

## CULTURA REVISITED

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Two of the original authors of “Giving a Virtual Voice to the Silent Language of Culture: The Cultura Project”, published in *Language Learning & Technology* in 2001, look back on the origin of the Cultura project, its goals, and the approach and materials used. Their commentary then focuses on the features and the methodology that made Cultura a pioneer in web-based, intercultural exchanges for foreign language instruction. The components that may account for Cultura’s longevity are its clear pedagogical design and the contrastive process which nurtures student involvement, both online and in the classroom.

One of the best-known and frequently replicated features of Cultura is the introduction of intercultural, on-line questionnaires. However, the authors feel that limiting the use of Cultura to those questionnaires is not only reductionist but it can also be counterproductive because, when used alone, the questionnaires accentuate a simplistic, binary approach to culture. Understanding another culture requires that students explore a large variety of other materials and articulate a multiplicity of viewpoints, undertaking the analysis of even the most contradictory ones. Given the numerous Web 2.0 social networking tools which have since been developed, it can be hoped that some of Cultura, particularly its asynchronous forums and the unique features that have given it its enduring appeal and strength, will be preserved.

**Language(s) Learned in this Study:** French, English

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### INTRODUCTION

This commentary is from two of the original authors of the 2001 *Language Learning & Technology* (LLT) article, “Giving a Virtual Voice to the Silent Language of Culture: The Cultura Project”, Gilberte Furstenberg, the creator of the project at MIT, and Kathryn English, Cultura’s longest exchange partner in France (from 1998 to 2005).

In the late 70s and early 80s, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) did not look very promising as it mostly offered fill-in-the-blank exercises, which were at the opposite spectrum of the fast emerging communicative approach to language learning. The chances of CALL becoming an ally in the process of developing cross-cultural understanding seemed remote. The mid 80s, however, saw multi-media tools such as videodiscs appear. Language learning became more interactive and the advent of the Web 1.0 in 1992, with text, images and forums, made it possible to connect students around the world for the purpose of exchanging cultural perspectives. The synergy between the field of inter-cultural communication (which implies encounters between people) and the Internet (which facilitates such encounters) laid the bedrock for a project like Cultura. In pre-Web 2.0 environments, learning through computer-mediated social dialogue was just beginning.

## BACKGROUND OF CULTURA

The project, conceived and developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology<sup>1</sup> (MIT), was the convergence of both personal and professional experience. At MIT, Gilberte Furstenberg had worked with interactive technologies and developed multimedia applications for learning French, such as the award-winning interactive story *A la Rencontre de Philippe*, and the interactive documentary *Dans un quartier de Paris*. Both aimed at involving and engaging students directly into a foreign world and helping them uncover hidden aspects of the foreign culture. In France, Kathryn English saw the Cultura approach as an extension of her doctoral research on contrastive semantic networks using bi-lingual word clusters and concept clusters. Cultura was an exciting way to blend research and teaching<sup>2</sup>. However, the Cultura program—with its concrete pedagogical design via word, sentence, and situation association contrasts—provided an outstanding methodology, as it revealed the tension between invisible, subconscious cultural values and the visible manifestations of articulated language.

Developed in 1997, Cultura also nicely dovetailed with the growing trend toward globalization and internationalization that made intercultural education a priority. As mentioned in our original article, developing students' intercultural understanding had become a necessity in our globalized world, as we needed to prepare our students to communicate and interact with people from different cultures (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001). The political, economic, and humanistic stakes were, and still are, very high. As we stated then, we felt that, as language teachers, developing our students' ability to access the "otherness" of an intercultural perspective was part of our mission. We were and still are in a privileged position to do so, because we naturally teach language and culture. However, courses on culture tended to take place at advanced levels. Language courses often focused on learning the nuts and bolts of language while the study of culture was considered peripheral. The main goal of Cultura was to make culture central to the language class, as early as intermediate level. This fit into emerging priorities both in Europe and in the US (Furstenberg, 2010). In 2007, for example, the Modern Language Association [report](#) had already stressed the importance of developing students' "translingual and transcultural competence", adding that "it is one of five imperative needs to which higher education must respond in the next ten years if it is to remain relevant" (para. 3).

Cultura, which had been created ten years earlier, has been called seminal, and has been described as a pioneering project—a model. It was initially created for an online exchange between French and American students but has since been adopted and adapted by instructors from other institutions for many different cultures and languages. Now, after nearly twenty years of existence, it seems appropriate to take a look back and examine the reasons for its longevity and its enduring, worldwide appeal.

