

Improving Cross-Cultural Awareness and Communication through Mobile Technologies

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, technology is mediating the way in which the youth around the world communicate, consume content and create meaning. As mobile communication media and the internet become more pervasive, young people from different cultures and communities are afforded more opportunities for collaboration across previously unbridgeable distances. The need for cross-cultural awareness and communication is thus more important than ever. The initiative described in this article, successfully demonstrated the role of mobile phones and the web as mediating technologies in the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills among a group of teenagers scattered across two countries. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Digital Media; Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Competencies; Mobile Storytelling; Online Collaboration

BACKGROUND

From August to December 2007, ten teenagers aged 12 to 14 were invited to document culturally relevant aspects of their lives and communities and publish

the material online. They were also encouraged to engage with one another about the published content. The participants, five teenagers from the United States of America (USA), and five from South Africa (SA), represented diverse

backgrounds and came from very different realities. The participants had smart phones at their disposal to document the world through their eyes. The stories they captured were published online as digital artefacts accessible to all of the participating members of the project. One of the aims of the project was to see if the mobile stories created would reflect these diverse perspectives and ultimately lead to increased cross-cultural awareness among the participants.

The initiative as proof of concept, described in this article, successfully demonstrated the role of mobile phones and the web as mediating technologies in the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills among a group of teenagers, scattered across two countries. Efforts were coordinated by researchers at Stanford University (USA) and MobiLED initiative at the Meraka Institute, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (SA).

THEORY

Increasingly, technology is mediating the way in which the youth around the world communicate, consume and create content. Central to the lives of many teenagers in the USA is the use of social media such as blogs and social networking sites. According to a Pew Internet study, 93% of USA teens aged 12-17 use the internet and they are treating it as a venue for social interaction – a

place where they can share creations, tell stories, and interact with others (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). The study revealed that 39% of online teens also share their own artistic creations, such as artwork, photos, stories or videos; 28% have created their own blog; and 55% have created a profile on a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook.

The national school study Speak Up 2007 revealed that over half (52%) of learners in grades 6-8 and two-thirds (67%) of those in grades 9-12 had access to a mobile phone (“Project Tomorrow: “Speak Up” 2007 National Findings”, 2008). The study concluded that amongst school learners in the USA, access to mobile devices (mobile phones, MP3 players, personal digital assistants and smart phones) has dramatically increased in the last year. Learners were apparently very interested in making better use of these devices for learning and particularly to assist with communications, collaborations, creativity and productivity.

The same depth of figures does not exist for SA. What is known is that in 2006 the number of all internet users (not just teenagers) was around 10.8% (“Telecommunication/ICT markets and trends in Africa.” 2007). While access to computers is relatively low, 68% of the population had access to a mobile phone in 2006 (Gilwald, 2007). A very popular mobile instant messaging (MIM) service used by many young people in SA is called MXit. Currently there are over 6.5 million MXit sub-

scribers in the country, who send 200 million messages per day (“Mobile Net usage on the rise”, 2008). Even though they are not the largest age group in the subscriber base, the under-18’s are the most active (Vanek, 2008).

One of the few studies conducted on the mobile usage of teens in SA found that most teens aged 13-16 were very dependent on their mobile phones for communication and social status (Oelofse, De Jager, & Ford, 2006). The authors of the study described the uptake and use of mobile phones by teens in SA as a “social revolution.”

