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Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education

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Chapter 4

The Use of Videoconferencing and E-mail as Mediators of Intercultural Student Ethnography

Robert O'Dowd

Abstract

As part of the search for effective methods for developing language learners' intercultural communicative competence, this chapter explores the possibilities of engaging learners in ethnographic research with distant peers through the use of networked communication tools such as videoconferencing and e-mail. The chapter begins by providing a review of the literature on the use of ethnographic techniques in foreign language education and by outlining what videoconferencing has been seen to offer network-based language learning to date. Following this, the outcomes of a semester-long networked exchange between two university classes in Germany and the United States will be presented. In the exchange, the German group of EFL learners and the American students of Communication Studies put into practice the skills of ethnographic interviewing to which they had been introduced earlier in their classes. The classes used both e-mail and videoconferencing technology in their interaction together. The qualitative analysis of transcripts, interviews, and questionnaires collected during this study revealed two central outcomes. First, it was seen how synchronic and asynchronic communication tools can contribute to very distinct aspects of ethnographic interviewing and intercultural learning. Second, the German students were often unwilling to take on the role of ethnographic interviewers during the exchange and regularly choose to reject alternative cultural beliefs and behaviour as being inferior to their own. Reasons for this reaction to the online contact are explored.

Introduction

In recent years, cultural aspects of foreign language (FL) education have gained in importance. The term "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC), the overarching aim of FL curricula in many countries (Byram and Fleming 1998), has been defined as the ability to interact effectively in a FL with members of cultures different from our own (Byram 1997; Guilherme 2000). Apart from knowledge of the target culture and attitudes of openness toward and interest in other cultures, effective intercultural interaction includes the skills of being able to discover and understand the symbolic meaning that is attributed to behaviour in different cultures. It also involves an awareness that one's own way of seeing the world is not *natural* or *normal*, but culturally determined.

A consequent challenge facing FL teachers and language program coordinators is how to develop such skills, knowledge, and awareness in learners enrolled in their programs. Many educators have turned to training language learners in the skills of ethnographic fieldwork and research in order to accomplish this. While ethnography for language learners is most commonly employed during residence abroad (e.g., the Socrates–Erasmus exchange program), in today's multicultural societies other FL educators have also engaged their learners in ethnographic studies of members of the target culture who are living in the students' home cultures.

However, many language educators and program coordinators may find it difficult to provide their learners with access to members of the target culture with whom they can interact in their ethnographic projects. In these cases, the availability of online communication technologies such as videoconferencing and e-mail can offer learners the cost-effective opportunity to interact with native speakers (NSs) from the target group and to develop the skills of ethnography without having to leave their own classrooms. Because the concept of learner ethnography is still relatively recent in FL education, it is not surprising that its application to online contexts is not yet to be found in the literature. Roberts *et al.* do indeed recognize the potential of videoconferencing and other online technologies for such ethnographic research, but the authors also warn that the "affective engagement with others in such intercultural experience will doubtless be different from that in the field" (2001, p. 242). These comments are quite vague and therefore reflect the need for further research in this area. This chapter explores the experiences of students carrying out ethnographic research with online contacts and the ways in which such research may influence the process of intercultural language learning.

The outcomes of a semester-long networked exchange between two university classes, one in Germany and one in the United States, are presented. The German group (advanced students of English as a Foreign Language taught by the author) and the American group (students in a course on Communication Studies) put into practice the skills of ethnographic interviewing to which they had been introduced earlier in their classes. The exchange capitalized on both e-mail and videoconferencing technology in order to facilitate intercultural communication in English between the participants. The research methodology was based on the principles of action research because little is known about the outcomes of ethnographic research in networked environments or about the particular contribution of videoconferencing technology to telecollaboration. Wallace defines action research for teachers as "collecting data on your everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be" (1998, p. 4). As such, action research reflected my aim of analysing the effectiveness of the online culture learning activities in my own classes and then making proposals about how these activities could be adapted and improved in other contexts. I was also aware, however, of Stenhouse's warning that action research should contribute to "a theory of education and teaching which is accessible to other teachers" (cited in Cohen and Manion 1994, p. 186). The following overarching questions are addressed in this chapter: (1) What can the particular qualities of

