs, perceptions of time and space, and precepts about human nature (Marshall, 2002:8), and its characteristics vary from highly explicit or obvious (recognisable in its material manifestations) to highly implicit or deeply hidden elements (attitudes, values, beliefs). It should be understood, however, that these explicit and implicit elements are interwoven because of constant interaction between them (Arvizu *et al.*, in Hernandez, 1989:20-21).

People are naturally steeped in their own culture (i.e. enculturated) and therefore ethnocentric (Sen Gupta, 2003:162). By this token, ethnocentrism is inherent in the human condition and proceeds from the premise that 'our way is the best way and the only way' (Bennet, 2003:43). It follows therefore that in the event of an intercultural encounter, people would be challenged by the sudden difference in culture, which shifts their focus from their familiar sphere to aspects of themselves with which they are unfamiliar. Relatively superficial differences may not be experienced as challenging, but they can be if they implicate fundamental beliefs and values, because encounters may force an evaluation or re-evaluation of such beliefs and values (Sen Gupta, 2003:160). When a person experiences a change in cultural context, acculturation is the outcome. Acculturation can and often does cause a more or

less disruptive and destructive sense of cultural alienation, disorientation and general loss of cultural identity. Anxiety and feelings of alienation may develop when individuals start feeling that they are moving away from their group and are running the risk of becoming outsiders in their culture of origin. A backlash effect of acculturation may be therefore that people retreat into a cocoon of their pre-exposure beliefs and refuse to look at their own cultural systems from the viewpoint of the 'other'. Similarly, learners' receptiveness to teaching material may be significantly reduced if the content of the material makes them feel isolated and/or marginalised in the classroom (Sen Gupta, 2003:164).

Elements of intercultural understanding

The need to recognise cultural differences

People from different cultures tend to perceive the world differently, but are sometimes unaware of alternative ways of perceiving, believing, behaving and judging. Hall (1959; 1976) contends that most people hold unconscious assumptions about what is appropriate in terms of space, time, interpersonal relations and ways of seeking truth. These assumptions may cause intractable difficulties in intercultural encounters. A conscious effort must therefore be made to overcome ethnocentric attitudes and to recognise the cultural differences between nations and ethnic groups. According to Bennet (2003: 48-51), this recognition process takes place in six stages: denial, defence, minimising, acceptance, adaptation, and integration.

Intercultural differences can be classified according to type, or rather according to different ranges of emphasis, for example, from individualism to collectivism; or in terms of power relations, from hierarchal to horizontal; or in terms of gender relations, from masculine to feminine. These examples of possible classification of intercultural differences (Hofstede in Salili & Hoo-sain, 2003:143) are not necessarily definite but at least give an indication of the busy tapestry of cultural diversity, and they could serve as a guideline and a useful aid to intercultural understanding.

Intercultural awareness

Inter-(cross-)cultural awareness is a prerequisite for the achievement of intercultural understanding that begins when a person realises that he or she has a particular cultural identity that is one among many, and becomes aware of the similarities and differences between them (Bennet, 2003:32). The ability to differentiate enables people to compare and therefore evaluate their culture in relation to that of others, which means that they take a decisive step away from the ethnocentric position from which the discovery of cultural diversity started (Cushner & Brislin in Sen Gupta, 2003:160). Neither understanding nor true acceptance is likely when differences are only identified at a superficial level. According to Hanvey (in Hernandez, 1989:25), there are four such levels. Levels I and II are likely to be characterised by varying degrees of ethnocentrism and stereotyping. At Level III, intellectual analysis takes place

that enables more substantive differentiation of cultures concerned so that they can be seen in relation to each other. At Level IV, the culture of the 'other' is assimilated as the behaviours and values of that culture are adopted. Cultures merge when this happens, which is the level required to achieve true intercultural understanding.