MIT professor, Henry Jenkins, (2006, p290) defines ‘participatory culture’ as a culture in which “consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.” It is certain that a large percentage of the technology-enabled youth around the world live out the dual producer/consumer role in a participatory culture. While much youth content that is created, shared and consumed is of a highly frivolous nature – one only has to spend some time on YouTube or MySpace to verify this – there are also many cases of more substantial content initiatives. For example, the Listen Up Youth Media Network (<http://www.listenup.org>), the International Visual Methodologies Project (<http://www.ivmproject.ca>), as well as the Centre for Digital Storytelling (<http://www.storycenter.org>) have facilitated young people in the role of digital media producers for purposes of education, social change or artistic expression. Youth working with these

organisations have demonstrated the ability to candidly and critically reflect on personal and societal issues affecting their life experiences (Mitchell, Stuart, Moletsane, & Nkwanyana, 2006). When taking on this role in a creative capacity, the young participants become “cultural producers.” It is to them that the following quote applies:

Changes in access to technology have facilitated new conditions for young people to shoot, cut, and mix multimodal texts, and the emergence of the Internet as “home theatre” for a global audience has enabled youth to communicate across borders and across the street. These new conditions have allowed for an outpouring of youth expression, a channelling of latent youth voice... (Hoechsmann & Sefton-Green, 2006)

Technology-mediated collaborations between globally-distributed youth are also increasing. For example, through the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN: <http://www.iearn.org>) more than one million learners from 120 countries collaborate on projects every day. These youngsters use digital media to take on the role of cultural producers.

But while teens “embrace the conversational nature of interactive online media” (Lenhart et al., 2007) and increasingly enjoy greater collaboration across communities and borders, the enabling technological advances do not necessarily equip them with the

necessary skills to negotiate the cultural differences between disparate groups.

Jenkins et. al. (2006) identify negotiation – the “ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms” – as one of the new media literacies that young people need to master today. Negotiation is essential because in the new media environment, “culture flows easily from one community to another” and people online “constantly encounter conflicting values and assumptions.”

Everything about this process ensures that we will be provoked by cultural difference. Little about this process ensures that we will develop an understanding of the contexts within which these different cultural communities operate (Jenkins et al., 2006).

The key is to “understand the way in which others, located in different global contexts perceive, analyse, and produce situated knowledge” (O’Brien, Alfano, Magnusson, & Heidelber, 2007). Within the field of intercultural theory, this skill is called intercultural competence and sensitivity (Lovitt & Goswami, 1999). Intercultural communication represents the successful negotiation across diverse cultural contexts because of a high degree of intercultural competence.

In a world where the production and distribution of cultural artefacts is increasing, as is collaboration across different cultures, it is not surprising that

Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2006) argue that “successful intercultural communication is a matter of highest importance if humankind and society are to survive.”

METHOD

While in the past two decades there has been a surge of interest in globalisation and intercultural communication, a key problem remains: “how best to use information and communication technologies (or ICTs) to offer students hands-on learning of transnational and intercultural differences (O’Brien et al., 2007)” To explore this, researchers from Stanford and Örebro Universities initiated the Developing Intercultural Competencies through Collaborative Rhetoric project. This involved teaming globally-distributed students (in the USA and Sweden) to analyse rhetorical artefacts (e.g. speeches, advertisements, architectural landmarks and representations of nationhood) with the aim of improving the intercultural competencies and intercultural communication skills of the participants. For collaboration the students used video conferencing, MSNchat, Skype, Google Docs, blogs, wikis and email.

In the context of the Stanford/Örebro project, we undertook to explore the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills of geographically disparate teenagers using mobile phones and the web as mediating technologies. One of the key

measures of intercultural competence – and one used in the Stanford/Örebro project – is “sensitivity to and consideration for others (Lovitt & Goswami, 1999)” Thus in our project we wanted to explore the role of mobile and web technology in mediating and enabling the development of a greater sensitivity and consideration amongst the teenage participants.

From the outset, this was not viewed as a formal research project; rather as a hands-on and informal pilot to “see what would happen” as the young participants created and collaborated with each other as cultural producers and negotiators. To surface any changes in the desired competence and skills, we held regular discussions with the participants throughout the project, as well as exit focus group discussions (one in the USA and one in SA). The qualitative data gathered during these discussions complimented the actual content produced by the participants and online interactions between them on the blog site.