videoconferencing technology contribute to networked intercultural exchange and student-led ethnographic research?; (2) What can be gained from combining asynchronous and synchronous tools (in this case e-mail and videoconferencing) in networked ethnographic research?; and (3) Can student-led ethnographic research be successfully carried out through networked technologies?

The questions are deliberately broad because it is not my intention to impose my own "researcher-determined categorisation schemes" (Davis 1995, p. 433), but rather to let the most salient issues emerge from the data. In order to find answers to these questions, I, in my role as action researcher, began by examining both the transcripts of the videoconferences and the content of the students' e-mails during the exchange. I then triangulated my findings with data from student feedback collected throughout the project in order to ensure that my interpretation of the data was in agreement with that of the students. This student feedback data included in-depth interviews (carried out by e-mail and face-to-face), end-of-term essays, and qualitative questionnaires (see Appendix 1). In addition, I showed students extracts from their own online interactions and compared their interpretations of them with my own. There were times, however, when it was necessary to *reverse* this process of data triangulation. In these cases, important outcomes and insights emerged from the student questionnaires and interviews, which I had not already identified in the interaction transcripts. I then searched for evidence of the students' comments in the transcripts or asked them to refer me to examples. Following the model of other reports of qualitative research in networked classrooms (e.g., Fischer 1998; Warschauer 1998), representative examples are used in order to illustrate the relevant issues and themes, which emerged repeatedly from the data.

In the next section, I first review the literature on ethnography and ethnographic interviewing in FL education to date. Then I discuss telecollaborative exchanges as a site for the development of student ethnography. Next, I outline reasons for the combination of both synchronous and asynchronous communication in the exchange under study. Following that, I provide an overview of the experiences of language educators in applying videoconferencing technology in their classrooms. In the next section, I offer background information on the two partner classes and describe how this particular exchange was organised and structured. Next, the key research questions are dealt with in detail and finally conclusions and suggestions for further research are drawn.

Ethnography for Language Learners

Ethnography is a well-known qualitative research method that has become very popular of late in the field of applied linguistics and FL education. Researchers have used ethnographic methods to understand the *emic* perspective or how the students and teachers in question understand and experience what is happening in the classroom. However, recent work has highlighted the possibility of not only using ethnography as a tool for the classroom researcher but also as a source of content in the classroom.

The value of ethnography for language and culture learning was recognised initially by Stern (1983), who suggested that teachers use ethnographies of the target cultures in order to create materials for their language/culture classes. In recent years, ethnography has become popular in FL learning as a means for students to learn about language and culture. Ethnography has been used to engage members of the target culture who live in the home culture (Batemann 2002; Robinson and Nocon 1996), in online language learning environments (Fischer 1997; Fischhaber 2002), and in the target culture during periods of study abroad (Barro *et al.* 1998; Byram 1999; Roberts *et al.* 2001).

But in what ways does ethnography contribute to developing ICC? To answer this question it is necessary to look at what ethnography actually is and what the interpretation of culture involves. Roberts describes ethnography as a process of understanding "how things get done, what meanings they have and how there is coherence and indeed patterns of flux . . . in everyday life" (2002, p. 35). Ethnography does not consider culture to be a finite set of facts or behaviour but something that is continuously constructed and altered through interaction and through language. In contrast to a Cultural Studies approach, which has focused mainly on the analysis of texts from the target culture (e.g., Kramer 1997), ethnography provides students with a much more hands-on approach in which they engage with the foreign culture on the microlevel of individual behavior, which is then subsequently linked to the macrolevel of the socio-cultural environment.