Intercultural competence

Developing intercultural competence includes self-reflection, gathering information about your own and other cultures, appreciating cultural similarities and differences, using cultural resources, and acknowledging the essential equality and value of all cultures (Klein & Chen, 2001:38-39). It is demonstrated, amongst other things, by the ability or sensitivity to interpret intercultural styles of communication (language, signs, gestures, body language, and customs) (Bennet, 2003:32-33).

Intercultural communication

People communicate within and between cultures by means of language, which is therefore central to their social relationships. It both reveals and marks status, power, authority, and levels of education. Cultural differences therefore tend to be revealed in language, and misunderstandings between people from different cultures tend to arise from their use of language to communicate with each other (Campbell, 2004:62).

However, effective intercultural communication depends on both the language and the cultural perceptions and priorities of whoever one interacts with. Culture-specific perceptions and priorities are evident from a specific cultural code (symbols, manners, dress, and gestures) (Skeie, 2005:249). Successful communication is only possible on the basis of a shared code. "To share a code you must know the meaning of the foreign word(s) and the meaning must be the same in both languages for if it is different, the code is not shared" (Ter-Minasova, 2003:302). People should therefore be sensitive to the way in which members of other cultures perceive reality and why; how they express their perceptions; and importantly, how their perceptions differ from those of other cultures (Campbell, 2004). It follows, too, that although language is the primary vehicle of communication, non-verbal communication is equally important.

In conclusion, what is required to achieve proper intercultural understanding is informed intellectual appreciation of and engagement with cultural and individual differences, which presupposes recognition and acceptance, in principle, of the existence and inevitability of cultural diversity. These requirements should be fulfilled in a spirit of tolerance, empathy and respect, which cannot be achieved unless the common humanity of all human communities is recognised and accepted without reservation.

Because it is my aim in this article to establish whether intercultural understanding was achieved through e-learning, it is necessary to refer briefly to what is meant by e-learning in this context.

e-Learning as a mode of operation between the participants

Developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) since the middle of the twentieth century have created an 'information society' in which the creation, distribution and manipulation of information have become very significant economic, educational and cultural activities. With its power to store, retrieve and distribute information, the Internet has become a fast and inexpensive means of gaining access to information and can therefore be an invaluable aid to education (Keegan in Engelbrecht, 2003:20).

Terms such as 'e-learning', 'online learning', 'virtual learning', 'web-based learning', 'internet-based learning' and 'resource-based learning' all refer to the use of Internet technologies to provide education. The term 'e-learning' is widely used and is the preferred term in most recent literature (Haney, 2002: 8, McArthur, Parker & Giersch, 2003:23). The use of e-learning has proliferated owing to the adaptability of e-learning to education, because it promotes learner-centredness in that it accommodates diversity in learning styles and in learners' needs with respect to time, content, place, learning resources and delivery media. E-learning is used to enhance traditional and existing teaching methods and to create new ways of achieving teaching and learning outcomes (Herselman & Hay, 2005:394; McArthur *et al.*, 2003:23; Sellinger, 2004:224). E-learning is furthermore based on the concept of interactivity, which assumes communication, collaboration and engagement (Simms, 2003:87-90; Ciges, 2001:136), and the theory of constructivism, which asserts that learners are not passive recipients of knowledge transfer, but are actively engaged in constructing their own meaning (Van Petegem, De Loght & Shortridge, 2004:1).

The factors that influence the effectiveness of e-learning are diverse and complex. According to Bentley, Tinney and Chia (2005:119), factors affecting the effectiveness of e-learning are language, educational culture, technical infrastructure, learning style, reasoning patterns, and cultural and social context. Many online international learners, who are English second-language speakers, find that their cultural orientation and second-language abilities magnify their problems. It seems further that the focus in first-generation e-learning programmes was more on the 'e' (electronic delivery) than on actual learning, which includes learning outcomes, good learning design, management of e-learning events, selection of the right ICT medium for the target group and learning materials, or the mental adoption of e-learning strategies by educators and learners (Engelbrecht, 2003:20). Developers of e-learning systems need to keep in mind the difference between e-learning and traditional learning. The change in medium (traditional or electronic) affects the elements that make up effective e-learning content (Hamid, 2002:316). Singh (2003:51) advocates a "blended" approach that consists of a mix of traditional instructor-led learning and online, self-paced study. Simms (2003:87-90), however, feels that interactivity, which is frequently an inherent quality of e-learning, "does not appear to be generating the educational outcomes predicted". It has also been documented that learners in e-learning felt disconnected from their classmates, frustrated by a poor flow of communication

and technical problems, and confused by feedback that was not always clear (Frank, Reich & Humphreys, 2003:59).

