

Søndergaard, M., Calás, M.B. and **Donnelly, P.** (2004) 'At a Distance: Learning about Cross-cultural Virtual Teams in an International Management Course', in C. Wankel and R. DeFillippi (eds) *The Cutting Edge of International Management Education*, pp.167-200. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

**AT A DISTANCE:
LEARNING ABOUT CROSS-CULTURAL VIRTUAL TEAMS
IN AN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT COURSE**

(Abbreviated Title – Learning From Cross-Cultural Virtual Teams In International Courses)

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Final Draft
February 2004

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ABSTRACT

This chapter narrates our experiences designing and teaching an international management course which was technologically enhanced to include cross-cultural interactions between the US and Denmark. Our rationale, that issues regarding globalization have accelerated the need to bring together through virtual means people from different cultures to engage in collaborative performance at a distance, was addressed in the context of theoretical concerns regarding cultural differences. We discuss the theoretical premises on which we based the course, illustrate the three core distance activities that we designed for these purposes, evaluate the general outcome in light of our objectives, and assess their value for others engaged in teaching courses such as ours. At the end, we link our experiences to broader issues pertaining to distance-education in today's university environments.

INTRODUCTION

GLOBALIZATION, TECHNOLOGICAL HYPE, AND TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION

Among the most typical assertions about “globalization” these days are those that equate information technologies with a woven world of distant encounters and instant connections (e.g., Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998). In these views, people between and within organizations and nations become connected in such a way that they end up configuring a boundaryless and mobile economy, full of complexities which are difficult if not impossible to control from any one point or institution.

Several other discourses of “globalization” assert a need to prepare students for the information-based jobs of the “global village” (Dimitriades & Kamberelis, 1997; Fulton, 1998; Miller, 1995; Molnar, 1997; SCANS, 1991), to make sure that they become capable of dealing with “a world increasingly constituted by and through rapidly developing technological apparatuses” (Dimitriades & Kamberelis, 1997: 138). Still others consider that the “global citizen” will need to develop a better sense of interconnections between cultural, social, technological, economic and representational phenomena, for the “global culture” is an on-going and complex contest between sameness and difference which is often technologically produced and mediated (Appadurai, 1990).

While not without criticism (Altbach, 2000; Brender, 2001; Wesley-Smith, 2003), issues of globalization have, indeed, accelerated interest in bringing together through information technologies people from different cultures who, for whatever reason, may need to engage in collaborative performance at a distance (Adam, Awerbuch, Slonim, Wegner, & Yesha, 1997; Drexler et al., 2000; Efendioglu & Murray, 2000; Johnson, 1999; Lelong & Fearnley-Sander, 1999; Osland et al., this volume; Rice, 1996). It has also become clearer that technological

mediation has the potential to exacerbate language and cultural issues (e.g., Wesley-Smith, 2003). No surprise, then, that the use of information technology and its intersection with cultural issues in international business activities and pedagogy is gaining increased attention (American Society for Training & Development, 2003; Huff, 2001; Klein, & Partridge, 2003; Sitze, 2002; Wheeler, 1998).

In particular, as virtual teams have become more prevalent among transnational organizations, both the academic and the more popular literatures on “multicultural teams” increasingly address technological mediation and its cultural implications (e.g., Daly, 1996; Day, Dosa, & Jorgensen, 1995; Laroche, 2001; Lazear, 1999; McCain, 1996; Myers, 1992; Neale & Mindel, 1992; Singelis, 2000). For example, Kiser (1999) describes a situation at Royal Dutch Shell where English was the agreed upon virtual teams’ common language and, therefore, assumptions were made about the ease in communication. Yet, Dutch team members felt that their US colleagues were talking in code, especially when colloquialisms were used. The US team members, on the other hand, argued that their Dutch counterparts had a preference for structure, wanting excessive details about the process, how it would work, and who would make decisions.

Shell’s experiences are supported by other writers. For example, Hiltz and Wellman note that computer-mediated communication “seems good for giving and receiving information, opinions and suggestions; [but that] it is less suited for communicating agreement and disagreement; and it is worst for social-emotional tasks involving conflict and negotiation” (1997: 45). Others, such as Cellich (2001), consider that international business negotiations over the Internet should be made on a selective basis and, ideally, as a preamble to arrangements for actual face-to-face negotiations, while Andres (2002) reports results that indicate team

productivity to be superior in face-to-face settings over videoconferencing settings. In fact, Shell and ABB, among others, have found that traveling to meet face-to-face is still a necessary element for a virtual team's success.

As this brief discussion illustrates, there are very concrete intersections between the practical, the pedagogical and the theoretical regarding technological mediation under globalization which could be integrated as content in international management courses. These arguments come alive, beyond the hype, in the microcosm of our own academic work as international management professors. New technologies for our everyday work and, in particular, the teaching environment, stress, experientially and concretely, the complex relationships that ensue because of technological mediation between different actors.

We, as scholars living and working in universities around the world, collaborate now with one another more readily than ever before, given the "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1989: 240 ff.) of our academic milieu. Concurrently, the transnational management literature through which we teach provides ready-to-hand insights into the workings of business corporations, where the interaction and integration of important organizational units located throughout the globe is represented as a business imperative. Yet, our students are, more often than not, located in a classroom, in a particular course, in a university, within a country. They constantly face the contradictions between the "international/global" arguments in our courses and their lack of lived experience with such arguments. At the same time, they are often caught between current ubiquitous portrayals of "distance learning" as education "anywhere, any time, any place" and the constraints of their experiences as bounded in time and space.

This chapter engages with these issues through a narrative of our experiences: designing and teaching an international management course which was technologically enhanced to

facilitate cross-cultural teamwork at a distance between the US and Denmark. The rationale which we followed was based on our own personal experiences as “connected academics,” the contradictions experienced by our students regarding their relationships to distance-based and computer-mediated activities in their own local educational contexts, as well as reports from the international management literature regarding virtual business activities. In our view, it was by explicitly articulating these intersections in the concrete context of classroom activities that students would be able to experience the advantages and limitations pertaining to distance and virtual information and communication, as well as practice with the possibilities of their new identities as “global citizens.”

However, as we started to consider several years ago ways to use technology in our international management courses, it was conceptual issues regarding cultural differences that were our primary concern. And thus, as may be gleaned through the paragraphs that follow, we found ourselves supporting the uses of information technologies in the instructional process not as an unavoidable reality in the context of globalization nor as the latest tool for international business problem-solving. In fact, we were not even concerned with debates around distance-education, which were then not as prevalent as they are today. Rather, we found ourselves eventually involved in these debates while trying to do something perhaps more modest from a technological perspective and more complicated from a theoretical perspective. As we saw it then, the technology was simply a means to enhancing experiences of cultural differences that are difficult to obtain within conventional classrooms. Since then we have learned much more.