This approach to studying culture and language is seen by many to be particularly suited to the development of cultural awareness and ICC for various reasons. First, Fischer points out that an ethnographic approach moves away from a more traditional definition of culture and makes learners aware that culture is not simply a set of facts to be learned, but is rather about understanding how "meanings reside in discourse" (1997, p. 108). As a result, words and utterances cannot have absolute meanings. Second, Jurasek maintains that one outcome of student ethnography is "an ever-increasing ability to recognise at least in a limited way what things might look like from the viewpoint of members of another culture" (1995, p. 228). Finally, Roberts *et al.* see the value of ethnography for intercultural learning in the fact that it is an interactive activity, which engages learners with the foreign culture on a local level via participant observation. Consequently, learners come to understand culture by taking an active part in it. As Roberts *et al*. note, learners "develop both linguistic and intercultural competences in the experience of fieldwork interaction as both verbal and non-verbal, as embedded in a 'context of situation'" (2001, p. 242).

Bateman (2002) and Robinson and Nocon (1996) describe the successful use of ethnographic interviewing techniques by language learners in their home culture. Both studies report on university-level learners of Spanish in the United States, who conducted ethnographic interviews with Spanish speakers living in their hometowns. Using ethnographic interviewing techniques such as listening actively and asking questions based on the interviewees' responses, it was hoped that students would become more aware of the *emic* or insider point of view

(Firth and Wagner 1997) and discover "natural categories of meaning in the interviewee's mind" (Bateman 2002, p. 320). In both studies, the ethnographic projects improved students' attitudes toward Spanish speakers and increased their desire to continue learning Spanish. Bateman also reports that her students became more aware of their own culture and had opportunities to see it from an outside perspective. However, Bateman also notes that the project led students to generalize a great deal about members of the target culture even though they had only interviewed a few subjects.

Reports of students using ethnography during periods of residence abroad are also common in the literature. The work of Roberts *et al.* (2001), for example, is based on *The Ealing Ethnography Project* at *Thames Valley University*, which involves a two-stage learning process for students of foreign languages. First, students are trained in the skills of ethnography over a one-year period before residence abroad. Then, they carry out ethnographic research on some aspect of the target culture during residence abroad.

If ethnography can only be used in situations where students have regular face-to-face contact with members of the target culture, however, then its usefulness may be of a limited nature. For example, while program coordinators of Spanish or ESL courses in the United States may have opportunities to bring classes into contact with NSs in their neighbourhoods, courses in other languages are not as likely to be as fortunate. In the following section, one way in which the principles of ethnography can be adapted for use in situations where language learners do not have face-to-face access to members of the target culture is examined.

Ethnographic Interviewing

Robinson-Stuart and Nocon explain why language teachers might train learners in the techniques of ethnographic interviewing: "Unlike forms of ethnography that involve long-term participant observation in specific cultural contexts, ethnographic interviewing techniques are transportable tools for understanding an insider's perspective" (1996, p. 437). Such interviewing essentially involves carrying out, over a number of encounters, a series of in-depth interviews with informants from the target culture in order to explore the *emic* perspective, or their natural categories of meaning (Roberts *et al.* 2001; Spradley 1979). The aim of ethnographic interviewing, and ethnography in general, is to provide what Geertz refers to as a "thick description" (1973, p. 6) that synthesizes different observations and converts them into a representative and partial account of the cultural event *from the native's point of view*. The ethnographer is not expected to support or criticise the cultural event under study.