## FEATURES OF CULTURA

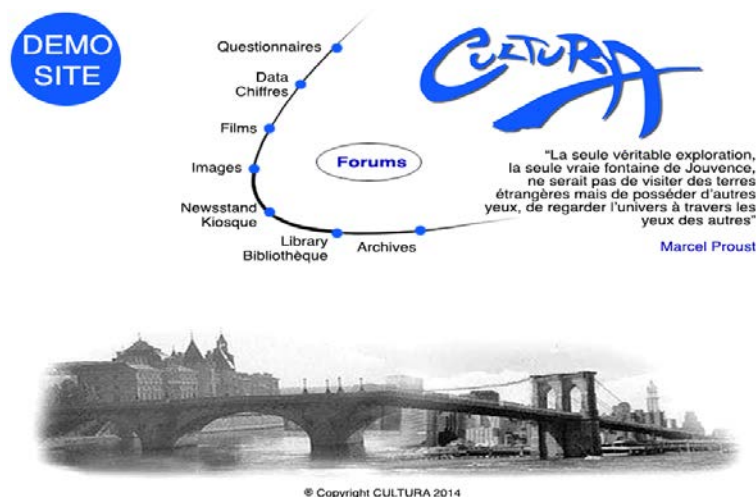
In retrospect, the primary asset of Cultura, we believe, is imbedded in its very own goal, which is to help language students across cultures understand the values, attitudes, and beliefs that underlie their interactions. This was a very novel objective at the time, especially within an intermediate language class, and a very ambitious one, as those elusive, abstract, implicit, and essentially invisible dimensions of culture are difficult to teach. Our challenge was to find an approach that allowed that goal to be met. We started with a very simple but powerful idea that proved to be very successful: namely, the comparative, contrastive approach. This approach combines two aspects: students first analyze similar materials from their own culture and those of another, and then they exchange their discoveries and viewpoints about each other's cultures via asynchronous online forums. These forums are central to this dialogic learning method because they allow students to delve deeply into issues and use language to productively explore the data they collectively produced, thus developing cultural literacy.

Another sustaining strength of Cultura is that its pedagogical design is consistent with the objectives and interactive nature of the Internet, making the congruence between the pedagogical goals and the

methodology clear. As Kern, Ware, and Warschauer (2004) wrote, Cultura “[goes] straight to the biggest problems of human communication: a culture’s ‘essentially elusive, abstract, and invisible’ aspects” (p. 249).

The innovative approach, the large variety of materials, the solid pedagogical framework, and the step-by-step dynamic methodology offered by Cultura also fit the current, newly emerging pedagogies, such as the constructivist, process-oriented, student-centered approach (see Levy, 2007). The success of our 2001 *LLT* article is due, we believe, to the fact that it provided numerous practical, concrete examples of the materials used and student postings on the online forums, as well as a comprehensive description of the process that students experience. It also provided a concrete explanation of the teachers’ roles, the tasks assigned, and what happens in the classroom. These elements could then easily be replicated by other teachers in other languages and countries.

Cultura’s ease of adaptation to other levels and languages made it possible, indeed, to iterate with varying degrees and levels of adaptations (Chun, 2014). As Cultura became widespread, many instructors used the questionnaires and the data that emerged was both stunning and useful. There is no question that the questionnaires are the most widely replicated feature of Cultura. This is understandable as students can quickly focus on abstract concepts as well as concrete life situations. However flattering this may be, we believe it is reductionist to have Cultura-like projects limited to the questionnaires. The side-by-side juxtaposition of answers tends to emphasize simplistic binary differences. That is why it is essential that these questionnaires be viewed as an entry into the cultures only and be enriched by a multiplicity of other materials. The goal is not just to encourage students to expand their knowledge, but rather to gauge their initial findings against wider perspectives and to engage in dialogic learning (Blyth, 2015). The process that leads to interpretation is key, not the data itself. The fundamental idea of cultural literacy is to foster this process of dialogic learning of cross-cultural communication rather than to generate a product of raw cultural data. Therefore, the real value of Cultura resides in the efforts students make to interpret their own data and in the process of co-constructing with their partners their knowledge and understanding of the other cultures. The questionnaires are only snapshots that must be contextualized to explore convergence and divergence. No single piece of data stands alone. The centrality we place on learning through dialogue can be witnessed through the visual design of the original entry page to Cultura. The online forums are located at the center of the online exchange in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* The ergonomic design of the Cultura demo site illustrates how dialogic learning affordances were centered on the forums<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the way Cultura nurtured the acquisition of literacy skills is found in the expansion phase. This entails reaching beyond the small student group and entering into the world of opinion polls, newspapers, films, history (e.g., comparing the US Declaration of Independence with the Déclaration des droits de l'homme), and archived materials. Literacy here means reaching out to an increasingly complex transversal and synoptic perspective. To neglect this would be to ignore the Cultura process of learning. Such would be a return to the programmed binary learning of CALL of the 70s and 80s, or the checklist approach to learning culture.

## DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURA

Since the article was published in 2001, we have introduced new venues for communication. We are acutely aware of the danger of having students form simplistic, rigidly fixed notions and fossilized views of the “other” culture, therefore we added a specific forum entitled *Forum on Paradoxes and Contradictions*, which encourages students to look for inherent contradictions across several materials and forum postings, which they could turn into hypotheses which they would then explore together. This forum offered the added advantage that it diffused potential conflict since students did not disagree with one another frontally or personally but raised co-created perceptions to be debated and mediated together. The Cultura forums, from the very beginning, contributed greatly to generating this sense of community, which is also part of the project's enduring appeal. This intimacy is due, we believe paradoxically enough, to the fact that students don't talk about each other directly, but focus on a subject which concerns them but which is situated outside of themselves thus creating what can be aptly called extimacy (Liaw & English, 2015).