In the rest of the chapter, we discuss first the theoretical provenance of our activities. Second we describe the three exercises that we designed and how we used them in our courses in two different semesters. In each instance, we discuss our results and evaluate the more general

outcome of these activities in light of our theoretical objectives. We also assess their value for others engaged in teaching courses such as ours. Finally, we link our experiences to broader issues pertaining to distance education in today's university environments.

DEFYING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS:

INCOMMENSURABILITY, HYBRIDIZATION AND COMMON INTERESTS

Encountering Incommensurability

As we started to design technologically mediated exercises, our primary interest stemmed from the theoretical positions we take in our courses regarding "cross-cultural differences." They also stemmed from difficulties that we had encountered trying to provide experiential knowledge about these differences. Specifically, most courses that consider cross-cultural issues often assume the possibility of cultural comparisons. However, this assumption has been thoroughly challenged through concepts of cultural incommensurability from both inside and outside the organizational literatures (e.g., Adler, 1984; Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991; Clifford, 1986; Czarniawska, 1998; Geertz, 1983; Hofstede, 1980; 1993; Kaghan & Phillips, 1998; Kuhn, 1970; Laurent, 1983; Redding, 1994; Taylor, 1985).

That is, to compare implies that the issues under comparison can translate into one another, or that they can be evaluated in relation to a neutral standard. Said differently, "cross-cultural" often assumes equivalence across cultures. Yet, differences may be incommensurable when they belong to different systems of understanding or, to use a much abused term, when they belong to different paradigms. Further, to say "cross-cultural comparisons" is also to conceal the fact that there are no "neutral" standards for comparison since all "standards" are cultural creations. To say "standard" is to depict the normalizing premises of some cultures but not of others. It is also to promote cultural universalism.

Therefore, despite assumptions of sensitivity to the uniqueness of different cultures, “cross-cultural” arguments often promote uncritical cultural universalism as they search for generalizable frames for comparison and understanding. Adler (1997), among other critics of universalism, cautions that cross-cultural miscommunication frequently results from the lack of cultural self-awareness or the ignorance associated with not knowing one's own cultural conditioning, subconscious cultural blinders or the lack of conscious attention to specific cultural assumptions (Hofstede, 2001). Lack of cultural self-awareness often provokes projected similarity, meaning the belief that people are more similar to one self than they actually are. Such beliefs may bring about inappropriate behaviors that exacerbate further misinterpretations by all members in the situation.

Critiques of cultural universalism appear, as well, in the globalization literature. In this case the critiques are directed to those who equate globalization with expectations of cultural homogenization. For instance, Barber (1995) argues that there are clear tensions between Western homogenization and the fragmentation promoted by a multiplicity of other cultural and religious understandings, which undermine the possibility of a common global democratic future. Similarly, Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham (1996) show that despite the apparent influence of Western television the world over, audiences receive and respond differently to these influences along regional lines. In fact, these media may encourage new regional differences, supported by common cultural, linguistic and historical connections.

Thinking Hybridization

In short, assumptions of cultural homogenization (or Westernization, or “Americanization”) under premises of globalization are often greatly exaggerated. These assumptions may also stem from simplifications of more complex processes, including lack of

attention to the appearance of newer cultural formations brought about by increasing contacts between world societies, which go unrecognized through conventional analyses focusing on static cultural differences or similarities. Known as cultural hybridization, this latter perspective posits the emergence of cultural forms and identities that are “something else” than whatever existed before (e.g., Pieterse, 1995). These arguments extend beyond discussions of cultural divergence vs. convergence in earlier international management debates (e.g., Kerr, 1983), for as noticed by Schneider & Barsoux (2003: 113-114), there is continued divergence of management practices despite increased internationalization since 1980.

The emergence of hybrid cultural forms and identities in any society is better understood as processes of hybridization, as active components of cultural change. These may happen through casual encounters of different human activities, such as when traditional crafts in a society introduce some changes in design inspired by contacts with members of another society. Similarly, social movements as much as intentional and unintentional appropriations and resignifications of particular social, economic and political forces and symbols, transform and reconfigure, on an ongoing basis, whatever was there before (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Escobar, 1995; García-Canclini, 1990).

Under conventional cross-cultural premises, these changes would be erroneously read as “cultural evolution” assumed to be occurring over long periods of time. In fact, often descriptions of cultural change (i.e., fast or slow) are used to classify societies for comparative purposes into problematic value-laden terms such as “modern or traditional,” whereby the former (often associated with industrialized societies) are represented as more prone to rapid change than the latter (often, but not necessarily, associated with non-industrialized societies). This is an issue of particular relevance in US classrooms, for assumptions are often made as if the US was

the arbiter of “modernization” and “innovation” and, therefore, as if levels of “modernization” should be judged according to each country’s standing in an (imaginary) scale in reference to the US.

Classificatory terms of this type already tilt the odds regarding who gets to know whom and in whose terms. Almost by definition, “modern societies” would be less likely to be known by traditional societies, for they are more prone to undergo fast changes, while the opposite would be true for “traditional societies,” whose almost static way of being is represented as easily knowable. Expectations of this type further create hierarchies regarding types of knowledge, as well as who is the known and the knowing subject. That is, “the modern,” including implicitly the society where the classificatory scheme was created, is privileged over “traditional” ways of understanding.

Nonetheless, even in the unlikely case that in the past societies could be differentiated according to their pace of cultural change, under premises of globalization there is no reason to expect that at present cultural change in any society in the world would be “evolutionary.” Rather the exponential increase in contacts between all societies (no need to use invidious comparisons), whose traditions of all kinds have now become currency in circulation throughout the global marketplace, would defy expectations of eventual stability of one or another transformed cultural form, or the appearance of settled cultural identities. These contacts include the actual migration of people as well as increased traveling and newer modes of communication, including information technologies, which bring acceleration of cultural hybridization as an ongoing process of cultural (trans)formation.

From the perspective of cultural hybridization, thus, the theoretical premises that support “cross-cultural comparisons” represent an unreflective, static and outmoded way of thinking.

That is, the notion of cross-cultural comparisons have always tended to leave out or depreciate certain traditions given the cultural blinders located within its own premises; at present they also leave out the actual processes of cultural transformation that better represent the contemporary world.

