Abstract:

Computer mediated communication has important implications for future classroom learning which is no longer bound by space or centered around textbooks. It has the ability to incorporate real life learning whereby students can make important contributions towards global problems without having to leave the campus. This study looked at the impact of virtual communication processes and online tools on student and partner engagement in an on-campus undergraduate unit which enables Australian students to create communication campaigns for an NGO in India. The study found that the communication exchanges provided students with opportunities for intercultural dialogue, both in real and virtual spaces, and skills to use ICT and media within a social justice framework in a transnational working environment. Internet technologies have become part of the daily communication pattern of a new generation of students, who see it as their natural environment in which to learn, play and work. It is thus important to expand students’ use of the global digital network from superficial social interactions towards activities which enable them to become active and informed global citizens.

Keywords: Virtual partnerships, e-service learning, global citizen, mediated intercultural communication, transnational, remote engagement

Biographical data
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1. Introduction

Computer mediated communication (CMC) has important implications for future classroom learning which is no longer spatially bounded or centred around text books. It has the ability to incorporate real life engagement whereby students make important contributions toward finding solutions to international problems without having to leave the campus (Herrington, 2010). Students gain unique intercultural experience in the context of a professional setting while working remotely on issues facing culturally divergent communities. The resulting sense of connectedness to a community with which they have had no prior links gives young people an emerging sense of what it means to be a global citizen in a digitally networked world. Increasing importance is placed on virtual service learning in professional degrees to provide opportunities for students to connect with global partners and 'collaboratively solve open-ended problems' (Johnson, 2013, p.1; also see Starke-Meyerring, 2008). Mufeti, Foster and Terzoli (2012, p.1) define virtual partnerships as 'collaborations between geographically dispersed institutions, where interaction between these institutions is enabled mainly by electronic modes of communication'. The trend in virtual partnerships will increase rapidly with greater demand placed on students and professionals to use online tools to engage in global partnerships (Johnson, 2013, p.170). Mediated intercultural communication aspects of such engagement remain under-explored within a framework of e-service learning and its contribution to notions of global citizenship.

This paper discusses the implications of CMC on student and partner engagement in an on-campus undergraduate unit in which Australian students create communication campaigns in partnership with a non-government organisation (NGO) in India. The activity is offered under the auspices of Macquarie University’s Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program which enables students to ‘learn by doing’, while engaging with key theories and concepts. Students use a range of online tools such as Skype, emails, Facebook, Dropbox and Prezi for meetings, file sharing and the final presentation of their work. They consider the problems of planning campaigns which are ethical, sustainable and cross-cultural, and identify social and cultural issues in the community where the campaign will be implemented.
Research was conducted to gain greater understanding of the mediated communication processes and ways in which these foster good professional relations and cross-cultural understanding. This research found that innovative delivery modes for community engagement, such as in this unit, provide opportunities for rich intercultural dialogue, and contribute to students’ own growing awareness as global citizens. Furthermore, the transnational exchange teaches digital media and information literacy to students and to partners, besides achieving the specific outcomes of the project.

2. Background

The ease of communication facilitated by web 2.0 platforms has seen a rapid uptake of Internet services around the world. There are now 7 billion Internet users worldwide with China, United States and India having the highest numbers of users in the world respectively (Internet world Statistics, 2012). CMC has played an important role in the development of global partnerships with multinational/multicultural virtual teams sharing knowledge and skills without the restrictions of time and space in various fields of commerce, medicine and civil engagement. It has afforded new opportunities for transnational linkages in higher education with educators developing curricula which ‘build rich shared learning and knowledge cultures’ (Starke-Meyerring and Wilson, 2008, p. 7). Students develop ‘transliteracy’ when they engage in problem-based learning around issues of sustainable development while working with cross-cultural communities online (Frau-Meigs, 2007).

These collaborations are variously called virtual partnerships (Ratcheva and Vyakarnam 2001); e-service (Strait and Sauer 2004); globally networked learning environments (GNLEs) (Starke-Meyerring 2008); and international service learning (Johnson 2013; Crabtree 2008).