A factor that influences the effectiveness of e-learning is that “the internet exacerbates the separate but unequal condition of peoples and nations around the world” (Kelly, 2002:212; Clark & Gorski, 2002:26), meaning that access to education, and specifically e-learning, is unequal due to poverty. In terms of online connectivity, Kelly (2002:211) notes that Finland is probably first in the world. Therefore, South Africa, as a developing country, cannot match that kind of connectivity.

Intercultural understanding through e-learning

A supportive environment is required to derive intercultural understanding from an intercultural experience. Such experience should help create a welcoming environment (cognitive and affective), otherwise learners may become jaded and disillusioned with the experience and may derive no benefit from it (Sen Gupta, 2003:161). To create a safe environment in an e-learning context, the following should be kept in mind:

In the case of educational web documents, the audience is international and, therefore, the site must communicate to multiple users from multiple cultures. If communicators have uncommon cultural patterns, then problems of asynchrony, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and discrimination can arise in communication (Carbaugh, in Holmes & O'Halloran, 2003:69).

Friedman (in Bentley *et al.*, 2005:19) is of the opinion that the social and economic divides are growing between speakers of certain languages as globalisation connects and yet separates certain nations or subcultures within nations, because some participants may be in a position where they have to speak someone else's primary language. Some studies also indicate that the difficulty of using a different symbolic system can cause cognitive overload in learners because they have to comprehend knowledge at a high level where they must know how to create it and add value to it (Oubenaissa, Giardina & Bhattacherya, 2002:41; Collier in Sellinger, 2004:228). In e-communication, absence of context means the absence of all the non-verbal, non-discursive cues that are part of the (cultural) communication and sense-making process (Holmes & O'Halloran, 2003:69). Kim (in Holmes & O'Halloran, 2003:69) therefore argues that it

may be useful to develop sites that more fully reflect the cultural and linguistic needs of the users, and that this process should coincide with the development of multilingual sites. The Internet will then be a place where people can continue to participate in their local culture no matter where in the world they are.

Designers should respond to the instruction discourse style by using creative materials that are culturally neutral. “This requires the use of simple sentence structures and avoiding slang, colloquialisms, local humo[u]r and local insider examples” (Bentley *et al.*, 2005:119).

Now that a theoretical framework has been provided for intercultural

understanding, e-learning, and the link between the concepts, I will proceed to discuss the findings and analysis with the aim of establishing whether intercultural understanding was achieved through e-learning in this project.

Research method applied during the investigation

A qualitative approach was used to determine whether intercultural understanding was achieved through e-learning. The strategy used to uncover the research question from the data was document analysis. Documents are tangible manifestations that describe people's experiences, knowledge, actions and values (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:451). For the purposes of this study, personal documents containing first-person narratives that described a person's actions, experiences, and beliefs were used. Personal documents are "a personal account of the author's environment and his subjective perceptions of his own life and the events in the world around him" (De Vos, Stydom, Fouché & Delport, 2005:315) and are categorised as primary sources. The articles published by learners in the eJournal were analysed. Only the articles written by South African learners were analysed. The reason for limiting the analysis to South African documents was that developing intercultural understanding for South African use was a priority. Furthermore, putting forward recommendations for the South African context was important.