Forging Common Interests

Finally, recent cultural theorizations, which in principle accept formulations of cultural incommensurability as well as hybridization, have been concerned with the excessive focus on differences forwarded by these formulations at the expense of noticing possible relational practices between and within members of different societies. These concerns address the aftermath, to put it metaphorically, of thinking at the edge of borderlands. Said differently, the arguments that sustain cultural incommensurability emphasize that which cannot be comprehended as societies face each other, which is also a way to establish a boundary against comprehending that which could be common to both. The arguments that sustain cultural hybridization, on the other hand, emphasize comprehending what is emerging, what is constantly becoming, which puts a boundary against comprehending what is still there; the traces that may have been left behind. In either case, a question remains: is there a place where members of different societies can still find something in common? (e.g., Esteva & Prakash, 1998)

The metaphor of borderlands, a common ground rather than a dividing line, has been mobilized by several authors to emphasize a space where societies could encounter each other, whether in their historical differences or in their newly found common causes (Anzaldúa, 1987; Michaelsen & Johnson, 1997; Saldívar, 1997). These views focus on ways to creating new linkages among people, and on a space to articulate their particular interests while confronting the forces brought about by globalization ---i.e., forces that do not benefit all people nor attend to

all human interests. That is, these views focus on both cultural commonalities and differences not as given but as circumstances that can be mobilized to construct new common grounds (e.g., consider the World Social Forum as response to the World Economic Forum). They emphasize local circumstances, what is particular to each place, in the face of what is global, such as what the majority of the people in the world may experience as part of global economic expansion at the expense of their own local interest. These are, indeed, critical views that bring up issues of power relations so often concealed by the apparently benign “cross-cultural” rubric.

Mohanty (2003) expresses similar arguments, under the concept of “common interests,” in terms of what they mean for the pedagogical context. In her words, “[m]y recurring question is how pedagogies can supplement, consolidate or resist the dominant logic of globalization. How do students learn about the inequities among women and men around the world?... I look to create pedagogies that allow students to see the complexities, singularities and interconnections between communities... such that power, privilege, agency and dissent can be made visible and engaged with” (2003: 523).

From Theoretical Loftiness to the Everydayness of Classrooms

The discussion above undergirds many issues that we, as instructors of contemporary international management courses, hope to be able to “translate” into the fundamentals of our courses. Past experiences had taught us that most students who enter our courses, either as upper division undergraduates or MBA students, expect to deal with cross-cultural comparisons in a fairly straightforward manner. That is, more often than not they assume that “cultures” are easy to compare, as if they exist in a fairly static and well bounded condition, within a hierarchical scale normed through “levels of development” or in measurable multidimensional spaces representing “cultural distance” and/or “cultural clusters.” Thus, our challenge is to be able to

weave-in other possible, more processual and critical, modes of thinking while easing the transition between their original expectations and the unexpected complications of the topic.

The fundamental complexity of these issues creates specific challenges for international management courses. More “practical” concerns repeatedly become the center of attention, for instance how to communicate across cultures or how to make decisions that take into account cultural differences--- even if incommensurability is conceptually acknowledged. Unstated assumptions behind these “practical” concerns hide many facts of incommensurability, for it is more comfortable and feasible for students to assume that differences could be resolved through “mutual understanding” than to address the reality that such understandings may never be possible. In particular, there is clear reluctance to address power relations that may be concealed under apparent “common grounds,” despite the fact that agreements may often be based on “common interests” of groups with little cultural commonalities, which face, nonetheless, a temporary necessity to bind together in “the borderlands.” Consider, for example, the collapse in November 2003 of the WTO meetings in Cancun, under the pressure of a newly formed, and precariously sustained, grouping of an NGO and 21 “developing” nations, whose common interests hinged mostly on issues around agricultural subsidies.

Resistance to addressing critical issues beyond “cultural differences” may appear perhaps more frequently in professional education courses taught under conventional instructional formats. For instance, classroom instruction within a specific country and with students who belong mostly to that country are not conducive to address the problematics of “cross-cultural comparisons.” The situation is not much better in classrooms that include international exchange students. These students often hold in common the fact that they come on exchange assuming “more advanced professional knowledge” outside their own countries, and usually they are a

diverse minority who has to face “the locals” in an on-going basis. Such a situation does not lead easily to classroom discussions where incommensurable cultural issues would be vented or critically questioned, even if they may often be the subtext of apparently more benign cultural interactions. Further, classroom-based cross-cultural simulations used within a single country, even in the best-case scenario (e.g., Bafá-Bafá (Shirts, 1977); Randömia Balloon Factory (Grove & Hallowell, 2001)), fare not much better. They are contrived situations of short duration and there is little “external validity” on which to rely when it comes to learning the difficulties that may ensue in actual cross-cultural interactions.

Thus, in the more general sense, the activities we designed were intended to deepening students’ understanding of cultural differences through actual multicultural encounters while trying to overcome the limitations described above. The mediation by technology in our original intent was the bridge toward fulfilling this objective. This mediation would provide concrete experiences giving local meanings to abstract concepts of “globalization.” It would also be the space where incommensurability, hybridization, and common interest become the norm against expectations of simple “cultural similarities and differences.”

That is, we wanted to produce a reflective knowledge-creating environment that would represent, in form and content, the complex world of which our students were to become a part upon graduation, and enhance at the same time their critical thinking skills about such a world. While we were also interested in exposing our students to the difficulties of working in virtual teams through computer mediated engagements, that was not our central objective, but rather a way to insert or enhance cross-cultural complexities in the assumed commonalities.

DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMWORK AT A DISTANCE

No Virtual Beginning

The immediate situation that prompted the creation of these activities had few virtual components. The two first authors had known each other for several years and had maintained email correspondence over time. We shared a mutual interest in international management and in cultural issues, and often taught similar courses in our respective institutions, which are business schools in public universities in the US northeast and, at the time, in southern Denmark. As a reflective point to our arguments, we each came originally from very different cultural backgrounds, and live in different cultural environments. Experiences with each other as friends and colleagues had, no doubt, influenced our conviction that it was necessary to address cross-cultural complexities in our courses beyond conventional treatments in our management textbooks and other course materials. At the same time, our long-term relationship contributed to our willingness to risk experimenting with these activities, for we had developed a high level of face-to-face trust long before any virtual engagement. The third author was a member of the instructional staff at the US institution working with the second author also for several years, and shared similar experiences, including being a non-US national teaching international courses at a US university.

In 1997, during an informal gathering at a professional conference in the US, we discussed possibilities for combining our common interests in cross-cultural issues and cognition into a teaching experience that could be run jointly through electronic means. At the time we each had already engaged in within-country computer mediated activities with our students and were ready to go the next step, extending these activities into cross-nation exercises. Content-wise, we both were teaching standard international management courses for upper-division

students within the span of a semester, which more or less coincided in dates between February and May.

We taught these courses concurrently in the spring semester of 1998 and again in the spring semester of 2002. Our syllabi were sufficiently similar, and it was not difficult to find dates in which our courses could “come together at a distance.” With the collaboration of the third author, we coordinated our course units such that at certain points in the semester our students would come together through electronic communication to either solve a case or participate in an experiential exercise. Table 1 summarizes details about the students, group design and communication and information technology used each year.