In addition, we added new affordances, such as having students exchange images and videos or discuss topics of their own choosing through a “coffee break” forum and regular skype sessions. We also created opportunities for some students to visit each other's campuses for a short period of time to confront views formed through the forums with the reality of campus life. They shared these experiences via blogs. We could have gone even further and initiated projects whereby students across the Atlantic would, for instance, collaborate on scientific projects<sup>4</sup> but the scheduling of short semesters for language courses prevented us from doing so.

Many telecollaborative intercultural projects have been developed around the world since 2001, along with platforms such as Unicollaboration in Europe which are designed to help language educators around the world create such projects. A recent publication describes a large variety of these projects, providing many different models (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

There has also been substantial research<sup>5</sup> since 2001 especially using Web 2.0 and social networking for language learning (Lamy & Zourou, 2013). However, we feel that in these times of instant messaging via Facebook, Tweets, Instagram and the proliferation of MOOCs and crowd-sourced evaluation, Cultura's asynchronous forums remain, more than ever, crucial to the development of cultural literacy. Their value is, in fact, enhanced, as they provide students with the fundamental opportunity to pause and reflect before responding and formulating hypotheses, which are then discussed and validated. This is at the core of intercultural learning (Byram, 1997). The forums also allow students' cultural, regional, and societal backgrounds to emerge, providing a kaleidoscope of viewpoints, and reducing the likelihood of simplistic generalizations becoming the focus of debate. But here again, the role of the teacher is as essential as ever in ensuring that students go through the process that will lead them to ask questions, weigh one point of view against another, unearth contradictions, and try to understand the many factors that may influence an attitude or a behavior.

## LESSONS OF CULTURA

Our original article focused on cultural literacy as we explored how CALL could be used to foster learning through exploration. At the time, we were thrilled as we witnessed the interactive value of the written word that provided proof of the exploration process. From the very beginning, students generated their own cross-cultural data, elaborated their hypotheses, and were able to broaden their interpretations of culture via the mirroring effect of dialogue. We feel that the lessons of Cultura are still pertinent today. Thinking through differences means taking the time to analyze situations and participating in balanced and fair communication. This process, beyond the product, was built around the asynchronous, on-line forums. As such it was inherently dynamic due to students interacting, thinking, and questioning. It was the ongoing process of observing, questioning, elaborating thoughts, and learning via dialogue. Thinking through the written word took time.

Today however, images crowd the written word. They are instantaneous. Skype, Snapchat, and Instagram have replaced the thought-provoking process of writing and rewriting—thinking before sending. Now we wonder how future students will approach the process of exploring thoughts to develop cultural literacy. How does communicating via fragmented video segments impact the learning process? New horizons generate new tools, new processes, and new forms of evaluation.

As CALL moves forward to Web 3.0, we still feel the written word retains its value, fraught as it may be at times, because it is testimony to the road travelled. We feel the core process remains valid as long as students continue questioning themselves whilst querying others. However, such thoughtful interaction takes time. We trust the process of exploration, validated by a solid step-by-step pedagogy, will give students the confidence to continue their questioning and thereby build their literacies across cultures—a skill they will hopefully keep with them all life long.

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## NOTES

1. The original team was Gilberte Furstenberg, Shoggy Waryn, and Sabine Levet.
2. Dr. English had created an innovative dialogic project linking students in the Institut National des Télécommunications in France with others in Poland using Talk on Unix, and co-authored the image-based *Images, Myths and Realities Across Cultures* program with Dr. Sharon Johnson at Virginia Tech.
3. The current Cultura site is [cultura.mit.edu](http://cultura.mit.edu)
4. For a number of years, MIT students worked with students at École Polytechnique in France, from 2001 to 2005, and it would have been very interesting to have had them collaborate on scientific projects together.
5. With tools available today, it is possible to identify the discourse structures that foster discussion. We can also identify structures that set a term to specific threads, creating closures. We can study the intricacies of face-saving strategies. Rhetorical devices, discourse strategies, and markers are abundant today. They need to be identified explicitly. However, it is essential to accept the fuzzy parts that surround the invisible part of the cross-cultural iceberg. In short, the forums provide as much, if not more, raw data for analysis and for language learning than the questionnaires do. We feel the forum data has been underused and has received less attention. Yet that is where the wealth of Cultura lies. Its nature is harder to evaluate. What students learn is how to mediate and negotiate differences with their partners in a meaningful way. That is what cultural literacy strives for.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gilberte Furstenberg, now Senior Lecturer Emerita, taught French at MIT for 30 years. While there, she became enthused by the way technologies could not only enrich, but also transform the teaching and learning of language and culture. This led her to develop pedagogically innovative multimedia and web-based projects that have gained a worldwide reputation.

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