An Intercultural Communication Event via Video Bridge:
Bringing Russian and American Students Together

Tammy Gregersen
University of Northern Iowa

Tanya Youdina
Herzen University

Through globalization, the world is becoming smaller, placing responsibility on the educational system to prepare tolerant, culturally empathetic learners. In response to this rising demand, students from a U.S. Midwestern university and another from St. Petersburg, Russia, met on a video bridge and learned intercultural communications by interculturally communicating. This paper examines how video-conferencing allowed American and Russian students on opposite ends of the earth to meet through technology to share each others' beliefs, values, and world views, and to sample the elaborate, multidimensional, and pervasive cultures of their international counterparts.

Technology has ushered in a new era in higher education. Our milieu has changed from blackboards and chalk to liquid screens and keyboards; from row-aligned desks in traditional classrooms with face-to-face interaction to cyberspacial synchronous communication where students and teachers interact via satellite and broad band networks. However, technology has not only revolutionized the medium through which we educate, but it has also morphed the content of what we teach. Because of advancements in transportation and information systems technology, intercultural contact has accelerated, compelling the educational system to address the surging need for more effective intercultural communication. According to Samovar and Porter (2004), "Because of international contacts, it is becoming obvious that a symbiotic relationship ties all people together. No nation, group, or culture can remain aloof or autonomous. If you touch one part of the world, you touch all parts" (p. 5) In response to the burgeoning interconnectedness of Earth's inhabitants, players in higher education have a unique opportunity to use the same technology that has brought us together to also help us understand one another. In this spirit of collegial partnership, two universities, one from the Midwestern United States and another from St. Petersburg, Russia, met on a video bridge and learned intercultural communications by interculturally communicating. This paper examines how video-conferencing allowed American and Russian students on opposite ends of the earth to meet through technology to share each others' beliefs, values, and world views, and to sample the elaborate, multidimensional, and pervasive cultures of their international counterparts.

Moran (2001) proposed in his "Guidelines for Teaching Culture" that learners move through various stages of an *experiential* learning cycle. With the use of interactive video, synchronous visual contact among students and professors at different sites is available, also enabling connections with experts in other geographical locations (Touchstone & Anderson,

1995). This interfacing allows learners to experience this learning cycle and to generate cultural behaviors (knowing how), procure cultural information (knowing about), seek out cultural explanations (knowing why), understand personal responses (knowing oneself), and by repeatedly undertaking this cycle, become insightful culture learners (personal competence).

This process is particularly important because since the beginning of human civilization, people have had to learn to get along, and historically speaking, we have not been all that successful. "The history of humankind details an ongoing antipathy and hostility toward those who are different" (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 3). In fact, who would have thought two decades ago at the height of the Cold War that American and Russian students would be synchronously interacting, actively constructing new knowledge and intercultural understanding through group and peer interaction? This is intriguing at both the cultural and technological level. Culturally, what prejudices and preconceived notions had to be overhauled in order for the alien differences that were malevolently present in Cold War rhetoric to be squashed? Technologically, what advances allowed this to happen? To answer the cultural question, we will examine the intercultural communication objectives that were met when the two groups of culturally diverse students of the authors of this paper came together virtually from thousands of miles away to enroll in the same class, interact on a daily basis, and arrive at a significant degree of mutual understanding. In response to the technology question, we will describe the technology that was implemented and discuss its advantages and disadvantages.

The class that we planned and carried out was called, "Cultural Aspects of Language." Before we actually planned our joint venture, our respective universities were each delivering classes on intercultural communications. The idea for bringing together our American and Russian students to team-teach them via video technology germinated with the recognition that there were limitations to teaching this

subject matter with only a textbook in hand. Theoretically, one could discuss varieties of beliefs, values, and worldviews, but it seemed that the critical human element was missing. For example, a Protestant American student discussing the religious beliefs of Russian orthodoxy could be informative, but it was thought to be another totally different and more real experience if individuals could see the face and hear the passion found in the voice of a Russian student describing the ornate alters found in their centuries old churches. Thus, the two authors of this paper came together to plan and execute a class where video technology was used that allowed synchronous interaction between our two cultures where various objectives were met.

Course Objectives

The use of videoconferencing technology erased geographical boundaries and allowed Russian and American students to come together in time and place. It was only through the features of this technology that we were able to meet our instructional goals and objectives. Although many more goals and objectives could have been added to our list, the following are those that were particularly enhanced by the use of technology.

Our first objective was to immerse our students in an intercultural situation where they would gain the insight provided by different perspectives and experiences and where their consciousness would be raised about cultural differences. Through this immersion, our goal was to stimulate our students to clarify their own values about diversity and make them more successful intercultural communicators. In the past, this type of immersion could only have been carried out through study abroad programs where students travel to their country of interest. Videoconferencing technology allowed us to dialogue with members of another culture, learning through discussion and reflection. We were transported through time and space to become one learning community.