Insert Table 1 about here

First time - 1998. Early in 1998 we finalized our syllabi and agreed to the formation of email cross-national groups. It worked to our advantage that our classes had an identical number of students, which facilitated the organization of these groups as equivalent as possible, including trying to minimize the possibility of single-sex groups. Students in both countries were fairly homogeneous as representative of the majority population in their respective locations.

We deliberately chose a very simple communication tool, namely email, since our concern was to use computers to support human-human interactions rather than human-computer interactions. As indicated, we did not think of the technology as the center of attention but as a simple tool through which our students would easily interact with each other.

There were three levels of communication. The first level was the link between student pairs (pen-pals), which was private between themselves. The second level was through each cross-national group distribution list, which was shared by the students within each group only.

Finally, the third level was shared by all the students in both countries through the common distribution list. As members of the email lists we, instructors and teaching assistants, were able to monitor the decision-making exchanges, and later in class “on location” provide feedback about these processes.

To get used to the media and to each other, once students were paired at the very outset of the semester they were invited by their instructor to start communicating on an informal basis with her or his pen-pal. This occurred even before the distribution lists were created. Students also had some opportunities to practice with the lists before the first exercise (a case) was posted. **Second time - 2002.** In 2002 we did not use the pen-pal approach, but organized the students in virtual teams from the start of the semester. This time we decided to use Web-based discussion boards rather than email because they allowed for threaded discussions.

The creation of these teams was also different from the original approach in 1998. Specifically, the Denmark class was expected to produce group papers and case analyses throughout the semester as part of their course. These groups were organized according to preferred (for them) paper topics and they self-selected to participate in one group or another. When the US students became part of these groups, the Danish groups already had a common history. The US students were an add-on for specific purposes (i.e., the three virtual team activities) throughout the semester.

As we will discuss later, while compared to 1998 these different group arrangements may have contributed to different dynamics during the virtual activities, other differences in the student populations might have contributed as well. The Denmark class was almost double the size of the US class and, therefore, the groups were not only larger but also more unbalanced in terms of number of students from each side. Both classes were also more diverse than the 1998

classes. Further, because of the way the Denmark groups had been structured on a self-selection basis, we had less control over the diversity of each group, including gender, ethnicity and nationality. At the end, the US instructor decided to assign her students to the Denmark groups at random. This action may have contributed even further to certain group dynamics since the Denmark students may have felt more “in control of their fate” than the US students.

The Three Activities

Both in 1998 and 2002 we used the same basic activities, structured in levels of increasing difficulty as described below. The first activity, the discussion of a case (The Islamic Headscarf) occurring in France and addressing highly sensitive cultural issues, happened fairly early in the semester, and was introduced suddenly with a relatively short deadline for completion and posting on the general list or board. This was followed by two other exercises: a set of situations depicting different moments in the trajectory of ABB, from its creation through merger of a Swedish company and a Swiss company to current issues in the life of the company, was presented in mid-semester; and a decision-making simulation (BioTech), considering ethical issues in China, was run almost at the end of the academic year. All these activities pertained to specific subjects within our syllabi: Culture; Organizing for transnational management; and Ethics in international environments. Cross-cultural issues were embedded within all these subjects and enhanced, in our view, through the virtual interactions between our students.

Incommensurability or Hybridization? The Islamic Headscarf. This first activity consisted of a mini-case adapted from the case “The Controversy Over the Islamic Headscarf: Women’s Rights and Cultural Sensibilities” (Phatak, 1997: 166-170). An abridgment of the case as it appeared in this textbook was discussed first in each class (US and Denmark) “on location” and, afterwards, students were asked to communicate with their partners in the other country to

discuss the questions we posed to them and to report back the outcome of such discussions in the following class meeting. In 1998 the discussion took place between pen-pals only, while in 2002 it was the first try-out of the discussion boards.

Briefly, the case pertains to an actual situation that happened in France in September 1994 when the national minister of education issued a directive that banned headscarves from classrooms. In October, police were called in to prevent 22 Muslim girls from entering their school wearing their headscarves. Polls had shown that a majority of the French supported the education minister's decree. The actual controversy included a general perception that the headscarf was a threat to secularism and the separation of religion and state. There was also concern that it would divide Muslim and non-Muslim students, that it would introduce religious influences into the public school, or that it would place undue strain on other students to conform to Islam's dress or moral code. Another claim was that the headscarf constituted a violation of women's human rights despite the fact that the students involved wanted to wear it.

The case, inspired by this issue, illustrates a situation where a fully westernized Iranian Muslim woman, Taraneh, who emigrated to France years before because of religious fundamentalism in her own country, decides to move to the US. Her decision is due to circumstances involving her daughter, who wears the headscarf to school, when the latter becomes part of the controversy described above. The case ends when the woman starts working at a management position in a multinational located in Texas. She has worked there some twenty years before while she was studying in the US. The personnel manager of the company, a Texan male, describes for her how the company has grown since then, the friendly atmosphere of the workplace as well as the multicultural environment, for the company is a leader in the promotion of diversity.

In our view, this case was interesting for our purposes but it was also full of cultural stereotypes regarding the actors in the situation and their particular locations. Thus, we decided to further complicate the situation by adding the following to set the stage for case discussion:

Consider that this is happening now, at this point in time: You are the personnel manager depicted at the end of the case. Now, you have been transferred to the French subsidiary of the company, and you want to bring Taraneh back to France with you since you think she'll help your approach as personnel manager in this subsidiary. The first situation you encounter is that some French managers in the company are objecting to the fact that several women workers, including secretaries, are observing the Islamic dress code. How would you handle this issue? What would you do? Explain the rationale for your answer using your course materials as well as your knowledge of facts behind this case.

While this first assignment could be considered a warm-up exercise to make the students comfortable with the technology and the time lags in communication, clearly the substance of the case was in itself important for issues of cross-cultural differences. The actual case situation occurred in a third country (France) that was a foreign location for both the US and Denmark students in 1998 (there were a few French students in the Denmark class in 2002 but this did not seem to affect the discussion, compared to 1998). It also portrayed general circumstances that are subject to much Western cultural stereotyping of women in Islam (e.g., Czarniawska & Calás, 1997).

Both times not all students communicated with their counterparts, but those who did reported back in class the similarities (a good deal) and differences (modest) in their opinions. Not surprisingly, the similarities referred to common (in the West) women in Islam stereotypes. This offered an opportunity to discuss in class the formation of cultural stereotypes regarding

migrant populations to Western countries and highlight hybridization that occurs through cultural contacts, including whether Taraneh presumed assimilation to Western norms could be perhaps a simplistic explanation. Would she be a “cultural translator” when back in France? Would the situation look different now than when she left France because of her daughter? Is a dress code necessarily a sign of oppression? Who defines what is a non-oppressed woman?