Principles of global citizenship are closely related to the values found in service learning. Combining learning with volunteerism was espoused by John Dewey, who connected knowledge with experience, individuals with society, and reflection with action (Jacoby 1996). Service learning involves joining the complex process of acquiring individual knowledge with initiating positive collective community action (Guthrie & McCracken 2010). Objectives include active, collaborative, applied, and experiential learning; development of cross-cultural, global, and diverse awareness and skills; critical reflection; increased university-community collaboration on social problems; and
the formation of an informed and engaged citizenry using the Internet (Crabtree 2008; Berry & Chisholm, 1999; Boyer & Hechinger, 1981). It empowers communities as collaborators in knowledge production and social action (Crabtree 2008; DeBlasis, 2006; Strand, 2000). Studies have shown positive outcomes in students’ grades point average, writing skills, critical thinking skills and understanding of course content (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan 1996). Virtual service learning contributes to many of the outcomes discussed above, despite limited community and cultural immersion.

While the field of intercultural communication deals with face-to-face communication between members of different cultures in various contexts, mediated intercultural communication extends these discussions into the digital environment. Martin and Nakayama (2007 p.275) describe the Internet as the ‘postmodern cultural space where scholars study how the virtual place/spaces affect the communication that occurs there’. A review of past research reveals that study of mediated intercultural communication is limited. A recent publication in this area by Cheong, Martin and McFayden (2012) provides important insights into how identity, community and political action in varying cultures find expression in the mediated context. The authors note that much of the literature originating from CMC scholars has tried to understand the ‘importance of culture in the design, implementation and use of the tools of mediated communication’ (2012, p.4). They propose that research ‘embrace (or develop) theoretical and methodological approaches that can accommodate and offer greater insight into the “processual, relational, and contradictory logics” of mediated inter- (and intra-) cultural communication and its local and global consequences’ (2012, p. 10). This chapter considers some of these aspects in its discussion of the student-partner engagement in the PACE Stream of the undergraduate unit ICOM202 International Communication Campaigns offered at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

3. Rationale

3.1 What is PACE?

International engagement is an integral part of Macquarie University's Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) Initiative which embodies Macquarie University's new strategic direction and commitment to excellence in research, learning and teaching, and community engagement. Run in
partnership with Australian Volunteers International (AVI), PACE International offers Macquarie University students a unique opportunity to work and learn in partnership with communities overseas. Participants apply classroom learning, theories and research to real-world situations and develop the capabilities to actively contribute to a more just, inclusive and sustainable world (Mukuria, 2012).

ICOM202 is a 200 level unit within the International Communication (ICOM) major offered in the Bachelor of Arts degree at Macquarie University. The ICOM curriculum enables students to analyse debates and practices related to communication in a variety of contexts that cross national and linguistic boundaries. Areas of study covered in the major include intercultural communication, global media flows and communication for social change. Students are encouraged to recognise diverse cultural perspectives and evaluate their own contribution to social justice, equity and sustainability as engaged global citizens. Learning activities promote collaboration and interaction with peers and professionals in a cross-cultural environment. Intercultural competency is an important attribute for ICOM graduates to enable them to successfully practise in a globalised world. Learning and teaching activities in ICOM202 engender professional skills through design of social change campaigns for implementation in the developing world using the Millennium Development Goals as a starting point. The unit aims to investigate how cultural values and assumptions shape communication methods, media choice and audience reception. Using the latest research, students identify an area of need, and design a campaign plan using traditional and new media forms that can be delivered across cultures and language groups. Case studies of information campaigns developed by international agencies such as the United Nations, as well as governments and NGOs are researched and critiqued. Non-PACE Stream students design hypothetical campaigns by choosing one of the Millennium Development Goals. The theoretical underpinning of the unit engages communication for development (C4D) with focus on participatory communication. Emancipation and empowerment of communities are central in this approach to development, which seeks participation of people for whom change is sought. The basic tenets of participatory development has its origins in the teaching philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970) who promoted praxis, or active involvement, of students, as opposed to banking education where one person acts on another. Dialogue is an important aspect of learning. The PACE
initiative undergirds these principles in its approach to learning through participation (LTP) (Baker et al. 2012).

3.2 The PACE Stream

The ICOM202 PACE Stream was introduced as a campus-based model in which selected students have the opportunity to work on actual campaigns with NGOs in a developing country without needing to travel internationally. The Stream was successfully trialled in 2012 with five students who worked with Insan, a Lebanese, non-profit human rights organisation, on an awareness-raising campaign targeting youth on Facebook about the treatment of migrant domestic workers. The pilot was repeated in 2013 with 15 students who are the focus of this study. Students enter the stream through a selection process which takes into account their academic standing and motivation to engage in real-life work experience. Students work in small teams to develop a campaign plan based on a project brief developed by the NGO. They use online communication technologies, both synchronous and asynchronous, to engage with the partner organisation, as well as amongst themselves. Over a ten week period there are approximately 30 hours of two-way interaction between students and the partner organisation including six formal Skype sessions. Exchange of written information, briefs and draft material was done via Dropbox, a file hosting service, e-mail and Facebook. The project culminates in the final week of the semester when students make a formal presentation of the campaign plan to the partner via Skype and Prezi, which is a cloud-based presentation software. Students also attend regular lectures, tutorials and undertake the prescribed readings.

