

Language Education, Global Competency, and the Web

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Students and educators who move into the cyber-realm are amazed by the sheer volume of information and new modes of exchange available to them. They are thunderstruck—perhaps like Hellenistic visitors to the Library of Alexandria—as they see the vast cyber-universe unfold before them. Contemporary college and university administrators and academics pause to consider how they should use these vast and interconnected cyber-resources. Should they supplement curricula with web-supported classes and so expand the postmodern cyber-experience for college students? If so, which cyber-strategies might support their goals? Should they fund and create web-supported courses? Should they fund and create web-based courses? Should they fund and create eCampuses to coordinate forays into the four corners of this Brave New World? Academics are presently debating these questions .

Educators and administrators are weighing the costs and benefits of implementing web-supported learning in higher education, including college-based English language programs. There is—in some quarters—a great deal of resistance to web-supported learning. Yet statistics show that more and more students are enrolling in web-supported or web-based college classes. Students who cannot locate web-supported or web-based classes locally are seeking those classes at other institutions within their own country or through eCampuses, especially in the United States and Europe.

There are many reasons students enroll in web-supported or web-based classes. Current research suggests that web-supported learning is valuable on many levels. Bolter (1991), Branzburg (2002), Bernstein (1998), among others, have noted that web-supported learning helps faculty to reach and engage college students in unprecedented ways. One added advantage of web-supported learning is that it can play an important role not only in energizing the English language curriculum but also in internationalizing post-secondary education and promoting global competency. Altbach (2002) offers helpful definitions of globalization and internationalization in the context of higher education: “In broad terms, globalization refers to trends in higher education that have cross-national implications [while] internationalization refers to the specific policies and initiatives of individual academic institutions, systems, or countries that deal with global trends” (p. 29).

We live in an increasingly small, increasingly dynamic, and increasingly interconnected global village because of the web. There are certainly other factors in this equation—but the web has created and continues to create new and rapid ways of interacting that had not existed (in quite the same fashion) before the information age. Branzburg (2002) notes that “an increasingly wired world means more opportunities for cross-cultural experience” (p. 2). This article argues that focused web-supported learning simultaneously advances the goals of international education. Web-supported initiatives can help universities and colleges 1) reach a wide variety of learners, 2) expand the learning environment, 3) facilitate

unprecedented modes of exchange, 4) provoke critical thinking and openness to other cultures, and 5) equip college students with the invaluable technological skills required in today's complex, highly technological, and increasingly global workforce. A report by the ACIIE and The Stanley Foundation concludes that "to ensure the survival and well being of our communities, it is imperative that colleges develop a globally and multi-culturally competent citizenry" (1995, Preface). Web supported learning can and should play a pragmatic role in this process.

Web-supported curricula foster a sense of global community

One of the advantages of web-supported learning is the sense of global community and interactivity that the global web can provide. Connecting students through technology allows the student to become part of a truly global community. Universities are becoming electronically linked and many provide venues for exchange and exploration of parallel curricula by faculty and students. Students can communicate in their native language or a foreign language with other students and experts throughout the world using e-mail, listserv discussions, MOO's (Multi-user - Object-Oriented database), and MUD's (Multi-User Dimension database). Information and ideas can be exchanged rapidly through a wide range of academic and international venues. This type of cyber exchange promotes "inter-cultural skills and direct experiences" with students from other cultures (ACIIE, 1997, p. 3).

Global collaboration among students is fostered and the quality of completed assignments is often higher because students have better access to resources and greater reach. Fewer than 10 percent of American undergraduates now study abroad, and international students make up only a fraction of U.S. college enrollment overall (claim made by U.S. Senator Zell Miller, cited in Garmon 2000). (The Institute of International Education compiles data on international students in the U.S. higher education annually, cf. Davis, Open Doors, 2002.). This pattern is the case in many university settings around the world, including Mexico. Cyber-venues can advance intercultural experience.

One such venue is ePALS.com—a global classroom exchange at <http://www.epals.com>. Students can register by logging onto the ePALS Web site, completing profiles, and accessing discussions specific to their age group. There are discussions for post-secondary students and post-secondary instructors—who can also use the web site in a web-supported context-specific (Humanities, for example) classroom. This global exchange is an interesting and productive way for students to learn about other cultures via the web, to improve and expand English skills, and to make friendships that may lead to home stays and study abroad. Branzburg (2002) comments that "online experiences enhance face-to-face experiences, and vice versa" (http://www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/TL/2002/11/whatworks.html).