The assumed modest differences, however, provided an even richer discussion since students in Denmark were more aware of the conditions in France than were the US students, as well as more experienced with immigrant situations than their US counterparts. To a certain extent, the discussion became the occasion to remark the fundamental differences in the experiences and expectations of both groups that may have been masked under the common focus on the women in this case. In Denmark the issue itself was of importance in the immediate local milieu while in the US the argument seemed quite “foreign.” This was not surprising in 1998 given that very few US students would have had any experience with issues of dressing preferences, i.e., under stereotypical notions of “American tolerance for difference.” Yet it is surprising that US students reacted in a similar way in 2002, given the focus on Islamic dressing brought about by the events of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, and the very public arguments associating certain immigrants with terrorist activities.

Altogether, students in Denmark were willing to consider the special circumstances of French institutions under French regulations and the multiplicity of issues brought about within this workplace. In other words, these students saw the situation as quite complex, and not easy to resolve for it included political as well as religious issues, let alone labor and management issues. Students in the US, on the other hand, were fairly adamant about the need for a universal solution based on “diversity training” no matter the location or the actors involved. For them the

situation was a managerial problem that the US manager would be able to solve mostly by himself, often ignoring even the possible mediation by Taraneh. It was the students' own divergent attitudes toward the nature of the problem, as they voiced their own incommensurable premises, that provided a glaring example of the difficulties behind notions of "cross-cultural comparisons" and served as the basis for debriefing at each location.

It is important to remark that in 1998 we had not put much emphasis on the technological mediation used to discuss the case. The focus was the classroom discussion on each location since for this case we had allowed interactions between our students to occur almost on a voluntary basis and we used their self-reports as the basis for discussion. In 2002 this exercise was the try-out for the threaded discussions on the boards and we were able to read what was happening as the discussions went on. Both times we found that student participation was less than we had expected. Still, we expected that those students who had been involved in the interactions would encourage those who had not to become involved in the future, once they reported in class "how much fun they had doing it." Unfortunately, as we will discuss later, this was not always the case.

Common Interests in the Borderlands? Asea Brown Boveri. In 1998 we assigned a case on Asea Brown Boveri (Simons & Bartlett, 1992) and introduced it to the students by mid-semester. This was the first time we were emphasizing "working in virtual groups" in the course, and we introduced the argument by remarking how much the company (ABB) both depended on, and developed, information and communication technologies for their own global operations. In a sense we were creating a situation in which students would experience ABB's notion of being "global and local," by becoming, themselves, "local and global" in order to discuss the case "at a distance."

Students were assigned to work on several questions for the case and discuss them within their own virtual groups through their own group's distribution list. Each group was also required to post on the general list their final answers to the questions a day before the next class meeting, at a specified time. It was important that all groups posted at the same time to prevent any one group from "gathering inspiration" from another group's responses. Time differences between Denmark and the US made it difficult to schedule synchronous activities, and students started to realize the difference that time-lags can make when working "at a distance." While some complained about it, this also provided more realism to our activities. The case was discussed in each class (Denmark and US) using the responses given by the groups.

ABB is perhaps the best representative of the logic of "being local worldwide" among transnational corporations. That in itself could have been an avenue for exploring cross-cultural differences at the core of company policy. However, the students became focused instead on the transnational and global organizational structures pertaining to this company and, in a sense, found there a common "safe ground" on which to allay any difference of opinions.

It should be noted that the topics we were discussing at the time in both locations involved organizing for international business and that the course materials in both our locations, with some exceptions (e.g., Schneider & Barsoux, 1997), were from US-based texts and research. That is, the theoretical arguments pertaining to these topics are not "culturally-neutral" for the literature and research on transnational and global organizations have been mostly generated in the US through this country's conceptualizations of organization theory.

Thus, while in appearance students seemed to become culturally disconnected from the topic such that the discourse of "organization" became their common zone of engagement, their "borderlands for common interests," in fact students from both sides were relying mostly on US

notions of organization theory to articulate their responses. The question of cultural imperialism of organizational theories could have been raised at this point, in particular when ABB adopted English as their lingua franca, but we did not do so at the time. As we will discuss, eventually the question of language also became an issue in our course, but at the point of this case we were unaware of it.

In 2002 we continued to put ABB as the focus of our transnational organization discussions. As starting point we used a case, ABB -Transformers Denmark, (Søndergaard & Naumes, under review). It narrates a situation in Odense when the local plant is about to be transferred to Thailand. We further reconfigured the exercise by extending it beyond the specifics of any written case, and bringing it to the present in time and space, for ABB's organizational structure was changing rapidly at the time, and it was worth it to experience the reality of such a situation.

That is, we created a set of activities which students on both sides would do together through research on the Web, including researching the very rich ABB Website. As indicated, this time the virtual teams had their own discussion boards, and it was possible to maintain threaded discussions. Throughout the length of the ABB exercise (close to a month after mid-semester) students would consult questions posted periodically on the "all participants" board by the instructors and discuss it on their own team's board. At certain pre-established times each group would post their responses on the main board and, as before, these responses would serve as the basis for class discussions.

However, remembering the neglect of "culture" in 1998, this time we included pointed questions that would lead them to discuss some particular cultural aspects of ABB's organizational forms. For instance, we asked students to consider whether the company's

original matrix organization would have been possible as a working organizational form for so many years if certain values (i.e., Nordic) had not been so fully represented through the top management of the organization. This allowed us to extend the discussion of organizational theory as culturally laden by including other possible organizational arrangements that may represent historical, cultural, and institutionalized preferences in different societies (e.g., Ethnic Chinese Business Networks; Mexican Grupos, as well as Nordic and Anglo conceptualizations of “organization”). We emphasized the processual over the structural, and cultural change over permanence by addressing what may have been happening at the company’s local levels (the assumed “being local worldwide”) underneath assumed common global structuring.

Altogether, the design of our first two virtual activities did not differ much from the traditional mode of case teaching, except that the students were required to prepare and conduct class discussions through computer-mediated communications at a distance. This in itself was a valuable experience by illustrating the difficulties of accomplishing tasks in virtual teams, let alone experiencing cultural differences as part of their collaborations. However, it was the third exercise that presented them, and us, with perhaps the more valuable experiences.

The Return of Incommensurability beyond the Borderlands: BioTech China. This third assignment differed from the other two in that student preparation and learning took place via a simulation (rather than a case) in international ethics (Larsen & Rathcke, 1996), based on ethical dilemmas from real life situations. Existing research on the subject of business ethics in international contexts points to the difficulty of arriving at any universal ethical position (e.g., Barker & Cobb, 2000; Cohen, Pant & Sharp, 1992; Payne, 1998; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1997; Vogel, 1992). Through “ethical dilemmas” we sought to further question the possibility of a unitary cultural system under conditions of globalization. This possibility was in fact already

called into question by the prior cases and our debriefing of them, but it was in this exercise that the more dramatic results of our course occurred both in 1998 and in 2002, for the student's dynamics produced new content for debriefing.

