

## Student Responses to an International Blog Exchange

**“Through online interaction, it is argued that learners can become aware that communicating in a foreign language involves not only the exchange of information, but also the expression of speaker identity and the development of relationships in situations of intercultural contact.” (O’Dowd, 2007, pp. 3–4)**

**Cheryl DICELLO\***

Technological online networking competence, or effectively communication online, is becoming increasingly important as a tool of the global marketplace (Dooly, 2007). In hopes of giving students an authentic but safe environment to practice interacting online in English with people, a 5-week blog exchange was begun between an intercultural communication course at a technical college in the U.S. and an advanced reading and writing English as a foreign language (EFL) course geared towards students majoring in cross-cultural communication at a university in Japan. As it was the first time for the researcher to try implementing such an exchange, she sought student feedback in the form of a post-questionnaire in hopes of improving future exchanges. After a short literature review, this paper reports the blog exchange goals and set-up, the participants, the research method, the results, strengths and weaknesses of the exchange, and conclusions to help the future organizing of online intercultural exchanges in similar contexts.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Planning an Exchange**

According to Dooly (2007) the most important thing to keep in mind when working with an intercultural telecollaborative activity is that the technology should be seen as a tool to *enhance* the learning content of the class, and not be a substitute for the class (p. 218). Dooly (2007) also advised that such a project should be designed to make it easy for students to collaborate in an environment where all members feel comfortable and practice expressing informed opinions while respecting opinions differing from their own (p. 219). The student should be able to work with the mindset that each member is vital to the collaboration (Dooly, 2007). Dooly (2007) also recommended in regards to planning telecollaborative projects that partnered teachers “select tools according to the expected procedures and outcomes, always ensuring that the different learning modalities are covered” (p. 220). This was also done to some extent in the current study.

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\* *School of Cross-Cultural Studies, Department Foreign Studies*

### Electronic Medium for an Exchange

Müller-Hartmann (2007) noted that current platforms for exchanges include tools such as “wikis, web-, audio- and videoblogs, as well as pod- and vodcasts” (p. 168).

### The Role of the Teacher

Tella (1996) encouraged teachers to consider themselves as facilitators of an exchange instead of the main part of it. This would then entail such things as being a manager, or supporter of the process (Legutke et al., 2006).

## The Current Study

### The Blog Exchange Goals and Set-up

During the winter holiday, one instructor from the U.S. college and I met and discussed the possibility of creating an exchange between our students. After receiving approval, we analyzed the core goals of attending the college and learning objectives of the U.S. course and discussed how these could be reached and evaluated through the exchange. From there I sent the proposal to my superior at the Japan institution and the goals and learning objectives of the U.S. were approved to be considered the learning objectives for the Japan course.

**The goals and student learning objectives.** The U.S. college had 10 overall goals, called core

**Table 1** Objectives, Goals, and Process Determined for Reaching Them

| <u>Objectives</u>   | <u>Process</u>   |
|---|--|
| Analyze communication situations                                    | Blogging and responding to other’s blogs, navigating through misunderstandings   |
| Contribute as a group or team member                                | Group work for writing and responding to blogs   |
| Evaluate how perception affects communication                       | Blogging and responding to topics of impressions and stereotyping  |
| Analyze how culture, including gender, impacts communication styles | Blogging with actual students from another culture about topics and experiences that will assess behaviors between these cultures, in class discussion |
| <u>Goals</u>  | <u>Process</u>   |
| Act responsibly   | Blogging with deadlines that affect people on the other side of the world. If a student is not timely, it affects other people                         |
| Communicate clearly and effectively                                 | Must look up enough English to communicate and comprehend through the blogs and respond to them  |
| Demonstrate essential computer skills                               | Type, post blogs, post comments  |
| Respect self and others as members of a diverse society             | Blogging and group work  |
| Think critically and creatively                                     | Blogging and responding with language and cultural hurdles   |
| Work cooperatively  | Group work   |
| Value learning  | Taking this project seriously and share knowledge that is valuable to others and oneself   |

abilities, for students attending the institution: act responsibly, communicate clearly and effectively, demonstrate essential computer skills, demonstrate essential math skills, respect self and others as members of a diverse society, think critically and creatively, work cooperatively, and value learning. The course's 12 student learning objectives were to be able to analyze communication situations, apply nonverbal skills, apply listening skills, contribute as a group or team member, apply conflict resolution skills, evaluate how perception affects communication, evaluate how self-concept impacts communication, analyze how culture (including gender) impacts communication styles, deliver an oral presentation, and develop strategies for overcoming communication obstacles. These were the basis for the project. We discussed which goals and objectives could possibly be met and how they might be met. The following table shows which goals and objectives we focused on and how.

As can be seen from Table 1, 4 of the 12 course objectives and 7 of the 10 goals of study were focused on. This means that there are, of course, other elements to dedicate time to in the course of study. For the course in Japan, students also needed to write a research paper, read and discuss Othello, increase their reading and writing speeds, and read an additional 10 books. Taking the students' workloads into consideration, we decided to recommend alternating who in the group would be responsible for posting and commenting on the blog. A short time would also be given in each class for discussing the response, but as seen later in the comments, this time was not long enough.