Data analysis and interpretation

Introduction

As noted above, the learners were allowed to choose from three themes, namely, 'culture', 'intercultural communication', and 'intercultural understanding', to do the set activities, and then to write articles and publish them in the eJournal. All contributions to the eJournal were written in English although it was the second language of the majority of learners in both cultures. 'Culture' was the most popular theme, and 19 articles were written on this theme. South African learners did not publish any articles on the other two themes. The focus of the data analysis and interpretation was on a group of eight attempts of varying factual depth to explain what culture is. Only eight of the 19 articles were usable for analysis.

Defining culture

A classical definition

A classical definition of culture was made available to the learners at the link 'course material'. This definition suggests that culture "is a negotiated set of shared symbolic systems that guide individual behaviours and incline them to function as a group". It was further stated that the definition included four basic assumptions about the nature of culture: it is holistic, learned, dynamic and pervasive. Therefore, culture includes everything in society — arts, beliefs, behaviour, concepts of self, ideas, knowledge, religion, tools, and values.

The learners' interpretation of culture

Although the above definition of culture was provided, the content of the articles written on 'culture' mainly comprised defining descriptive statements on South African cultures. Only one of the eight articles was considered to have produced a 'good' explanation of what culture is. This was rather disappointing in view of the fact that a definition and description of the concept 'culture' could have been researched in the 'media library' and at the link 'course material', which can be reached directly from the eJournal. One learner defined culture as

"... art and other human intellectual achievement of a particular time and persons' appreciation and understanding of moral standard, values and norms ... It includes religions, myths and other beliefs ... What is very important is that we should respect culture, although teenagers and even older people do not take it seriously".

Three learners saw artefacts as the only manifestations of culture, for example: *"Clothing is a garment or article used to cover the body. One reason men first wore clothes, was for protection ..."* (this entire definition focused on clothes). One learner made an unsuccessful attempt at explaining culture, and three other learners made no identifiable attempt to define culture although it was required as an article theme.

It was recorded that the link 'course material' had 3 149 visitors. It was therefore clear that learners did visit the link several times and could therefore literally have copied the information from this link into their articles to explain what culture was, but they did not seem to be familiar with the procedure of searching for information. The tutors at each school were supposed to have prepared the learners to deal with the theme 'culture' and to have edited the articles before publication but they seemed to have provided no such assistance. The question is whether the tutors' training was sufficient to fulfil their obligation in this regard. Besides defining 'culture', specific aspects of the learners' cultures (e.g. Zulu, Xhosa, Venda, Ndebele, Batswana) were explained in the above-mentioned eight articles. Cultural matters dealt with included clothing, marriage and funeral customs, art, food, languages, houses, transport, entertainment, religion, myths, medicines, and dance. The learners did not seem to have formed an overriding concept of culture in the anthropological sense of a coherent system to which a particular group belongs. It seemed as if the learners had been attempting to define themselves in this anthropological sense, but without success, hence the observation that they lacked the overriding sense of a coherent culture.

One benefit of the eJournal software is that any logged-in user of the eJournal can read and comment on the content of the articles. The eight articles had 5 534 visitors in total. This meant that the learners 'visited' the articles several times, but only 24 comments on the articles and nine replies from the authors were posted. A reason for this could be that learners did not have Internet access after school. Replies could conceivably have been prepared offline and then cut and pasted in the eJournal reply box, but learners possibly did not have access to computers at home. These limitations

affected the flow of conversation between the Finnish and South African learners significantly because the South African learners were restricted to working during specific school hours when computers and Internet access were available. Comments on the content of the articles could be provided from Finnish or South African learners, and the author of an article or a 'visitor' to the article could publish a reply to or comment on the article. The comments (verbatim) on the eight articles were placed in the following categories: interesting, assumed clarity, traditional content, and language usage and structure.