The organisations involved with PACE are screened carefully by AVI to ensure that they comply with ethical standards consistent with PACE guidelines (See Baker et al., 2013). The current partner, Restless Development (RD) in New Delhi, facilitates peer-based programs that aim to improve basic health and education, and promote civic participation among young people in India. Restless Developments' Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) trains young people in rural schools and communities to actively contribute to the development of their communities, to make responsible and informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and to improve their livelihood opportunities (RD website). Students conduct in-depth research to understand the historical, political and socio-cultural context of the society with a focus on youth and gender.
collaboration model instead of a competition model is favoured. This model allows each group to work on a different but related campaign instead of the same campaign which would allow only one group to win. This approach provides the partner with a variety of materials which are useful in different areas of their work, while students learn important lessons in collaboration and shared problem-solving. At the end of the semester students fill in a self-assessment form which enables them to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in teamwork and to identify skills they have gained to successfully engage in future collaborations.

In designing the stream, the intention is also to determine if it is a model that could be applied more broadly across other units of study, thereby extending the opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning in their programs. Evaluation of the success of the pilot project was undertaken by PACE International. The findings were that innovative models such as ICOM202 may prove more feasible to sustain in the long run in comparison to the planning and delivery of more traditional modes of international community engagement (that are capital- and human resource-intensive to both the host organisation and the educational institution). An important benefit of virtual placement for the partner is that they are relieved of the responsibility of managing student activities and having duty of care towards them, which are special considerations for resource poor NGOs. It also opens up opportunities for students who are unable to travel overseas because of disability or cost factors. It was noted that the on-campus program contributes to new and transformative ways of rethinking community engagement, transcending borders through cost-effective projects that effectively enable partner organisations in developing countries to increase their capacity to address local issues (Mukuria, 2012). It benefits the greater society, produces partnerships between the university and the greater community, and produces graduates committed to lives of service (Schaffer 2004).

4. Research Results

Through interviews and focus group discussions the partner and students were asked to share their experiences of virtual engagement in the ICOM202 PACE stream. Four themes were explored – online communication processes, cross-cultural experiences, tools and technologies, and the advantages and disadvantages of remote engagement.
4.1 Intercultural dialogue

The study results revealed that the communication exchanges provided various layers of intercultural dialogue both in real and virtual space. The multicultural character of the cohort led to rich cultural exchanges within the group, which included international and Australian students who came from diverse backgrounds such as Anglo-Australian, American, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Malaysian, Peruvian and Vietnamese. The students reported that they were genuinely interested in learning about each other’s culture as a way of getting to know each other and actively engaged in conversation to gain other perspectives, leading one to observe, “We are all from different countries but aiming for one goal. We are united in a diverse way”. Working in teams of four they developed campaign plans targeted at young people to a) raise awareness about HIV Aids; b) make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health; c) improve young women’s livelihood opportunities. A case-study of online student learning experiences by Shuyan Wang (2011) found that students considered the collaboration with peers to be a “positive experience”. International students gained an opportunity to engage with local students for the first time with one student noting that her group did not judge her for her lack of English, but valued the other skills she brought to the team:

I didn’t have a chance to talk to local students. I was afraid they might ignore my language and maybe not listen to my opinions, but after the first meeting everyone was really trying to understand whenever I try to make an idea.

Aspects of service learning espousing global citizenship heighten awareness of social problems (Markers, Howard & King 1993), giving students a global perspective of subject matter and encouraging them to question the “common sense” that organises their own world (Starke-Meyerring 2008). Since designing a communication plan requires identifying the target group, appropriate channels and message design, it was critical for students to understand the socio-cultural context in which it would be delivered. As the partner wanted messages which could be translated to different States and languages within India, this complicated the assignment even further for the students. In an immersion model, students would already be within a community experiencing the everyday life of the community. In the virtual model, students had to experience immersion of a different kind – by engaging in intense research about the social, cultural and political context of India and its different states, which included Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Orissa and
Bihar. Students observed that they would have to negotiate the complex layers of gender concerns, cultural taboos, social inequities and lack of access to technology and education. Watching Hindi films such as *Monsoon Wedding* and *Lagaan* became another way of learning about Indian culture and led to the realisation that “they are really religious and proud of their own culture”.