The simulation is made up of a series of decision-making situations in which "bribery" figures prominently. These situations occur in the context of a fictive joint venture (BioTech) between a Danish company (BioDana) and a Chinese company (ChenTech). An expatriate manager, a Dane, on a three-year contract to manage the joint venture in China, is confronted with on-going ethical dilemmas, from arrival in China to everyday activities managing the venture. The dilemmas are arranged in levels of increasing complexity and seriousness of consequences, but in association to each other. They range from a request of grease payment for the expatriate to rent a car upon first arrival in China to the company auditor's suspicions of embezzlement by the expatriate, who then invites the expatriate to pay a bribe.

As we used it in this course, in the next to last unit of the semester, the actual simulation was divided into two parts. In the first part, a general description of the case (formation of the joint venture, sending an expatriate to China, etc.) was handed to the students in each "on location" course and assigned as homework for the following class meeting. Also, students were given the first five dilemmas that confronted the Danish manager, and were asked to choose within each virtual group the decisions (among available multiple choices) that each group would have made if they had to face these situations. They also were asked to write down what kind of consequences they expected from those choices.

It was important to have this first part done as homework. The students became fully familiar with the simulation and the details of the case, but also became aware by design of the simulation that their commitments to a particular course of action at one point would influence

their range of choices in later situations. As before, the groups were required to post their responses to the “all participants” email list or discussion board at a particular time prior to the following class meeting.

In 1998 the second part of the simulation occurred in synchronous fashion. We were able to arrange for a class period when both “on location” courses could meet in real-time in a way that was not too disruptive to each course despite the six hour time difference (mid-morning for US; mid-afternoon for Denmark). During this class period the students received from the instructors, via email, the additional seven ethical dilemmas. These were introduced consecutively by the instructors to the virtual groups, allowed to be discussed within groups for a few minutes, and followed by posting each group’s choice to the “all participants” list. The students were also able to offer open-ended decisions (not in multiple choice options) as their responses.

The teaching assistants in each “on location” course, moderated the physical situation and observed the students while they were embedded in the task. At the end of the class period the students were asked to fill out two questionnaires to record their experiences both for process and content of the simulation. Discussion and debriefing of the simulation and group experiences took place during the following class periods “on location.” Regarding the results, our first surprise was that the responses given during the synchronous activity were consistently oriented toward universalism, while there was more variation and more cultural relativistic responses in the earlier asynchronous homework.

The second surprise might nonetheless explain the first. Some of the US participants voiced that the level of interaction with their Denmark counterparts during the synchronous discussions was less than they would have liked, while others noted that their Denmark

counterparts seemed to simply agree with them rather than engage in discussion. Many cultural stereotypes seemed to have emerged at that point regarding “the Danes.” Yet, there were mediating language issues in this situation, in which the Denmark students would take longer to reply as they were making sure that they were communicating correctly in English. Consistent with this, US students considered that their own personal opinions were reflected in the final results a great deal, while the Denmark students considered theirs to be less so. Such discussion clarified the results by reiterating a consistent preference for “universal solutions” on the part of US students, which had already appeared in the “headscarf exercise” and possibly glossed over the “organizational universals” in the ABB discussions.

In 2002 we made some significant changes. Rather than synchronous email interactions, students in each location completed the second part in their “on location” groups (each country’s subset of each virtual group) during their own class meetings. Results from these responses were tallied and posted as tables (Denmark and US responses) on the “all participants” discussion boards. Students were asked to discuss in their virtual groups (through threaded discussions on their boards) the significance of these results. Our questions were guided by arguments about the possibility of “global ethics,” which was part of the course readings (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997), as well as the effects of national vs. transnational “codes of conduct” and regulations for multinational corporations. Further, we also wanted to highlight some more critical points regarding the position of countries in the world economy and how these economic differences affect different populations.

Discussions on the team boards were substantial. There was a higher level of engagement than in the previous (ABB) exercise, and it was clear that the topic of discussion could raise some heated debates. The tables posted on the common board showed that the

Denmark side took once again a more cultural relativist approach toward the issues, often seen as social problems, while the US side was bound to more universalist principles and managerial concerns. The debates that ensued often reflected surprise on the part of the students: That such differences could suddenly appear within groups, that apparently had already taken for granted similarities among their members from the previous exercise, was deemed unthinkable!

LESSONS FROM “A DISTANCE” IN THE “HERE AND NOW”

Below we offer some additional learnings that resulted from these activities. While some stem from our own reflections over experiences with the course, others are based on the observations of the students by the teaching assistants and on the students’ responses to informal questionnaires. We should make clear that these “results” should not be taken as formal research results of any kind. They are the product of a pedagogical exploration about what we thought was possible at the time. Moreover, we did not design the course as a research project, and it was only in the process of learning from the events that unfolded that we thought there was any merit in sharing these experiences more formally with others.

Regarding Our Theoretical Aims

Learning about culture. As we reflect upon how activities and interactions evolved throughout the semester on both occasions, it seems that we did succeed in configuring a situation in which student expectations for more conventional cross-cultural “comparisons” always ended up in more complicated and difficult to grasp cultural issues. That is, from the Islamic Headscarf case on to the BioTech simulation, students were constantly challenged to abandon their comparative premises and to observe that which could not be so easily articulated. As indicated, students were surprised to find out by the end of the BioTech simulation that differences between the two sides remained.

As an illustration, the content of the first case lends itself to discussions about hybridization and incommensurability, but the debriefing process, which included the student inputs, became additional content to complicate the situation in an experiential manner. It was not that the Denmark students were more “relativistic” and the US students more “universalistic” (as an example of something that kept on creeping up in the debriefing of all the activities). Rather, the point we made was that comparative notions such as “relativistic” and “universalistic” may conceal that the label “relativism” could mean something different and not the opposite of “universalism.” Different systems of understanding may be hidden behind these labels.

Specifically in this case, the “relativistic” arguments made by the Denmark students addressed very concrete knowledge of institutional, legal, and historical conditions of immigration in France. In contrast, the “universalistic” premises of US students were a reflection of prior assumptions referring to US management theories, which are supposed to be based on universal principles. Students from each country were paying attention to the case from very different perspectives and, therefore, were repositioning the case within their own preferred (and different) understandings of what the case meant. To a certain extent, they were solving two different cases. As a further point, by debriefing the case in this manner, hybridization may also have happened when we explicitly voiced these theoretical arguments for both locations (how would the students on each side reappropriate and make sense of these arguments over their own prior understandings?). The possibility of incommensurability became, at the same time, a very concrete experiential fact.