In the category 'interesting', the majority of comments were based on the interesting facts contained in the articles such as: "*We enjoyed reading about different cultures. It is interesting get to know what kind of clothes people wear in other countries*"; "*Monks check the horoscope and choose the right day ceremony — thats very interesting habi*"; "*It was interesting to read about your cultures and traditions. They were really different than ours. That death custom part was specially interesting*"; and "*I was intrested of death. I don't know how death can be intresting, but maybe it is interest because us death custom is so different than those*". If the research question, "Can intercultural understanding be achieved through e-learning?" is tested in this category, by referring to an earlier theoretical exposition of intercultural understanding, the following can be mentioned.

If individuals are challenged with an intercultural encounter, the sudden "difference in culture shifts the focus from aspects of ourselves with which we are familiar to aspects with which we are unfamiliar, and moreover, that we were not even aware existed" (Sen Gupta, 2003:160). If a person experiences a change in cultural context, he or she undergoes a process of acculturation (which is an important component of intercultural understanding). Berry *et al.* (in Sen Gupta, 2003:163) identify three criteria for acculturation: firstly, continuous and first-hand contact or interaction with another cultural system; secondly, some permanent or semi-permanent change in the person; and thirdly, dynamic activity during and after contact, which is followed by a period of stability that is the result of the process. Although learners became aware of unfamiliar cultures and found them interesting, acculturation did not take place because none of the three criteria for acculturation had been met. Therefore, intercultural understanding did not fully come to fruition in this e-learning context. Seen against the background of learners' limited understanding of 'culture' as indicated earlier, it cannot be expected that these learners were acculturated, as the interaction time was too short.

Culture is learned and transmitted largely through language (Campbell, 2004:42-43). It became apparent from the replies to the articles that the 'assumed clarity' of words (language) can be offensive to the ethnocentric individual. For example, the article contained the following statement: "*The (Zulu) men wore clothes made of tiger and lion skin*" and the comment was: "*Please note that we do not have tigers in South Africa therefore it would be impossible for a Zulu warrior to have worn any clothing made out of tiger skin! Possibly the author means leopard skin. Please correct this.*" Another statement

was: *“Every Sunday Christians go to different churches like ZCC where they jump very high when they sing, some go to Lutheran church, Ethopia, Roman church and other different churches”* and the comment was: *“Are you sure that they are luthericks that jump high in the church? In our church we just sit still, sing songs and pray.”* Comment: *“Corrections. It is not luthericks who jump high in church is zcc’s ...”*. Different cultures perceive the world differently but each culture tends to be unaware of the existence of alternative ways of looking at things. These different perceptions are furthermore transmitted through language because language carries culture-specific codes and nuances, which may not be shared between cultures (Campbell, 2004:42-43; Ter-Minasova, 2003:202). Although the learners thought they were making sense in the articles they wrote for the benefit of their Finnish counterparts, they often failed to do so for various literacy related reasons. To one participant, tiger skin and leopard skin are seen collectively as animal skin, but to another participant, tiger skin cannot be mentioned in a South African context.

In the category ‘traditional content’ comments such as: *“The clothes that you use feel funny for me, because I just buy this at shop, but you have make it yourselves”*, refer to the statement made that *“The Zulu culture use different kinds of animals skins to make clothes. The women clothes are made out of cow skin ...”*. The following comment: *“Do day now days have any computers and 40’s tv:s? or nokia mobile phones?”* is almost exclusively concerned with traditional culture. The dynamic nature of culture and the fact that culture is adaptable and changeable (Hernandez, 1989; Marshall, 2002) were rarely referred to by the learners, who wrote about their own culture. The result was that a picture of an age-old, static culture was created. It is no wonder that the Finnish learners think that South Africans do not have television sets and mobile phones because they were statements such as the following in the articles: *“They climb on the bag of the donkey being decorated ...”* (when modes of transport were discussed).