Project Description

The Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) in San Francisco runs an annual summer internship programme for high school learners that have completed a course in video production at BAVC. As part of their internship last year, a group of teens needed to complete an individual and collective media production project. Steve Vosloo (a South African) and John Kuner, both research fellows at Stanford

University, were volunteer supervisors to the group. They made contact with the Mobiled initiative in SA to discuss the possibility of an international collaborative project between the five BAVC interns and youth in SA. Adele Botha, a researcher on MobiLED and the then Head of IT at a high school in Pretoria, agreed to facilitate a group of five teens in SA. The plan was for the participants to use their mobile phones and the web to document, reflect upon and share some aspects of their personal and community life experiences – based on prompts given to them – that reveal something about their culture.

When contrasted with school-based projects, youth media organisations – such as BAVC – “stand out as innovatory sites of the new cultures of youth media production (Sefton-Green, 2006)” We wanted to capitalise on the affordances of an informal media project to explore any changes in cross-cultural awareness experienced by the two groups of teens who came from different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. We hoped that the process of discussing, planning and creating each publishable piece would force the teens to think about the effects of culture in their own lives and how to portray their reality to others living in a totally unfamiliar place.

It is useful to consider the digital media creation, distribution and consumption process as storytelling in a shared space. Joe Lambert, an expert in digital storytelling, reflects that in the storytelling process a variety of

perspectives and meanings are presented (Lambert, Mullen, Paull, Paulos, Soundararajan, Spagat, & Weishenker, 2007). Each person articulates his or her views through stories and tries to be compelling, yet accessible. When conducted in a shared space, others are invited to reciprocate. The space in which stories are shared and collaborated on becomes an entity with a life of its own. The participants place their own lives under the microscope and seek out the bits that others might find interesting. In order to self reflect, a step back from reality is required so that the storyteller becomes a participant observer, objectively selecting and reporting on incidents, issues and areas of interest.

In this context we asked the teens to create multimedia vignettes, or mobile stories, which could incorporate still images, text and/or video. The project spanned two media: camera phones were used to capture visual content, and the web was used for presentation and communication around that content.

In Vox (<http://www.vox.com>), a free hosted blogging service, a private group was created for the project, which acted as the online nexus for all of the blogging activity. Each participant created his or her own blog account to post their stories, links and images. While all participants were invited as members into the single, private group for the project, their own blogs could be publicly accessed.

On a weekly basis the participants in San Francisco met to discuss a

new task, based on a series of themed prompts, e.g. tell us about the food you eat. The teens would sometimes conduct research online, shoot material at home or in their community, edit the content on a computer and then upload to the web as a post to their own project blog. The students in San Francisco used Final Cut Pro for movie editing.

The broad themes for the self-documentation were: about me (where I come from; the story of my name; my favourite books, bands, things; the food I eat and my room); my family and community (my family's religious beliefs, historical background, rules in our household, what my community looks like and what I like about it); and a relevant issue in my community. We asked them to think about their own culture as a context for the project. They were asked to "frame" their lives, communities and issues within their particular cultural milieu. Mobiquette - acceptable mobile etiquette when using camera phones - was also discussed beforehand with the participants.

The South African group all attend Cornwall Hill College, a forward thinking and dynamic school in Irene, Pretoria. It is common practice in this institution to use personal mobile phones in the classroom for learning and learning support. These learners preferred to communicate via short message service (SMS) and mobile instant messaging (MIM) to communicate tasks, prompts and provide support. Many of them preferred to upload content directly from their mobile phones, editing and

contextualising their contributions on-the-fly.

CONTRIBUTION

With the differences in school calendars, not all of the themed tasks were completed by both groups. Below is a selection of participant creations, starting with the teens from San Francisco. If it is publicly available, much more can be learnt about each participant from his or her project blog.

Bob* grew up in the Haight Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco, the epicentre of the sixties hippie movement. He is a big fan of graffiti as a form of street art, which comes through in his neighbourhood video¹, appropriately set to a song by a busker on Haight Street, recorded with his mobile phone.