Our second objective concerned the enhancement of language learning/teaching skills. All of the Russian students were non-native speakers of English who were afforded the opportunity of interacting in their target language for several hours each day. All of the American students were TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) majors who, through the use of technology, were exposed to advanced foreign language speakers of English and were given first hand experience of interacting with them. Other current computer internet technology like chatting and blogging necessitates the use of a keyboard and, therefore, enhances the *reading* and *writing* skills of learning a second language. Videoconferencing provided real life learning and teaching practice of the *speaking* and *listening* modalities.

Besides speaking and listening, the visual cues provided by videoconferencing gave each group insight into the use of cross cultural nonverbal communication. One of the pillars of communicative competence is sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), which encompasses the whole notion of knowing how to interact nonverbally with people in the target culture. Because so much of what people communicate is nonverbal, some say as much as 65% (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967), we would be remiss as language educators if we did not place students in situations where they would be receivers and senders of authentic nonverbal communication. This is important because "although much of our nonverbal communication is universal, many of your nonverbal actions are touched and altered by culture" (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 166).

Finally, current classroom technology allowed us to meet the objective of providing a window through which our students could view the cultural influences in the educational setting. By participating through videoconferencing, we were able to become flies on each others' walls. That is to say, we were given a peek into the classroom processes of another culture and gained valuable insight by studying the others' perception and approach to education. Russian students were surprised that American students called their professor by her first name and that students were eating during class (American students had a sign up sheet for "treats" on the first day of class). American students thought it strange that Russian girls sat in class with their arms around each others' shoulders. Also, American students dove right into small group activities, whereas the Russians were more reticent. These are only a few of many examples of what students saw as they observed the interaction of students at the other site.

Procedures

The class met 3 hours a day, 4 days a week, for an entire month. There were 16 American students and 10 Russian students each in their respective classrooms with their own professor. Both groups followed an identical syllabus, participated in the same activities, read the same text, and were evaluated in similar ways, although grading procedures were dictated by the individual institutions. The class began each day with a "warm-up" which included three activities that were organized and assigned on the first day of class.

For the first daily "warm-up" activity, one student at each site was asked to bring in a current article from his/her respective newspaper whose contents focused on the other culture. That is to say, the American

student brought in an article from the U.S. media about Russia, and the Russian student shared something from the Russian media about America. This allowed students to see how the media and their societies in general were portraying each other and themselves. Current events seen through the eyes of another culture's media resulted in some fascinating conversations between the sites. It so happened that there was a political showdown being played out in the media between the U.S. and Russia over how to deal with Iran during the course of the class, and the handling of this international episode clearly demonstrated to students how public opinion is influenced by the press.

The second "warm-up" activity consisted of a list that was distributed on the first day of class of "universal values" which included marriage, death rituals, courtship, taboos, housing, superstitions, and greetings, among others. A value was chosen for each day and a student at each site volunteered to present how their culture operationalized the idea. Students' feedback at the end of the course consistently demonstrated how intriguing they found the differences and how pleasantly surprised they were by the similarities. For example, students had expressed surprise at how similar superstitions were between the two cultures. Although both cultures agreed that black cats were unlucky, the Russian students thought horseshoes brought luck while the Americans believed in the power of the rabbit's foot and the four leaf clover. In another presentation, the Russians were somewhat taken aback by the embalming process after death (which was graphically described by an American ex-mortuary student), while the Americans found the leisure activities of the Russians unfamiliar. This activity allowed students to compare and contrast basic values and beliefs found in each culture.

We finished the daily "warm-ups" with a 3-5 minute presentation on a topic of the students' choice. On the first day of class, a student at each site was given a date upon which they would present anything that he/she thought would interest their classmates at the other site. Among topics chosen by the American students were "rural life in the Midwest," "the rise of Walmart," and "popular outdoor activities." Russian students had chosen "museums," "graduation parties," and "Olympic sports." This activity allowed students at each site the opportunity to share whatever they wanted with few parameters as to choice.

After the warm-up, which generally lasted around 45 minutes, we asked students to write a journal entry on a topic that was related to the assigned reading. The purpose was to have students composing their ideas and through this process, help to clarify some of their values concerning the more thought provoking ideas of the chapter. Our topics were carefully chosen, avoiding

display questions that had "right" and "wrong" answers but rather demanded reflection from the students. Some of the topics that students were asked to write about included the presence of a "world collective consciousness," "ingroup," and "outgroup" identities; national pride, patriotism, and enthnocentrism; cultural misunderstandings; the impact of the media on cultural identity, international intervention, and the concept of the "global village." Students were then offered the opportunity to share what they had written.

Next, we engaged in a discussion of the assigned reading. We chose the text *Intercultural Communication* (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999), which took a historical approach to intercultural communications and provided the foundation to understand obstacles to its success. We explored the changes in the field from its sociological roots through the present and important concepts such as nonverbal communication, assimilation, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and individualism vs. collectivism. The use of this text gave theoretical support to the very activity in which we were embarking—intercultural communications.