In another approach, the global classroom uses e-mail to promote curricular development in higher education. Pairs of faculty from different nations are linked by discipline to jointly develop curricula and teach students in the U.S. and abroad by engaging them in important contemporary debates that are focused on global issues. Students subscribe to an e-mail listserv by contacting

listserv@uriacc.uri.edu. This idea can readily be applied to Mexican educators and their colleagues in other countries. Projects like this enable faculty to stay current about issues that directly affect their teaching. Such cyber-activities increase the intercultural experience of students, can and should affect the undergraduate curriculum, including the English-language curriculum, and can involve students in international activities and collaboration in trans-national research. Green and Bauer (2001) note that "many international collaborations involve relatively few students" (p.24), but this is hardly the case with cyber- collaborations. Since the late 1990's, more than 20,000 students in over 100 countries have logged onto ePALS to exchange ideas, learn about other cultures, experience other ways of life, and network while thousands have participated in the global classroom.

Web-supported initiatives promote critical thinking and openness to other cultures

Green and Bauer (2001) observe that "knowledge and first hand experience of those who are culturally different can be a powerful antidote to prejudice and intolerance" and state that such exposure can be accomplished "through study or work abroad, service learning, or learning about other cultures in the curriculum and co-curriculum" (p. 16). Students can move beyond the limited views by participating in critical conversations and exchanges with other students from all over the world via the web.

In 1998, faculty at Georgia State University concluded that one significant benefit of web-supported courses related to improved critical thinking. Developing students' critical thinking skills is an important goal for any educational institution, and even more important today since development of these skills has often been overlooked in many nations' education systems. Studies found that students are greatly empowered by learning how to access web resources. They frequently become independent learners motivated to explore topics on their own. They also develop strong critical thinking skills due to the interactive nature of the web. Students greatly expand on the information received by making use of links to related sites. Many students will click on a link much more readily than obtaining a print resource identified in a bibliography (Georgia State University, 1998).

There are other advantages to web-supported initiatives. Providing instruction on accessing information using the web, on-line databases, and other technology-based resources can supplement a university library that may not have adequate resources for students. Also, web forums can provide international venues in which students can express their views (about war and peace for example) in an international context. A group called Empower Peace coordinated Internet videoconferences for students to exchange information about their lives with their international peers. Students from Boston and Bahrain connected via videoconferencing, and these videoconferences were streamed for the Internet via www.empowerpeace.com.

Such experiences can also prepare students for future exchange programs—in which they can also complete on-line coursework while overseas. They can then continue to communicate and interact with acquaintances abroad via the web. This type of sustained exposure can provide students with new and broader

ways of looking at the world and their individual role in the world as well as provide an opportunity for greater exposure to the English language. Such experiences can encourage students to re-examine and re-think conventional and isolationist perspectives in favor of more international approaches. Web-supported learning can help students strengthen and exercise the critical thinking skills that are at the heart of global competence. The student who thinks critically is less likely to accept the arbitrary and prejudicial rhetoric of his/her immediate environment—but will call convention into question by using a dialectical model based upon greater knowledge of the world. The student who knows about a variety of world religions may be less discriminatory than the student who knows nothing of other religions (but who may have been taught that there is only one legitimate religion). It is easier to question the standards of one's own society if one knows something about how things work in other countries and in the world at large. It is easier to accept the "diversity, commonalities, and interdependence" in the world—as well as "the importance of all peoples" if one can get glimpses of other places and have encounters with other peoples (ACIIE, 1997, p.3). These experiences empower and promote growth. Critical thinking also prompts one to "accept the responsibility for global citizenship" (ACIIE, 1997, p.3). One has to first move beyond the narrow constraints of parochialism and nationalism to recognize one's place in and responsibility to a greater global domain.