Perhaps more interesting were the dynamics created by the students themselves, which were oftentimes unintended but powerfully relevant consequences of our “planned” activities.

One such dynamic worth recalling pertains to language. As indicated above, all the activities plus both courses used English as their language of exchange. In 1998 both courses had a fairly homogeneous composition of students, in which the US class was fully first-language English while the Denmark class was homogeneously Danish with good working knowledge of English. Issues regarding language appeared as a concern from the Denmark side in which they saw themselves at a disadvantage (for instance when responding in synchronous activities, which took longer for them) vis-à-vis the US side.

Things took a different turn in 2002. The Denmark class had 19 nationalities and 16 different languages represented. There were 2 native English speakers out of 68 students. In the US class one student had English as her second language, and English was the native language of the other 38, including all other international students. Thus, the interactions in English from the Denmark side were more difficult not only because of having to interact with the US side, but also when working with each other in Denmark before posting responses to discuss with the US side. Two of us, the original designers of the course, are not native English speakers, thus much of the arguments that we heard from our students truly “spoke” to some of our own experiences and we were quite sympathetic. Perhaps for this same reason, at first we were unaware that something else was also happening.

While our own pedagogical interests were reflected on the formal posting on the boards, the students were enacting their own set of “cultural concerns.” In fact, discussion boards became very contentious grounds. Possibly one third of the groups were functioning “according to plan,” while the rest had decided on other approaches. It was clear that only certain members of each group were participating, which meant that several members of each class did not seem

interested in engaging with each other, but those who did were transforming the boards into new “borderlands.”

It was the international students, both native and non-native English speakers, from both sides who engaged in consistent informal interactions. They seemed quite comfortable using the technology informally, often using bits and pieces of their own native languages interspersed throughout the English lingua franca (hybridization in action!), and seemed to find it pleasant to create and maintain friendships this way. Interestingly, in most cases the cross-postings were between students of different nationalities who seemed to find on the boards the space to address their “common interests” as “the foreigners” in their local classrooms. New groups were formed for these purposes out of our original groupings as students shared freely the board passwords. Alliances were forged among strangers in cyberspace!

In retrospect we now see that the way the course “configured itself” in 2002 closely reflects the realities of a global society. The difficulties that we experienced when we thought that the situation was “out of control” are nothing but a reflection of “the real world” of virtual encounters under conditions of globalization. It is gratifying to know that these experiences are similar to other reports regarding virtual teams and recent literature about doing courses of a similar nature (e.g., Hamada & Scott, 2001; Pauleen, 2003; Schallert & Reed, 2003; Walker & Jeurissen, 2003).

The culture of technology/the culture of the technology. Perhaps the most important learning from these activities is something that we may have missed out of our impetus toward making our theoretical interests come alive through the “virtual teams.” While there is no doubt that the course activities created several situations in which to highlight issues of incommensurability, hybridization and common interests, the one thing we did not consider was

what type of cultural intervention we were making by bringing these different groups of students together. What kind of new cultural form is created by technological mediation in the context of globalization? What is the culture of technology? What is the culture of the technology? What kind of cultural form is the technology?

We were very wary of the hype about using technology in our classrooms given that many of these claims are based on untested assumptions (e.g., Nissenbaum & Walker, 1998). We also had been involved in discussions about introducing technology in educational contexts, which promptly degenerated into the “nuts and bolts” of the technology at the expense of pedagogical aims (e.g., Barab, Thomas & Merrill, 2001; Schutte, 1996). Thus we were probably overly cautious, not allowing ourselves to be seduced by the technology for we did not want to risk losing the objectives of our courses. And yet, for these very reasons, we may have missed bringing into the course the many cultural aspects that are due precisely to and by the technology.

For instance, the technology itself was and is created and used with a strong level of unidirectionality, dictated by the interests of the West (or more precisely the Triad) to the rest, even if we call it “global” ---i.e., whose “common interests” are thus represented? Noticing this is, as well, a way to call attention to the origins of the theories and the texts through which we are teaching “international,” as recognized by Schneider & Barsoux (2003). Similarly, it was neither an accident nor just a matter of convenience, that the lingua franca in our course was English. The majority of the traffic in the Internet is in English, and as more global interactions occur, and as more countries are added to courses like ours and others through distance education, the more likely it is that English will be given preference, since the major producers

of “distance education” are based in Anglo countries ---i.e., forced “commensurability”? What may get lost in that picture?

As discussed above, however, the pace of the required work, as well as time-lags, all contribute to creating unexpected cross-cultural situations that need to be negotiated, often through means others than those “officially sanctioned.” First, the fast pace of activities enabled by the technology as much as the shortening of the distance between the two groups (at least from our perspective) was resisted in more than one way by our own students, who often created their own pace and space in parallel to our expectations. That is, the technology can be used in many different forms, and appropriated by all for many different purposes and “common interests.” Second, this is also an argument in support of hybridization, in which contacts between populations create emerging cultural forms and identities that are more transient and less easily knowable than we often assume.

For example, there were probably new identities in formation, such as many different possibilities for notions of the “global citizen,” represented throughout the playful and informal use of the discussion boards by international students as well as in their refusals to our requirements. This should also be noticed in regards to the “on location” composition of our classrooms, which in the short span of 4 years (1998-2002) changed from homogeneous to diverse, heralding the ethnoscaapes of globalization in the local context which so often escape from view (Appadurai, 1990). The students’ preferred interactions illustrate the new borderlands, which recreate the global in the local and vice-versa.

It seems that there was indeed “a moose in our cyber-room” which we did not want to notice. This was a sorely missed opportunity but also a main learning point for the future.

Evaluating the Virtual Teams

In 1998 we decided to evaluate the students experience with their virtual teams. For that purpose we used a brief questionnaire with open-ended questions, which we repeated in 2002. These were given to the students during the class meeting (in each country) after the last virtual team exercise (BioTech). Based on these responses it is possible to make some general observations about student perceptions and opinions. Table 2 summarizes their experiences.

Insert Table 2 about here

As could be gleaned from Table 2, the perceptions from both groups did not always coincide. In general, Denmark students were more able to detect differences in their interactions with the US students than the other way around, for US students tended, perhaps unreflectively, to report more cooperation and agreement than was perhaps the case. This may also reflect a tendency towards conflict-avoidance, which is so ubiquitous in US managerial literature, as well as assuming that more interactions meant better knowledge (on this point, see Schallert & Reed, 2003).

Technological difficulties were present as a concern on both occasions, and this was further compounded by time concerns. Despite the fact that students were more sophisticated in their use of technology in 2002 than they were in 1998, issues around it kept on surfacing. Preference for face-to-face communication could as well be related to these difficulties, but in 2002 there was also more general agreement that group results were better than if they had worked independently. The latter was exactly the opposite in 1998. Therefore, technological difficulties may hinder what otherwise could be a more generalized trend toward preference for teamwork.