In the category ‘language usage and structure’ typical errors made by second-language users and teenage slang were found to obscure intercultural communication (which is an important element of intercultural understanding). Comments such as the following were published: *“But thank you anyway about the info (own emphasis) about the customs”*; *“What kinda (own emphasis) of things are used in foods there?”*; *“I was intrested of death. I don’t know how death can be intresting, but maybe it is interest because us death custom is so different than those. Olso (own emphasis) it was intresting to read a bit more of other croups (own emphasis) clothing culture”*; and: *“This is very factful work ... got a lot new info of zulu, it might be nice to live in zulu tribe ... hmm do day now days have any computers?”*. As indicated in the theoretical exposition in this article, intercultural communication is the successful transmission of information between individuals from two different cultures. Language is used to convey the content of communication. Using a common language when communicating with members of different groups does not mean, however, that individuals will indeed communicate effectively. Effective

intercultural communication depends on understanding both the language and the other person's cultural perceptions and priorities (Campbell, 2004). It was found in the comments that incorrect language use and sentence structure, for example, slang ("info" instead of "information", "kinda" instead of "kind of"), writing phonetically ("do day" instead of "do they", "olso" instead of "also"), spelling mistakes ("croups" instead of "groups") and incorrect and incomplete sentences, can hinder effective communication and slow down intercultural understanding.

Communication by sms may be effective in the sense that sms jargon is more widely understood. However, it does not overcome a basic lack of competence in the language concerned (English in this instance) and will therefore remain an impediment to intercultural understanding. Although the slang used by young people, for example, in sms format, may improve communication in that it forms part of 'global' English that especially young people who are not English-speaking may have some access to, it must be mentioned that the particular cultural and regional circumstances will still impact on intercultural understanding.

Discussion

Intercultural understanding through e-learning in this particular project was only partly achieved. If the definition of intercultural understanding, which is unpacked in the theoretical framework, is taken as the point of departure and 'interculture' means any encounter between people of different cultures (Sen Gupta, 2003:159), then this was achieved in the sense that South African learners wrote articles to which Finnish learners responded. However, in view of the definition of 'understanding' in the theoretical conceptualisation, namely,

... the sum of the mental powers by which knowledge is acquired, the power of apprehending relations and making inferences (deductions, conclusions) from them and furthermore an agreement between two or more persons, sometimes an arrangement or settlement of differences, or of disputed points (Funk & Wagnalls, 1970:1368)

as well as the content of the articles and comments published in the eJournal, it must be concluded that no higher-order thinking occurred such as apprehending relations and drawing conclusions. Data gathered from document analysis showed that the project obscured rather than improved intercultural understanding for the participants. It should be pointed out, however, that knowledge was acquired, retained, and extended in the form of the search for and publication of content.

Further, the fact that the concept of culture was badly defined in the articles written by learners indicated that fundamental knowledge of intercultural understanding was lacking. As noted above, to achieve intercultural understanding, the elements of intercultural understanding such as *recognition of cultural differences*, *intercultural awareness*, *intercultural competence* and *intercultural communication* would have to be developed as essential skills. It was apparent that the learners came to *recognise cultural differences* but on

the very basic level of aspects such as food, clothing, and arts, which only relate to explicit culture. Implicit culture, which refers to beliefs, values and norms, was barely mentioned. If Hall's (1959; 1976) interpersonal style of communication is taken as the key to the recognition of basic cultural differences, it will be difficult for learners to perceive differences in styles of communication, for two reasons: no direct verbal communication took place between learners from different cultures, and learners wrote and commented on the articles in their second language. The use of a second language was inevitable in view of the cultural background of the participants, which from the start implied that misunderstandings might occur. If, furthermore, "meaning must be understood in terms of the situation or setting in which communication takes place" (Hall, 1959; 1976), then e-learning fails to communicate meaning accurately because it takes place in an impersonal cyberspace.