After the text discussion, we participated in a variety of activities that were related to the content of the text or the skill of becoming a better intercultural communicator. To highlight some of the activities that stimulated the best discussions, there was an activity on self-disclosure where students were asked to respond whether issues involved in opinions, tastes, work and study, money, personality, body, and family were public or private domains. While many of the statements like "feelings about my sexual adequacy" were definitely perceived as private by both Russians and Americans, there were differences about how much information one would divulge on matters of money and family. Another activity that stimulated much interaction was one where students were asked to identify "stereotypes and attributes" that they hold about various groups of people (for example, Muslims, people with AIDS, males/females, etc.).

Finally, students participated in "Critical Incidents." A critical incident includes a story about a cross-cultural miscommunication with a subsequent set of questions. After reading the story, students were asked to choose the best interpretation of the characters' action based on their knowledge of the characters' cultures. As in real life situations, there was more than one explanation that could be considered correct. Students were invited to discuss their options in small groups and to rate the choices. Both sets of students found the activity helpful in developing their empathy and tolerance as they tried to understand why miscommunication occurs. Interestingly, the Russian students were able to draw significant parallels in their own culture to those that were handed to them as events that occurred in the American classroom.

The Technology

Using interactive Polycom Video Conferencing Units, American and Russian students were able to synchronously videoconference using high-speed internet access. In order to connect, the Russian and American universities dialed the Internet Protocol (IP) number of the video bridge located at the American university. The video bridge is used to connect multiple sites together into a multipoint video conference. Although the experience being presently described had only two sites participating, the video bridge purchased by the American university has the capacity to connect 16 sites simultaneously. By using the video bridge in this example, it enabled other non-participating sites to join the class and observe the course and technology. (Universities from Chile and Moscow joined us for several days as observers.) Remote controls were used to manipulate the cameras at both sites. The microphones were open unless muted manually. Students saw each other on television monitors, and when someone spoke at either of the sites, the camera at that location could be zoomed, panned, and titled by using the specialized Polycom remote. When the person stopped talking, the camera could be easily set back to the wide angle showing the entire group. The video bridge that was used adheres to the H.323 standard. This standard enables others to connect to the conference as long as their video conferencing equipment met the H.323 standard.

Limitations

Although the benefits of sharing in this joint venture far exceeded any of the limitations, it is still necessary to comment on some of the difficulties that were encountered. The first hurdle was scheduling. There is a 9 hour difference between the U.S. and Russia, so if the American students enter class at 9:00 a.m., the Russian students have already completed a whole day of activities and begin a 3 hour class at 6:00 p.m. Our best option was to begin as early as possible in the U.S. so that the Russian students were not in class until the wee hours of their morning. Coventry (2006) reported that video conferencing can cause extreme fatigue as more intense concentration is required than that found in a traditional face to face classroom, so our intention was to mitigate that fatigue as much as possible. There were also difficulties concerning the semester schedules at the respective universities. While this was scheduled as a May Term class in the U.S., the Russian students were in the middle of their annual examination period, making it difficult for Russian students to meet all of their obligations.

Because we had experience using videoconferencing with remote sites on other occasions, we understood many of the limitations. In those instances where only one professor is in charge of all of the videoconferencing sites, issues such as depersonalization and isolation have a high probability of occurring. Learners have the tendency to view their instructor as an object on a screen or as a "talking head." Furthermore, without strong leadership at each site, students who are off camera have mute microphones and may have a tendency to disengage and talk off task (Coventry, 2006). Those who have taught via videoconferencing have also noted that the rhythm of the class is different than face to face classroom interaction. Wait time is longer as discussions are technologically mediated.

To mitigate these problems, we co-taught the course, with a professor at each site. We developed both inter-site and intra-site rapport. That is to say, we often had discussions within the individual sites and then joined together to report on those discussions. The presence of a "live" professor also eliminated the off task talking and inattentiveness that is sometimes found at remote sites, and also greatly limited the isolation and depersonalization that students often feel during videoconferencing.

Conclusion

The most poignant examples of the success of this project can be found in the final journal entries of the students who were asked on the last day of class to write about how this video-conferencing experience had changed their ways of thinking. As previously intimated, our purpose was one that was as much focused on values clarification as it was on gaining intercultural content knowledge. Our success in meeting these goals are found in the following statements made by students at the conclusion of the class. Some of their responses were

"This class has done an outstanding job of helping to bridge two cultures via technology."

"I think that pairing up with Russia allowed us to see that even though there were small differences we are more alike than we may have thought before the class started."

"My opinion about Americans has been changed since the first class."

"I feel myself more open to the other cultures."

"I became more tolerant and patient with people from other cultures."

"This class has impacted me greatly because I was able to see how we in the U.S. have such a narrow view of many things."

"I am grateful to American students because they disclosed so many new ideas about American culture."

The interconnectedness of the world brought about by advances in technology demands that different cultures try to understand one another. Institutions of higher education are in a unique position to rise to the challenge. The technology that shrunk our world can be used to bring us closer together by providing spaces where we can immerse ourselves with each other without ever having to get on a plane.

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TAMMY GREGERSEN (Ph.D, Universidad Catolica de Valparaiso) is Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, TESOL Section, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa

TATIANA YUDINA is Assistant Professor and Head of Department of Interpreting and Translation, School of Modern Languages, Herzen State University, St. Petersburg, Russia.

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