Luisa* lives in the Mission District of San Francisco, a traditionally Hispanic community with beautiful, colourful wall murals that reflect the history, transition, pain and hopes of its immigrant

community. Her neighbourhood video² captures some of this cultural heritage and portrays the vibrancy of the shops and people living there. She is Mexican American, named after a saint. In the video of her room,³ filmed by herself with her camera phone, she shows us her Rosary Beads, favourite videos and music. It is a brief, but intimate, peak into the life of a Mexican American teenager living in a neighbourhood in San Francisco that is specific to a particular culture with a particular history.

San Francisco is home to many different cultures. It is a city known for its diversity. Kim*, whose family moved from Vietnam to the USA when she was three, highlights the culture-destroying influence of American fast-food. She is interviewed by one of the other teens in the project as she sits down to lunch that she bought from Starbucks. In the short video she explains how the only thing the meal represents is convenience and that she knows nothing about the person who made the sandwich. Against the backdrop of San Francisco's diverse

Figure 1. Shop window



Figure 2. The Red Victorian in San Francisco



food culture, her view contrasts the facelessness of commercial, corporate America. The blog post about her,⁴ that includes a video tour of her room, tells us more – explicitly and implicitly – about her world that she occupies, both Vietnamese and also what she considers as being a typical USA teen. Her video⁵ of the Excelsior neighbourhood shows how many different ethnic groups – e.g. Japanese and Italian – share this space.

Before heading “out into the field”, Jonathan* talks⁶ about the plan to film his neighbourhood.⁷ While he was born in San Francisco, his mother is from the Philippines and father from El Salvador, as described in his introductory post.⁸

For the “issue in your community” prompt, the San Franciscans decided to work, as a group, on homelessness, which they saw as a problem in the city. They first discussed the issue amongst themselves in person, conducted

desktop research, compiled interview questions, and then headed out to take photos and conduct interviews. Bob’s series of photos⁹, and Luisa’s photos¹⁰ and video interview¹¹ with the Coalition on Homelessness provide a good insight into the issue and clearly reflect a high degree of criticality in the way that both teens portray this social issue.

Turning to SA, Phil*, who hails from the rural town of Mafikeng, documented his experiences of moving to Johannesburg, SA’s largest city. On his blog he kept a detailed journal of day-to-day life in this vibrant city.

Brad* is a ‘techie’ and a ‘tree hugger’. In one of his blog posts that includes images and video he shouts out to the international community of liberal environmentalists and informs them of the conditions in SA.

Artemis* is of Greek-Norwegian descent. He is “into the culinary arts” and enjoys experimenting with the vari-

Figure 3. Building a computer



Figure 4. The door to Artemis's room



ous flavours of the African continent. His menagerie at home includes a pet parrot,¹² tropical fish and a number of four-legged animals. He posts on his colourful home life and describes his younger sister and the baby being fostered by the family. A visit to a flea market¹³ in Johannesburg is a reflection of the cultural diversity of SA's rainbow nation.

Instead of writing about what he did with his free time, Shaun* (15) used his phone to make a video.¹⁴ His posts describe his family history, a love for PlayStation games and the family pastime of breeding pedigree Chow dogs.

Ethan's* postings portray him as a sport fan. He supports the local "Blue Bulls" rugby team and he plays rugby and swims at school. He loves reading and going to the family's game farm. Elephants were recently released and he shares the majesty of these animals with the other participants. He also illustrates

the skill of skinning a springbok. A video and several pictures have been added of the game farm as well as the antelope and bird which his cousins shot.