Web-supported learning equips students with technological skills required in today's high tech global workforce

University students will become technologically savvy in many ways as they explore exciting new cyber-horizons. They will learn how to use numerous technology-based applications such as e-mail, listservs, graphics programs, PowerPoint and HTML. These are considered essential skills for today's global workforce. Students who are exposed to web-supported learning become more comfortable with postmodern technology, overcome anxiety regarding technology, and are thus better equipped to explore the potential of technological applications. They are also more likely to recognize global systems and their connectedness if they have some solid intercultural web experience (via cyber-immersion, virtual travel, discussion forums, and foreign language exchange). Green and Bauer (2001) argue that "many careers are potentially international and all sectors need employees prepared to work in a globalized world. Communities around the world which were isolated in the past are becoming contributors in the global crossroads; the need for international competence is surfacing in unexpected places" (p. 16).

There is an obvious relationship between the expansion of the information age and the increased demand for information age workers who have both technological and intercultural savvy. Universities need to provide workers who possess a more multi-cultural, multi-lingual, global perspective. Students who develop global competency will be more effective employees and more effective citizens. Universities can serve students well by providing them with the technological, diplomatic, and foreign language skills required in many economic sectors (for example, sales, banking, transportation, and tourism). Leu (2001) explains that globalization, information economies, and new forms of economic competi-

tion mean that the problem-information-resolution-communication process now takes place within collaborative teams that (more often than not) rely on the web for information and communication: this means that “the world of work has changed” (p. 568). Leu concludes that “to remain static is to become obsolete” and observes that this principle applies to all types of organizations—including educational institutions (p. 584).

Conclusion

Garmon (2000) summarizes the importance of cyber-learning as follows:

After aggressively promoting the open door, colleges must provide high-level skills to students. These should be problem-solving skills that are individualized to fit the needs of each student. Access to cyber learning is as important as is access to on-campus learning. Students should have electronic access to learn at any place and at any time, but also enjoy the opportunity to benefit from highly interactive teaching and learning in the classroom, laboratory, and on the job (p. 4).

The potential of new technology in college education is revolutionary. Web-supported learning has many advantages—and one advantage is that it contributes to the enhancement of global competencies, including language competencies. Universities can serve their students by capitalizing on the interactivity, the interconnectedness, and the global edge that the web fosters. Colleges and universities can use web course tools to accommodate diverse learning styles, expand learning environments, provoke critical thinking, and equip their students with the technological skills they require to survive in the global workforce. Educators and administrators interested in using the web to enhance global competency in the general education curriculum must continue to focus on goals and outcomes. They need to ask themselves the following questions to help guide their thinking as they move forward into a global and digital age:

- To what extent is global learning articulated as a goal of undergraduate education at the institution? How is it defined?
- Does the institution's general-education curriculum include global perspectives?
- Do collaborative activities with institutions in other countries affect the experience of undergraduates?
- Do the international activities of faculty members have an impact on undergraduates?
- How does the institution implicitly or explicitly encourage or discourage study abroad?
- How does the institution review and assess the global dimension of undergraduate education? (Green and Bauer, 2001, p. 24).

All of these pragmatic questions must be explored if educational institutions hope to promote web-focused global competency.

One can look back at another time and place, very distant in time and space, but a place that nonetheless was facing new horizons, a new threshold of expanding ideas much like the present. During the Renaissance people were exploring concepts, beliefs, and ideas, new and old. People were traveling, meeting, and mixing. Opinions were being exchanged and debated. Those times are being mirrored today in the Postmodern cyber experience. The civic centers of the Ren-

aissance cities were dynamic because there was so much emphasis on great conversation and dynamic international exchange. As educators, we must take advantage of the new opportunities that technology offers in order to continue and expand this interchange.

Whether one is in Renaissance Florence or 21st Century Tijuana or Managua, conversation and dynamic international exchange often enrich civilization and lead to increased understanding and open-mindedness. We can find great conversation and dynamic international exchange today—and unquestionably via the web. Cyber- experiences can be broadening on many levels and certainly in academia. Universities can use a variety of web-supported strategies to support their pedagogical goals and extend the learning environment beyond traditional boundaries—and into promising new global directions. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges of the United States is convinced that universities must employ new technologies to transform access, speed the generation and diffusion of knowledge, transcend the dimensions of time and space, accelerate economic development, and connect our institutions with their communities, states, and the rest of the world (Magrath, 2000). I daresay that educational institutions everywhere should work toward those same goals.

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