This is a less acknowledged and more mundane issue in our experiences which also points to other limitations faculty and students face when employing information technology in the curriculum. That is, no matter how sophisticated the task, there are technological limitations due to variations in hardware and software used on campus and by students. No surprise, then, that both the business and the instructional literature recommend to maintain technological-mediated interactions as technologically simple as possible (email is a highly recommended approach) no matter how many “bells and whistles” one may consider possible (Solomon, 1998). Oftentimes, technological sophistication becomes so much the center of attention that we forget the purpose for which we wanted to use it.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Today several questions stand at the center of evaluations about the benefits of distance education: Economic issues, including the identity of universities as educational institutions vs. profit making ventures (Victor, 1999; Young, 2001); pedagogical issues regarding course delivery and reception as well as learning outcomes and accreditation (Alavi, Yoo & Vogel, 1997; Webster & Hackley, 1997); technological issues including both questions of adequate technologies for course delivery (Heerema & Rogers, 2001; Mirabito, 1996; Schank, 2001) as well as questions of access for particular populations (Ali, 1999; Gladieux & Swail, 1999; Grill, 1999; International Labour Review, 2001). Perhaps more importantly, there is still paucity of quality research that could document some definitive answers for most of these issues (NEA, 2001; Trinkle, 1999).

While we are “sitting on the fence” in these debates, as they pertain to the elimination of the traditional university and its substitution for “virtual universities,” we do recognize the unique opportunity the Internet represents toward enhancing our efforts assisting students in

constructing new knowledge and in reconstructing existing knowledge. We also recognize that virtual learning situations such as ours raise important questions regarding what we understand by university. Essentially, we had two professors and teaching assistants, from two separate, independent institutions in two different countries, collaborating on teaching an undergraduate course in international management. Each had a class of students physically located at each institution and met with them at the officially scheduled time. Yet, we created a third space, located in cyberspace, where part of our separate courses came together at different points throughout the semester. This space was neither the US nor Denmark, or their local educational institutions, but another institution that transcended the limits of space and time, one that enabled us as educators to collaborate in a way that had not been possible until very recently. Yet, the space we created is different from that generally trotted out in the literature we reviewed in that we have moved beyond merely thinking about transforming our individual bricks-and-mortar institutions into virtual campuses.

We see advantages in continuing to offer courses as individual professors within our institutional boundaries, while also working in the borderlands of cyberspace. This is especially pertinent for those of us teaching courses with an international component. We can more easily incorporate other ways of knowing into our cyberspace classrooms, ways that can potentially introduce colleagues and students from countries around the world to experiences that would otherwise be next to impossible without the available technology. Certain hybrid forms, which include both “on location” and “distance,” seem to be taking the lead in reconfiguring our higher education institutions today towards those ends (e.g., Drexler, et al. 2000; Hamada & Scott, 2001; Lelong & Fearnley-Sander, 1999; Osland et al., this volume). We consider our approaches

as part of this trend; a trend that, in our view, represents best the global/local conditions in which we all live.

Under the premises of globalization, then, it is possible to re-consider instruction through these technologies as a blessing in disguise. That is, these instructional approaches may provide a way to debunk the orientation toward education as an end product with a more or less shortened “shelf-life” (as apologists of the marketization of education through “virtual learning” would lead us to believe) and towards an on-going hybridization process of learning to learn to further our common interests despite our differences.

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TABLE 1

Summary of student characteristics, group design and ICT used, 1998 and 2002

Year courses were taught	1998		2002	
	Denmark	US	Denmark	US
Student characteristics:				
Number	36	36	68	39
National and ethnic/racial composition	All Danish nationals, non “ethnic”	All US nationals white	1/3 Danish nationals; 2/3 eighteen other nationalities	2/3 US nationals, white; 1/3 four other nationalities, plus “diverse” US nationals
Sex composition	Almost even M/F	Almost even M/F	Almost even M/F	2/3 M 1/3 F
Group designs:				
Pen-pals	First grouping ^a : 36 cross-national pairs		No	
Small groups	Second grouping ^b : 12 cross-national groups		12 virtual groups ^c : Based on original groupings for other on-location projects in the Danish course – US students were added to these groups	
Group size	6 students each (3 pen-pal US-Denmark pairs per group)		8 or 9 students each (5 or 6 from Denmark; 3 or 4 from the US)	
Information and communication technology				
Paired pen-pals	Email ^d Private emails between members of each pair		Discussion boards ^e No	
Small groups	Group distribution lists – emails shared within each group		Each group could only access own discussion board (password protected)	
All participants	Common distribution list – emails shared by all members of both courses		Common discussion board – common to all members of both courses	
Website	No		Each course had its own Website, but they were linked to each other	

^a For the Islamic Headscarf case.^b For both the ABB and the BioTech exercises.

^c For all three activities (Islamic Headscarf, ABB and BioTech).

^d This set-up was intended to facilitate more informal and private discussions of the cases or exercises first in pairs, and then to foster student participation in reaching group level decisions before posting solutions to the “all participants” common list. Both the group distribution lists and the common distribution list served as collaborative spaces to support sharing different perspectives on the issues presented in the case or exercises. Instructors and their teaching assistants had access to all email communications, except for those between pen-pals, and students were informed from the start about our “presence”.

^e Instructors and teaching assistants had full access to all communications on the boards, and students were informed from the start about this fact.

TABLE 2

Students' self-reported experiences working in virtual groups, 1998 and 2002

Year courses were taught	1998		2002	
	Denmark	US	Denmark	US
Like/dislike for technological mediation	Indifference and skepticism about technology's contribution to group results	More indifferent and skeptical; some frustration about problems with technology	General liking for the use of technology; concerns with technological problems; would prefer face-to-face communication	Some liking but also some skepticism; concerns with technological problems; would prefer face-to-face communication
Group dynamics	Cooperation as the norm; but similar results could be attained independently	Highly cooperative as the norm; but similar results could be attained independently	Some friction and saw greater differences of opinion; yet most students said their opinions were taken into account; group work was better than if they had worked on their own	Personal friction and differences of opinion about the task practically non-existent; group work was better than if they had worked on their own
Cultural learning	"virtual teams" was better than a traditional "on location" learning situation to enlighten cross-cultural ethical dilemmas	"virtual teams" was better than a traditional "on location" learning situation to enlighten cross-cultural ethical dilemmas	Cultural differences were minimal following the ABB activities; differences become greater following the simulation	Cultural differences were minimal in all activities
Time/space concerns	Central concern – i.e., not enough time	Central concern – i.e., not enough time	Central concern – i.e., not enough time	Central concern – i.e., not enough time