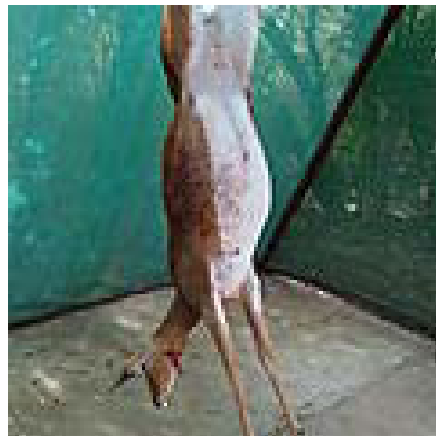
While the American teenagers were more into hip hop and graffiti – reflecting their urban environment – the South Africans enjoyed a variety of activities including heavy metal, fantasy books, barbecuing (or braaing) and hunting. As Phil commented: "[I love] a good piece of meat, just the right spicing and a little pink on the inside is perfect!" Computer and video gaming was also very popular. Phil goes on to say: "I am very into anything and everything electronic or computer related since I was about 9, the way everything just meshes together is just fascinating. Take the current state of computer graphics ... it's becoming so real that it's blurring the lines of reality and fantasy."

While much of the material was fairly high-level, e.g. "I can't survive without my iPod," or photos of pets,

Figure 5. Chow puppies



Figure 6. Skinning a springbok



there were also instances of personal disclosure. For example, one girl described her resentment towards the USA government because it had “abandoned” her father who supported the American troops during the Vietnam War. As a result of this he spent 13 years in a re-education camp in Vietnam before managing to move to the USA. One can also look at a boy’s pain as he dealt with his life in the same house (“in different rooms, of course!”) All of these personal moments, while not necessarily deep or painful, are endearing and alive with teenage honesty. This is the essence of the project, and it only began to appear when a certain degree of trust had developed in the shared space.

Project Reflection

Lack of immediacy did not affect the group collaboration at all. The time difference between the USA and SA made online chat or voice conversation impractical, although both groups wanted to engage in this.

Of significant interest was the readiness of the participants to publish their stories. They could each determine the privacy level of their blogs, making it viewable only to the group or to make it available to all internet users. Most of them chose to go public, although some did blog under a pseudonym.

EVALUATION

Did the participants develop their intercultural competencies through the project? We believe they did. During the focus group discussions after the project had officially ended, the participants in both groups reported that they had learned a great deal about each others’ lives and also about their own.

While differences between the groups were noted and discussed it was really the high level of similarities that was obvious to everyone. Jonathan said: “I learned how our cultures [USA and SA] contrast, and also how they’re similar. I think that was my favourite part.” About the South Africans, one teen from the United States struggled for the right word and then said: “They were more ‘civilised’ than I expected. Their interests are European and Westernised.” The group in SA echoed these sentiments with one of them remarking: “The world is actually very small; I suppose we could all have been friends in another time or place. You know they are just like us.” These comments convey a definite sensitivity towards and understanding of others on a cultural level, a measure of intercultural competence. Furthermore, the South Africans were mindful to explain local slang and the meaning of Afrikaans words when these were used, again reflecting an inclusive approach.

The prompts encouraged the teens to think about many of the things they take for granted. Things they like, don’t like, eat, watch, say and do. The two groups

of teens stated that when documenting their own lives, they realised how much they were influenced by the diversity surrounding them. This diversity can be generated from traditional family values, the community, peers and simply the times – living as fourteen year olds in San Francisco or Pretoria in 2007. A common theme was that they were proud of their heritage. Bob reflected that: “I think it’s important to show the many sides of San Francisco to the kids in South Africa because it is a place so full of culture and life.”

The project required a high degree of self-reflection, communication of views and life situations across differing cultural contexts and, because of comments and responses being traded, a level of cross-cultural negotiation. The photos, videos, text pieces and comments all attest to the participants successfully meeting the project’s requirements. In this sense we believe that their intercultural communication skills did improve.

What did the participants think about using mobile phones to document and reflect on their lives? “The camera phones were cool and different,” responded one the USA girls. One of the other girls said that she would never have considered using camera phones as a way to educate and influence others. Once the project began the participants were all completely comfortable with using mobile phones as capturing devices for the visual projection of themselves and their communities. They did, however, comment that lighting and

sound quality were sometimes problematic when using camera phones.