Co-ordinating with community partners across time and cultures also adds layers of complexity (Johnson 2013; Stevens 2001). During the research phase, students met via Skype with the RD project coordinator to clarify their concerns. These discussions elicited greater insights about the society, promoting a mental shift, as demonstrated in this quote:

[The RD coordinator] gave us a really good insight into things we didn’t really know. Like we had a small, generalised preconception, let’s say, about gender. We had a lot of questions about that. We had a lot of questions about teenage pregnancies and [he] cleared a lot of that up. And it’s just interesting. A great experience.

They realised that despite the fact that Indian society was modernising and had access to technology it was “still culturally and religiously influenced”. For example, phrases that would be easily accepted in western society such as “sexually transmitted disease” were not suitable for use in a more conservative Asian country. One student commented that she had not expected such high levels of HIV infections and drug use in the country, “India wasn’t a country I thought would have high drug use or high numbers of unplanned babies”. These experiences confirm that globally networked learning environments challenge one’s ethno-centrism, described by Stark-Meyerring and Wilson (2008:9) as “commonsense, culturally bounded assumptions, habitualized and normalized ways of thinking”, and helps students to understand their subject matter from a cross-boundary, global perspective. The cultural awakening also led students toward new interests such as travelling to the country, seeking interactions with other Indian students on campus, and reading international news pages. Deeper understanding of global issues led some students to compare the situation in India to their own country and to find common grounds and solutions that would cross cultural boundaries:

I compared India to the Philippines and we found from our research that HIV and AIDS come from the rural areas. We took aside the cultural differences and took aside religious differences and put it in the context of the rural community. From my experience in the Philippines with the school kids is that if they are in a rural community they tend to have more time on their hands...they can get into sex, into drugs, but if we give them extra curricular activities with sports, arts and all these different things...
Another student became acutely aware of the need for sex education in her own country:

We need to be educated about how to have sex. In Korea we have a serious problem about teenagers having sex. This is big problem in South Korea because we didn’t have enough education about sex…. I don’t have a sexual vocabulary. It’s the language problem. Like the word ‘womb’, I’d never heard the word.

This illustrates students expanding awareness as global citizens who begin to think beyond the project to wider problems in other societies and develop programs which are transnational in nature.

4.2 ICT and Media literacy

Information and communication technologies (ICT), including mobile technology and social media platforms, have become an integral part of students’ own learning environment. Facebook was favoured by students for group communication and exchange of ideas. They used it to set up meetings, upload files and receive instantaneous feedback on design ideas from other members of the group as described in this statement:

When the picture was uploaded to Facebook, we could all see it, then we could say ‘oh, why don’t we change this to this’ and we could change it in that instant because we saw what it looked like on online media, while we were all there.

Since they checked their newsfeeds constantly, the group was available 24/7 and did not seem to mind that they may be asked to comment on a piece of work in the middle of the night or while out with friends. However, during semester recess there would be a lull, illustrating that communication on Facebook was outcome motivated. Students saw Facebook as their own personal space where they did much of their thinking and collaborating and felt that the presence of their tutor would impact on this free flow of ideas and be seen as surveillance.

Sapp (2004) observed problems arising from technological inequality, when business students in US worked with Cuban students. PACE Stream students received important lessons on how communication can be impacted by the digital divide. The tenuous connections during Skype meetings, the lack of technical support at the partner’s end, quality of hardware, all became important considerations as well as irritation at times. One of the challenges of using Skype was its unreliability, with the connection dropping out at crucial moments, as well as the difficulty of understanding accents without the benefit of body language. After the initial introductions, video was turned off and the meeting was conducted with voice only to avoid lag or disconnection.
However, despite the problems, both the RD coordinator and the students described Skype as a ‘fun’ and easy way to communicate. A student describes how Skype can collapse formal spaces, allowing business to be conducted from anywhere anytime:

He [RD coordinator] was in a taxi at that time. He was Skyping with us formally. It was like a formal meeting but he was in a taxi and we were at a table. You could hear the cars racing by. Motorbikes. That got a bit distracting. Since he is busy you can’t really help that.