If *intercultural awareness* is the recognition or awareness on the part of an individual that he or she has a view of the world that is not universally shared, and that it differs profoundly from that held by many people belonging to other nations and ethnic groups (Bennet, 2003:32), and that self-evaluation is crucial to the development of intercultural awareness because it provides a means of moving beyond the superficial exchange of information about the 'other' (Cushner & Brislin in Sen Gupta, 2003:160), then it can be said that learners did not develop a true intercultural awareness during their e-learning experience. No traces of self-evaluation were found in the articles and/or comments. If the Hanvey levels of intercultural awareness (in Hernandez, 1989:25) are taken as criteria, where Level I supposes awareness of superficial or very visible traits and Level IV supposes awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider, and cultural immersion or living in the other culture is experienced, then it can be said that the intercultural awareness of the learners involved in this e-learning project functions at Level I (which seems reasonable for a first encounter). The project should therefore be revised to assist participants to develop their intercultural awareness to Levels III and IV and to ultimately achieve adequate intercultural understanding.

Intercultural competence refers to ways of working effectively with members of another cultural group (Lynch & Hanson in Klein & Chen, 2001:38). The 'ways' referred to include using all the skills required for the above-mentioned activities and techniques: self-reflection; gathering information about the cultures (own and other); appreciating cultural similarities and differences; using cultural resources; and acknowledging the value of all cultures (Klein & Chen, 2001:38-39). Intercultural competence is also demonstrated by the ability to interpret intercultural styles of communication (language, signs, gestures, body language, customs) that are different from one's own. The goal is to develop awareness of the culturally conditioned assumptions made by people of different cultural backgrounds about each other's behaviours and cognitions (Bennet, 2003:32-33). A kind of intercultural sensitivity is needed as a basis for achieving intercultural compe-

tence. Of these skills, only the skills required for gathering information about cultures (own and other) and appreciating cultural similarities and differences, were evident in the articles. These skills are too limited to pass for intercultural competence.

Intercultural communication is the successful transmission of information from one person in one culture to another in another culture. Cultural differences and misunderstandings often become evident when people from different cultures try to communicate because cultural assumptions are reflected in expressions. This relates to one of Barna's (in Samovar & Potter 1997) obstacles that cause misunderstandings, namely, the naive assumption that since we are all human we are alike. It is also clear from the findings that the Finnish learners could not believe that the South African learners did not have access to "TV's and mobile phones" based on the content of the articles. It was also evident from the findings and analysis that if communication takes place in a second language it is not only the difference in culture but also the language difference that increases the opportunity for misunderstanding. Note that e-learning in this particular project was a major hurdle for intercultural communication since nonverbal cues could not be provided to promote understanding of concepts or clear up uncertainties.

Conclusion

Overall, it can be said that the project was a rather sophisticated exercise. Moreover, the expectations of what could have been achieved by this encounter may have been somewhat unrealistic, given its brevity and its nature, and the developmental levels of the participants, who are teenagers and probably more interested in popular culture than the theoretical aspects of culture. Intercultural understanding is a complex subject that requires considerable powers of observation, thoughtful analysis and command of language, which can only be achieved over time and by means of a concerted effort. The achievement of intercultural understanding furthermore requires specialised expertise and intellectual maturity.

Leading learners to intercultural understanding is an important way of preparing young people to function in a national and global village as responsible and thoughtful adults. E-learning can be a means to establishing intercultural understanding, provided that the e-learning environment is supportive of the aim. In the absence of this support, it is possible that learners may become weary and disillusioned with the experience and can emerge from the intercultural encounter with the minimum of positive outcomes. The use of a blended approach that accommodates teaching at a distance and uses communications technology combined with traditional education (instructor-led learning) is considered the best way to create a supportive e-learning environment that will help learners to achieve intercultural understanding. The relevance of the blended approach for e-learning projects lies in the fact that learners who are traditionally used to being led by an instructor may feel frustrated if the instructor is absent when they want to appeal to him/her to explain learning content. Furthermore, the theoretical

framework of intercultural understanding needs to be very basic and to be presented in small chunks if it is to hold the interest of the learners. Good planning of content exposition is critical. Finally, all the role players should be fully trained and highly motivated to eliminate logistical, cultural, and teaching barriers.