**The period of time.** We noticed that the only time that both our classes would be in session would be in the summer. As a pilot, we decided to use the U.S. Summer Session with the Spring Semester at the university in Japan. This gave us a 7-week period of time where our classes would overlap. Assuming the U.S. college would need to orient students and test them on other portions of their course. We decided on having a 5 week blog exchange and then determine if this was something our schools should continue or not. The period of time that students would be interacting with their exchange groups for their grade was from May 13 to June 17.

**The Topics.** We planned out topics by adding one option per blog from both of the textbooks in use from our respective courses except for the first blog, which would be an self-introduction so that students would know who they were writing to. This meant that for the 5 weeks of the project there would be one required topic and 8 topic options. Four of the options were from the textbook *Understanding Human Communication* (Adler & Rodman, 2009) that was used in the U.S. course and the other 4 options were topics from the textbook *Q: Skills for Success: Reading and Writing* (Lynn, et al., 2011) that was used in the Japan course. The topics and sequence were Week 1 "(no topic choice): Why are you going to college? What are your plans after college? Give a short intro about yourself. Everyone in your group must write something for this."; Week 2 "(choose one topic): A: How can someone make a good first impression on you? B: Is it ok to lie? If yes, when is it ok to lie? If no, how do you react to someone who lies to you?"; Week 3 "(choose one topic): A: How do you feel when people look you in the eye? When and where it is appropriate to look people in the eye? B: How do you define a successful person?"; Week 4 "(choose one topic): A: What is racist/sexist from your point of view (where do you see it, don't see it, what causes it?) B:

What kind of technology do you use to communicate? How does this affect your relationships (give positive and negative examples)”; Week 5 “(choose one topic): A: How much intimacy is desirable and how do you express it? How did you meet and become good friends with people? B: What kind of clues can you get to know that a topic or conversation is not acceptable? If you notice this, how do you amend the situation?”

### **Research Questions**

The questions addressed in this paper are the following:

1. Did the students enjoy the blog exchange process?
2. Which topics do the students recommend for future exchanges?
3. Were there any technical challenges?
4. Would any of the students try and continue to communicate with their partner exchange group members?
5. What could make the exchange more interesting for the students?
6. What advice, comments or opinions about the blog exchange process do students have?

### **Participants**

Students from the Japan course who chose to fill out the survey numbered 26. Ten of these students were in the researchers course and 16 were in another instructor’s section of the same course. All students were female and in their third or fourth year of university aged between 20 and 22 years old. Some have studied abroad but this information was not specifically requested, instead it was known from teaching the class.

### **Method**

Students in two sections of a Reading and Writing ESL course were given questionnaires in paper format at the end of the blogging process. They were informed that filling out the questionnaire was voluntary and that their grade would not be affected by the questionnaire in any way. No questionnaire had any names written and students collected the questionnaires upon completion to turn into me. At the end of the course, students were again asked if it was all right to use the questionnaires for research purposes and received permission. The survey consisted of six questions. The first question, “I enjoyed the blog exchange process” was a statement that students marked on a 5-point *Likert* scale: 1 was marked as *not at all* and 5 marked as *yes, absolutely*. Question two was “Which topics do you recommend for future exchanges?” with a list of all the topics that were available from the exchange and an open space marked other for possible suggestions. Question three was “Did you have any technical challenges for posting or commenting? (for example, not sure how to post)” with the option of answering yes or no. Question four was “Will you continue to communicate with anyone from your partner exchange group? With multiple choice options listed here: (a) Yes, I plan to; (b) It’s possible, but I am not sure; (c) No, but I would like to; (d) No, I am not interested in continuing the exchange, and (e) Other:. Questions 5 “What could make the exchange more interesting for you?” gave a list of options with the instructions “please circle all that would make the exchange more interesting.” The options were (1) More time in class to discuss the blog topics, (2) More personal topics, (3) Less personal topics, (4)

Pictures of group members, (5) Pictures of daily life from the exchange group, (6) Video(s) of daily life from the exchange groups, (7) More orientation to creating a blog, (8) Individual blogs instead of group blogs, (9) If I had different group members, (10) A longer time for the exchange, (11) If my exchange group replied faster, and (12) Other (with a space to write comments). The final question “Please write any advice, comments, or opinions about the blog exchange process here” left an open space for students to write in.

### Results

**I enjoyed the blog exchange process.** For this Likert scale statement, no participant rated it with a 1 *not at all*, but this does not mean that there were not any participants who did not enjoy the blog exchange process. Keeping in mind the Halo effect where participants may rate something in a study in a way that they think the researcher likes because they like the researcher (Brown, 1998), this is a possibility to keep in mind. The participants, who knew who I was, may have thought that marking a 1 on this question would hurt my feelings and therefore did not mark it. While keeping this in mind, 2 participants rated this statement with a 2. I will assume that these 2 students wanted to circle 1, but did not in order to avoid hurting my feelings. Both of the participants who marked 2 were in the researcher’s class, not the other instructor’s. Twelve of the 26 participants rated with a 3, 7 with a 4, and the remaining 5 participants rated that they enjoyed the exchange. To sum up this result, almost half of the students rated that they enjoyed the exchange, and a little more than half of the student rated that it was ok or did not enjoy the exchange.