The students only used email to communicate with the tutor or the partner and seldom used texts or phone calls, some even describing these as annoying. Dropbox was used to retrieve files or deposit completed projects for the partner or tutor for comments. ILearn, the online teaching platform at Macquarie University, was thought of as “organised and formal” where unit-related material could be accessed. Prezi, the cloud based presentation tool, was new for many students.

The students felt that each technology had its place in their learning environment, as seen in this comment: “I think ILearn and Facebook are about balance. I wouldn’t want to choose one or the other. I would want to use both”. Students had first hand experience of the digital divide when they realised that access to technology such as smart phones is a privilege and not a fact of life for rural Indian youth and could not be included in their communication plan.

The project also led to important learning outcomes for RD staff such as improving their media literacy, thus “upskilling” the whole organisation. They had not used Dropbox and Prezi before, but quickly integrated these into RD’s own organisational communication. They also realised the importance of theory in undergirding campaign design. In this project the NGO treated students as professionals who were providing a service that they really needed, compared to the commercial sector, which treats interns as learners. RD clearly expected material they could use and the students felt the high expectations of them because of the “real” nature of the project, and rose to the occasion accordingly:

We go for donor meetings and we need lots of this material to pitch for our work. Otherwise we would have to pay someone for the skills and we don’t have the money. These are specific skills that not everyone has. We have not modified. We have used them…. The content is brilliant, really brilliant.

Professional courses lend themselves well to the remote model, whereby discipline-specific skills in communication and business, for example, can expand the capacity of NGOs in areas such as
data analysis and policy analysis, which the partner sees as “youth-friendly, user-friendly, not jargon”.

The function of the academic/facilitator is crucial in ensuring that students understand how theories and concepts inform project design. The students are helped throughout the semester with appropriate readings, lecture material and case studies to make sense of the links between theory and practice. In tutorial discussions students are asked to justify the choices they make in relation to target group, media channels and message design. As one student observed, “I would be able to develop a campaign and I would know how to write the report for it, whereas I wouldn’t have before”.

4.3 Challenges

The remote model has immense benefits for intercultural dialogue but it also has its challenges. A lack of geographical context can lead to a fragmented cultural experience. While the students knew more about the culture of the communities in which the campaign was to be implemented, they did not feel that they had actually interacted with the community, as they would in the immersion model. Students met with only one person from the partner organisation online. One student observed “if you are there, you can see other people, you can hear the language, whereas here we are only exposed to a square”. Nevertheless they believed that the experience had given them a greater understanding and respect for another culture.

Students wanted greater interaction with Indian youth (their target group) and recommended that this be implemented in the next project. A possible model would be a peer-based mentoring whereby each group of students could work with cultural guides to enable deeper intercultural dialogue, or in the words of a student “we would have a friend, listen to their problems and make a campaign for them”. Another student explained the relevance of speaking to Indian youth:

We could ask them what they do after school. Even if it is intrusive, we could ask questions like do they know anyone doing drugs, do they know anyone who is sexually active, ask questions about the health systems at school and at home, the whole relationship they have with their parents.

As mentioned earlier, technology also had its challenges. While Skype was easy to use and provided multiple communication modes – audio only, audio and video and instant messaging –
the connection with India proved unreliable on several occasions. Initial introductions were made on video followed by audio only conferencing.

5. Conclusion
Values espoused by global citizenship include commitment to communication and mutual dialogue, mutual respect and tolerance for difference, and global concern for humanity (Stokes, 2004). The study revealed that the communication exchanges provided important lessons in intercultural dialogue, both in real and virtual spaces. The PACE experience allowed the students to reflect on the contextual validity of theory, develop cross-cultural insights and practise skills which have implications for their future career. The experiential learning came from interaction with staff at the NGO, their response to the project brief and development of the campaign. Significantly, it gave students exposure to a transnational working environment in a service-learning context, thereby developing their identity as global citizens. Students identified with the cultural diversity of their own team as a strength and learned how to use ICT and media within a social justice framework. By researching the assigned topic, and critiquing campaigns around the Millennium Development Goals and designing a campaign, they learned to translate classroom knowledge and skills into the work environment. Internet technologies have become part of the daily communication pattern of a new generation of students, who see it as their natural environment in which to learn, play and work. It is thus important to expand students’ use of the global digital network from superficial social interactions towards activities which enable critical thinking skills and active engagement as informed global citizens.
References


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