Reviewer: Noah Mass

Article or Book Title: “Improving Cross-Cultural Communication Through Collaborative Technologies”

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Central Argument of Text

This article was written jointly by Stanford (United States) and Örebro (Sweden) University Professors, and lays out their rationale for Stanford’s Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Program, as well as some of the results of the program’s early trials. The authors’ stated purpose for the program is that, by creating “globally-distributed teams” of students, the partner classrooms “can influence people to approach cross-cultural communications with greater political understanding, ethical awareness, and intercultural competencies in order to bring about improved international and social relations.” That is, the “application of persuasive digital technologies” in these classroom partnerships is a “mode and apparatus” for “changing attitudes about cultures” (1).

CCR-Relevant Points

- Theoretical Points of Interest

The authors underscore their emphasis on encouraging partnerships across intercultural contexts with reference to writings by Carl Lovitt and Dixie Goswami, as well as Dean Barnlund and Fred Edmund Jandt. They sum up their reading of the critical literature thus: “teachers need to know how to instruct students in intercultural rhetoric, that is, how to persuade people to understand the way in which others located in different global contexts perceive, analyze, and produce situated knowledge” (2).

The authors do acknowledge possible pitfalls in such a cross-cultural project, citing Ronald and Suzanne Scollon’s emphasis on “partial attention to specific cultural factors [. . .] at the expense of other interpersonal and cultural factors that influence the site of transnational exchange and understanding” (2). However, they do not focus specifically on possible misunderstandings between the populations of the actual partner schools in this study, so readers must assume that this particular pilot program, while it tests out pedagogical and communications technologies, is not aiming to resolve any particular cross-cultural disputes between students in the member countries. Rather, this project “builds on current scholarly literature and research to offer a model of pedagogical instruction and
cross-cultural learning using ICTs (information and communication technologies) to develop innovative classroom practices with persuasive, social end-goals

- **Practical Issues Raised**

The collaborative projects include “collaborative analysis of different texts (online ads, websites, political speeches, and cultural artifacts) [. . .],” and “in-class video exchanges between student pairs during which time they actively engage in more individualized collaboration leading to a deliverable (a written text, an oral presentation) that is shared with the class as a whole at the end of the session.” (4). The specifics of these projects—exactly what the students were analyzing, what the exchanges were based on—is not made clear in this article, although the web address for the online collaborations, at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/ccr](http://www.stanford.edu/group/ccr), is listed, and several of the actual collaborations can be found there.

**CCR-Related Problems Raised by the Text**

What I think lies in the background of this project, but is left unstated in the article, is a specific connection between the teaching of rhetoric as such and “cross-cultural competency.” Ease of communication between cultures seems to be the authors’ solution to inter-cultural insensitivity, but the projects themselves imply that it is the teaching and study of rhetoric that is the means by which cultures can become more interconnected. I can imagine why the authors’ might shy away from such an approach, with its undercurrent of cultural imperialism and the tyranny of Western-based intellectual traditions. But that notion does seem to be at work in these classrooms, and this article makes us think about the implications of “the internationalization” of rhetoric. We might wonder: is there a “global approach” to rhetoric teaching that we can think about, should we consider adapting this type of project to our own ends?

**Solutions Offered**

As we all know, merely giving students, or anyone, the ability to connect with someone internationally doesn’t necessarily mean that the participants in the exchange will be come more “sensitive” to one another—in fact, the opposite is as likely to be the result. But then, the authors don’t seem to be measuring actual intercultural competency between the two partnering cultures—namely the U.S. and Sweden—as an outcome, nor do they say what metric they would use to measure such competence.

However, we can examine several project proposals on the CCR blog, at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/ccr/collabblog/](http://www.stanford.edu/group/ccr/collabblog/), as well as reports from student group projects at [http://ccr.stanford.edu/bloghome.htm](http://ccr.stanford.edu/bloghome.htm). None of these are referenced in so many words in the article, but the posts on the collaborations show some interesting results. The main focus, as we might imagine, is on audience; that is, how might American students, when partnered with Swedish students as well as with participating
students in the American University of Cairo, have different concepts of what counts as the “audience” for a piece of rhetoric? How might a project such as this ask both sets of students to consider multiple, and international, audiences for a piece of rhetoric that they might not have considered otherwise?

In my opinion, such an emphasis can certainly lead to “sensitivity” to unfamiliar cultures, but I think that the emphasis of the projects themselves might have to be directed along particular social and political lines if the project really intends to resolve “misunderstandings that can lead to conflagrations” of the type the authors reference in their essay.