References

- Barna LM 1997. Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. In: Samovar LA & Potter RE (eds). *Intercultural communication — a reader*. 8th edn. CA: Wadsworth.
- Bennet CI 2003. *Comprehensive multicultural education: theory and practice*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bentley JPH, Tinney MV & Chia BH 2005. Intercultural Internet-ased Learning: Know your audience and hat it values. *ETR & D*, 53:117-127.
- Campbell DE 2004. *Choosing democracy: a practical guide to multicultural education*. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Ciges A 2001. Online learning new educational environments in order to respect cultural diversity through cooperative strategies. *Intercultural Education*, 12:135-147.
- Clark C & Gorski P 2002. Multicultural education and the digital divide — Focus on socioeconomic class and background. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 4:25-35.
- De Vos AS, Strydom H, Fouché CB & Delport CSL 2005. *Research at grassroots. For the social sciences and human service professions*. 3rd edn. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Engelbrecht E 2003. e-Learning — from hype to reality. *Progressio*, 25:20-31.
- Frank M, Reich N & Humphreys K 2003. Respecting the human need of students in the development of e-learning. *Computers & Education*, 40:57-70.
- Funk & Wagnalls 1970. *Standard dictionary of the English language — International Edition. Volume 2*. New York: Readers Digest Books.
- Hall ET 1959. *The silent language*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hall ET 1976. *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hamid AA 2002. e-Learning: Is it the 'e' or the learning that matters? *Internet and Higher Education*, 4:311-316.
- Haney D 2002. Assessing the organizational readiness for e-learning: 70 questions to ask. *Performance improvement*, 41:8-13.
- Hernandez H 1989. *Multicultural education: A teachers' guide to content and process*. New York: Merrill.
- Herselman ME & Hay HR 2005. An investigation into e-learning practices: implications for providers of education and training. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19:393-410.
- Holmes P & O'Halloran S 2003. Communicating across cultures on the Internet. Implications for global(ising) e-education. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 30:65-84.
- Kelly MF 2002. The political implications of e-learning. *Higher Education in Europe*, 27:211-216.
- Klein DM & Chen D 2001. *Working with children from culturally diverse backgrounds*. New York: Delmar.
- Kok D 2004. E-onderrig word in VS-skole gevestig. *Volksblad*, 28 Oktober.
- Marshall PL 2002. *Cultural diversity in our schools*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- McArthur D, Parker A & Giersch S 2003. Why plan for e-learning? *Planning for Higher Education*, 31:20-28.

- McMillan JH & Schumacher S 2001. *Research in education*. New York: Longman.
- Oubenaissa L, Giardina M & Bhattacherya M 2002. Designing a framework for the implementation of situated online, collaborative. Problem-based activity: operation within a local and multicultural learning context. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 1:41-46.
- Salili F & Hoosain R 2003. *Teaching, learning and motivation in a multicultural context*. Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Sellinger M 2004. Cultural and pedagogical implications of a global e-learning programme. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 34:223-239.
- Sen Gupta A 2003. Changing the focus: a discussion of the dynamics of the intercultural experience. In: Alfred A, Byram M & Fleming M (eds). *Intercultural experience and education*. Church Point: Footprint Books.
- Simms R 2003 Promises of interactivity: Aligning learner perceptions and expectations with strategies for flexible and online learning. *Distance Education*, 24:87-103.
- Singh H 2003. Building effective learning programs. *Educational Technology*, 43:51-54.
- Skeie G 2005. Intercultural education reconsidered; a discussion based on communication theory and with special reference to religious education. *Scriptura*, 89:247-256.
- Sowetan 2005. Distance learning: Connecting millions of pupils across the world. 30 November.
- Ter-Minasova S 2003. Linguistic aspects of intercultural communication. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 37:300-306.
- Van Petegem P, De Loght T & Shortridge AM 2004. Powerful learning is interactive: a cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Instructional Science and Technology*, 7:1-13.

Author

Corinne Meier is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Teacher Education, College of Human Sciences, at the University of South Africa. She is an award-winning researcher and her research and lecturing focus is on multicultural education, education management, and early childhood development.