**Which topics do you recommend for future exchanges?** Of the 9 topics available for the exchange, they were all recommended by at least 2 participants to be continued. Here is the order of recommendation frequency for the topics with the number in parentheses equaling the number of students who recommended the topic: How can someone make a good impression on you? (15); Why are you going to college? What are your plans after college? Give a short intro about yourself (14); Is it ok to lie? If yes, when is it ok to lie? If no, how do you react to someone who lies to you? (13); What kind of technology do you use to communicate? How does this affect your relationships? (11); How do you feel when people look you in the eye? When and where is it appropriate to look people in the eye? (8); How do you define a successful person (6); How much intimacy is desirable and how do you express it? How did you meet and become good friends with people? (6); What is racist/sexist from your point of view (4); What kind of clues can you get to know that a topic of conversation is not acceptable? If you notice this, how do you amend the situation? (2). Of these 9 topics, only 3 of them have at least half of the participants recommending them. It may be helpful in this particular context to drop the others from future blog exchanges. There were two new topic recommendations given, “How do you define your nationality?” and “What is your stereotype of Japan?”.

**Did you have any technical challenges for posting or commenting?** Ten of the the 26 participants circled “Yes” that they did have challenges posting or commenting.

**Will you continue to communicate with anyone from your partner exchange group?** Four participants marked “Yes, I plan to”, 13 marked “It’s possible, but I am not sure”, 8 marked “No, but I would like to” and one marked “No, I am not interested in continuing the exchange”.

**What could make the exchange more interesting for you?** Thirteen participants wanted pictures of group members, 11 wanted pictures of daily life from the exchange groups, 8 wanted more time in class to discuss the blog topics, 6 wanted more personal topics, 4 wanted a individual blogs instead of group blogs, 4 wanted a longer time for the exchange, 4 wanted videos of daily life, 2 wanted less personal topics, 2 wanted more orientation to creating a blog, and one participant commented that they wanted “more interesting topics”.

**Advice, comments, and opinions from students.** Of the 26 participants, 24 wrote advice for improving the exchanges. As an instructor, this shows how dedicated the students are to wanting an exchange. It also shows that any researcher who wants to know what students think of a class activity and earnestly asks them in a similar context as this study will probably get a large response. There is not enough space in this article to share all the participant comments therefore I will summarize them. Twelve of the comments included mentioning that the blogging system was challenging and they would prefer something more user friendly, 4 participants noted that the topics were a little difficult for an exchange either for their language level or for the amount of time need to think about and agree on an answer for the group, 2 mentioned that they wanted to write more frequently and for a longer period of time, and 2 mentioned needing more discussion time in class as a main issue with posting blogs, the remaining mentioned that they thought having an exchange is a great way to communicate with people from other cultures.

### **Strengths**

One strength of the study is that it was primary research. As stated in Brown (1998) “It (primary research) has the advantage of being closer to the primary source of information” (p. 2). This study’s focus was on student interest and enjoyment of a blog exchange, therefore, these students were the best resources to request this information in this context. In addition all participants were female which is useful for other women universities concerned about how to make an interesting exchange or avoid this researchers mistakes in a similar context.

### **Weaknesses**

Weaknesses of the study included the sample size being small, all participants being female which makes this research less applicable for non-women’s university settings, and there was only a single point of data gathering. In addition to surveys, student interviews, or teacher interviews could have been useful. Also, there were no surveys from the U.S. group, therefore, how the other half of the exchange group felt about the exchange is at the time of this writing unknown. The website used for the exchanges was also new to all participants and therefore difficult to navigate. Posting proved difficult for some participants, and the system didn’t notify participants of new comments under their blogs. The duration of the exchange was a short 5 weeks. A longer duration may have given the participants more time to get used the exchange and know more about their exchange partners.

### **Conclusion**

One main issue brought out in the results was that students really liked the idea of the exchange, but the website utilized was new and not user friendly when considering their own background knowledge of computers and had some issues with not notifying students when someone had

commented on their post, causing a delay or lack of reply. It is recommendable to first confirm what mediums students have some familiarity with before deciding how set-up the exchange. If students don't have familiarity with a system of exchange but show interest in wanting to learn, it would be best to confirm this first. The topics for the exchange were from the textbooks of the two universities but did not hold much interest for the students as a topic of exchange. It may work better to discuss such topics while sending exchanges, but not as the main theme of the exchange. Thirdly, for the exchange to work, it would be advisable to dedicate more class time to the exchange in order to make sure everyone is on the same page and to show that it is a serious part of the course that is important enough to take up class time. Some participants also mentioned that they would prefer to do an individual blog instead of a group blog. In addition, a blog may not have been the only format available for the exchange. For example, one could have sent some postal mail as well, posted photos, or set up surveys to ask and answer questions in an alternative format. Some students mentioned something like Facebook would have been more enjoyable.

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