Developing Intercultural and Global Communication Competences: Third Place Learning Environments

Mara Alagic1, Glyn Rimmington2
1 Wichita State University, Curriculum and Instruction, Wichita, USA
2 Wichita State University, Educational Leadership, Wichita, USA

Abstract—In this paper we deliberate on two instances of third place learning environments: (a) Role-play simulation environment in which learners develop a heuristic for intercultural/global communication, and (b) a virtual learning network, developing knowledge bases for kind of learning necessary for improving intercultural/global communication.

Index Terms—Cage Painting simulator, intercultural/global communication competence, misunderstanding/disorienting dilemma, third place learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication skill is a desired goal in the professional development of today’s global and intercultural workforce and in the preparation of graduates—the future workforce. The path to achieving these goals is neither simple nor passive. It depends on more than just cultural knowledge. Although important, cultural knowledge is not the same as intercultural and global communication competence [1, 3]. As communication skills and abilities are developed, several processes and conditions come into play. Underpinning these are dispositions of curiosity to understand, courage to ask the potentially embarrassing question, caution to not judge and consideration of all perspectives. The discipline of cultivating these dispositions in oneself is challenging and can be disorienting. A systematic approach to global and intercultural communication competence development may be accomplished in Third Place Learning Environments [5].

II. THIRD PLACE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

After briefly introducing the concept of Third Place Learning (TPL), two instances of its application are presented: a social/professional network and an online role-play simulator; both resources for further development of global, intercultural communication.

A. Third Place Learning

A glimpse of Third Place Learning came about while studying potential misunderstandings in communication during global, intercultural interactions. Third Space was a turning point; Something about “…the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity…” [2,55] joined with ideas of transformational learning [4], resonated into the new concept, third place learning—a kind of learning that can change one’s strongly held belief, transform one’s perspective and worldview [5].

The Third Place Learning Environment (TPL) does not provide a “place” in the usual Cartesian sense of the meaning. Rather, it comprises a set of specific conditions and processes that facilitate development of new knowledge. In this paper we focus on two instances of these conditions and processes, one associated with an online simulator and another associated with virtual places of interaction. In the former, miscommunications are provided as a stimulus for a simulated dialog, while misunderstandings due to differences in perspective might emerge during virtual and global interactions. The communication strategies learned in the online role-play simulation may be applied during dialog in the virtual places [5].

The trigger for TPL is often an encounter with a significant misunderstanding or disorienting dilemma. It may be the dilemma of a teacher, who is used to cell phones being banned in the classroom, being shown in a professional development workshop how to integrate student use of cell phones into lesson designs; or, an entrepreneur, who confronts a cultural practice that is contrary to his/her firmly held beliefs, before beginning business negotiations with a partner from another culture. TPL refers to kind of learning that leads to transformation of a person’s deeply held belief. The teacher in our example, instead of rejecting this idea, experiences an epiphany when she/he gains insights into students’ perspectives on cell phones as learning tools. The entrepreneur, rather than refusing to participate in the practice, consults with peers in a professional network to improve his/her understanding of the business partner’s perspective.

B. Third Place Learning Network

Mushrooming social and professional virtual networks form according to their purpose and goals. Some are social, some professional and some a combination. A network’s repository of participants’ contributions evolves and transforms over time dependent on network members’ knowledge, interests and experiences. It serves as a knowledge base that members can study, understand and apply in their sphere of professional, intellectual or social interests. Members bring (back) reflections and reflective questions that may further understanding and curiosity of network members and contribute to the organic nature of the network. Inherent in a network’s structure and membership is a means for developing social and/or intercultural capital. These networks act as informally structured learning communities, more or less controlled by their initiators.
The Third Place Learning Network, connected through http://thirdplacelearning.ning.com/, is a group of educators and researchers from distant parts of the world, who are interested in developing and sharing resources and services for the TPL kind of learning: developing comprehensive knowledge bases and disseminating a TPL way of thinking. It is an evolving repository of shared knowledge; it includes reflective blogging, discussion forums and experiential examples. It is a place of ongoing asynchronous interactions among members, open to anyone interested in the idea of intercultural/global communications and third place learning, its dissemination, applications and further development.

C. Online Role-Play – Resolving Misunderstandings

The particular online role-play learning environment referred to here is the Cage Painting Simulator (CPS). CPS is a Web 2.0-based (http://gl.wichita.edu/cps) e-learning environment based on the Cage Painting metaphor [5]. Underlying each simulation is a scenario that presents challenges ranging from minor differences in viewpoint to more significant disparities with the learner’s worldview. Learners proceed through a simulation and learn how to resolve such challenges via a dialog with the synthetic character Simea. CPS is very specific in its scope and encourages an (intercultural) communication heuristic, which comprises strategies of sharing and taking perspectives. These strategies can later be used in two ways. Those people with more experience can add to CPS repository of scenarios by designing potential resolutions for misconceptions that they have encountered. The second way is the application of these strategies to real-life situations. Both ways stimulate learners’ further improvement of their communication heuristic. This heuristic has helped some people to overcome instances of disorientation in different contexts.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR E-LEARNING & WORKPLACE

Two resources introduced in this paper complement each other: (a) the CPS simulator with its repository of scenarios that expose learners to misunderstandings while cultivating an intercultural communication heuristic that comprises perspective sharing and taking; and (b) the TPL network, which constitutes a developing knowledge basis about learning that occurs during unexpected intercultural encounters and in some other critical instances. These resources support the growth of intercultural and communication competence, both theoretically and experientially. The essence of both approaches is captured in Figure 1. It is inevitable in a global, intercultural workplace that disorienting dilemmas and misunderstandings will be encountered. Without an intercultural heuristic, it is improbable that the individual can improve understanding of his/her own perspective or that of others and thus resolve misunderstandings, small or large. In contrast, those who choose to develop and apply an intercultural heuristic may experience transformative learning [4] as a result of dialog in which perspectives are shared and taken [5].

For the workplace, the implication is that two, active approaches for improving global and intercultural communication can be achieved with e-learning, one based on role-play simulation and the other based on social networking. In each case, ongoing interaction of learning communities will spawn more sophisticated and numerous resources: CPS scenarios and interdisciplinary TPL knowledge bases.

![Figure 1. From the interplay of perspectives sharing/taking to the possible new perspective](image)

It is interesting to speculate about the nature of the future e-learning landscape with potential integration of role-play simulations and social networking knowledge bases. What will these look like?

REFERENCES


AUTHORS

Mara Alagic is Associate Professor in College of Education at Wichita State University in Wichita and creator/owner of the Third Place Learning Network, http://thirdplacelearning.ning.com/.

Glyn Rimmington is Boeing Distinguished Professor of Global Learning and Chair of Educational Leadership at Wichita State University, an instigator and co-creator of the online role play simulator, http://gl.wichita.edu/cps.

Revised manuscript received May 15, 2009. This work was in part supported by the Boeing Endowment for Global Learning and Kansas Board of Regents Faculty of Distinction Fund.