Due to budget constraints, the San Francisco teenagers could not upload content directly from their phones to the website. This was a pity as the immediacy of mobile phone communication proved to be one of its greatest features with the Pretoria group. A photo of graffiti, taken while walking home from school and uploaded immediately can be considered to be highly contextualised and relevant, appealing to youth expectations of instant gratification.

We initially sought to explore the role that mobile phones and the web would play as mediating devices and technologies in this process. The mobile phones, whether used only as camera phones or as both camera and communications devices (including immediately blogging and uploading media), proved to be very suitable devices for the creation and sharing of digital cultural artefacts. Because mobile phones are so pervasive, and have become such an everyday device, they are always on hand. This makes them very well suited to “capture the moment”, which is often when cultural nuances are revealed. The blogging interface, suited to the persistent publishing of photos, stories and videos and asynchronous communication and collaboration, successfully complimented and supported the phone activities from in the field.

Using mobile phones, so much a signifier of youth identity today, certainly contributed to the intimate nature of the stories that were told, enabling the teens

to reflect through a medium they were comfortable with and proficient in. No training was needed for mobile phone usage. The technologies used enabled – rather than hindered – collaborative reflection.

CONCLUSION

While more action than formal research, the project helped us to understand the possibilities, challenges and limitations of using mobile phones and the web in international collaborative projects. The shared online space encouraged frank and open contributions in a trusted environment. The cultural productions functioned not only to represent individual perspectives but also to engage and challenge other members of the project community. The process of creation, sharing and negotiation provided an opportunity for participants to foster relationships and to contextualise their lives to create shared understandings. Through technology-mediated cultural production and negotiation, the participants successfully demonstrated their development of intercultural competencies and communication skills.

As with the Stanford/Örebro project, we regard “the use of technologically-mediated collaboration to be an influential tool with regard to social relationships and improved cross-cultural understanding (O’Brien et al., 2007).” In spite of the many differences between as well as within the groups themselves, they found common

ground. At the time of writing, some of the participants are still in touch with each other, without any prompting from the project facilitators.

More research is needed in this area. Technology is rapidly changing and influencing youth participation in cultural production and negotiation on a global level. “Our need to understand the relation between digital media and learning is urgent because of the scale and the speed of the changes that are afoot (Ito, Davidson, Jenkins, Lee, Eisenberg, & Weiss, 2007).” The role that mobile communication media can play in the development of cross-cultural awareness needs to be explored in formal educational and informal learning spaces. At the very least, we have shown that mobile phones have a place in the creation of meaningful user-generated content for improved cross-cultural awareness and communication. Certainly, as communication media devices, they have progressed “from text to context.”

* Names have been changed to protect the participating minors. Some of the blogs have been removed by the participants and are no longer publically available

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <http://ozark71.vox.com/library/post/my-movie-on-the-haight-ashbury-neighborhood-of-san-francisco.html>
- ² <http://lupe543.vox.com/library/post/la-mission-in-portuguese.html>
- ³ <http://lupe543.vox.com/library/video/6a00d4144d4eb83c7f00e398a03f540001.html>
- ⁴ <http://diemmvo.vox.com/library/post/about-me.html>

- ⁵ <http://diemmvo.vox.com/library/video/6a00d41448d19f6a4700e3989bddaa0004.html>
- ⁶ <http://honu824.vox.com/library/post/shooting-plan.html>
- ⁷ <http://honu824.vox.com/library/post/honu824---wed-jul-25-162930-2007.html>
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- ⁹ <http://ozark71.vox.com/library/post/homeless-photos.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://lupe543.vox.com/library/post/homeless.html>
- ¹¹ <http://lupe543.vox.com/library/post/interview.html>
- ¹² <http://archmageofethrealfire.vox.com/library/post/crazy-is-as-crazy-does.html>
- ¹³ <http://huggybear56.vox.com/library/photo/6a00d4144905b6685e00e398a689070005.html>
- ¹⁴ <http://hobgoblin.vox.com/library/post/my-free-time.html>

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