The main characteristics of ethnographic interviewing can be summarised in the following way. First, unlike other types of interviews, ethnographers do not have a pre-planned outline of set questions which are "imposed" on the informant. Instead, interviewers develop their line of questioning based on the information that their informant supplies to them. Second, ethnographic interviews usually

require periods of extended contact with informants. A good deal of time is needed to establish rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewee, to identify their *emic* perspective and then to explore in detail the meanings which they assign to behaviour. Third, ethnographic interviewing requires a great deal of what Nemetz-Robinson describes as "creative listening" (1985, p. 45). This means paying careful attention to what the informant is saying, expressing interest in their answers, and following up on the topics and issues that they bring up. The final key characteristic of ethnographic interviewing involves the types of questions informants are asked to answer. Spradley (1979, p. 60) reports that there are over thirty kinds of ethnographic questions, which fall into three main categories. These are: (1) descriptive questions; (2) structural questions; and (3) contrast questions. The first type is designed to gain an overview of the foreign culture; the second type targets the ways in which informants structure their cultural knowledge; the third type requires that informants contrast terms in their language with other terms to establish the precise meanings of particular concepts.

Ethnographic interviewing is of great use as a method of culture investigation within the context of an asynchronous text-based telecollaborative project (Belz 2003; Warschauer 1996a) for the following reasons. First, interviewers have ample time in the asynchronous medium to reflect on what their informants tell them and to decide what line of questioning will best lead to further exploration of this information. Second, learners can receive support and advice from their teachers and classmates on the execution of the interview and the analysis of the data if the ethnographic project is adequately integrated into the course. Learners who are engaged in traditional ethnographic fieldwork during their period of study abroad are unlikely to have access to such support. Finally, text-based electronic interaction may provide support for learners who are shy or not confident about interacting with speakers of the foreign language. This means that learners who would normally be unwilling to carry out face-to-face ethnographic interviews in their local area or in the foreign culture may be happier about using this investigative technique in a virtual environment (see Warschauer 1996b for a discussion of students' increased participation in online interaction).

Nevertheless, there are certain practical problems that might hinder the application of ethnographic interviewing to text-based exchanges. First, e-mail exchanges usually have as their goal a balanced intercultural relationship, which requires both partners to contribute more or less equal amounts of information about themselves and their cultures (O'Dowd 2003). Ethnography, on the other hand, usually involves a less balanced turn-taking relationship. Spradley explains: "The relationship is asymmetrical: the ethnographer asks almost all the questions, the informant talks about her experience" (1979, p. 67). In the case of telecollaborative ethnography it will be necessary for learners to take turns acting as both ethnographers and informants. This reduces the asymmetry of the relationship, but need not necessarily impede the learners from developing a more in-depth picture of the target culture as well as a more critical understanding of their own.

A second drawback in applying ethnography to telecollaboration is related to the non-visual (or text-based) nature of common telecollaborative media such as e-mail and message boards. The informants can more easily avoid or ignore any

difficult or probing questions that they do not wish to answer because they are not communicating face-to-face. Furthermore, the time delay in asynchronous communication may mean that the process of receiving content from an informant and then sending back further questions that are based on that content becomes slow and tedious such that students never really get a sufficiently rich picture of the world of their partners. A possible remedy to this problem is the introduction of synchronous communication tools such as chats or videoconferencing. A combination of asynchronous and synchronous tools may provide learners initially with rich, in-depth descriptions (via e-mail or message boards) and then allow them to make follow-up questions via the synchronous medium.

Videoconferencing in Foreign Language Education

Videoconferencing is a point-to-point closed communications system connecting computers that are equipped with video (Roblyer 1997, p. 58). In order to take part in a videoconference, users require a camera, a screen, a microphone, loudspeakers, and the necessary software. Communication usually takes place via Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) lines or over the Internet, using Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. Both systems can suffer from low-quality visual images and sound; however, ISDN is considered more reliable due to its greater bandwidth. Low cost tends to make IP the more popular option with educational institutions.

Desktop videoconferencing, which is well suited for one-to-one communication, involves carrying out a videoconference using a web-camera and microphones that are connected to a personal computer. Videoconferencing software applications such as *NetMeeting* allow users to combine the videoconference with a shared whiteboard on their screens where each participant can write, draw diagrams, and make changes to what the other has written. Room-based videoconferencing, on the other hand, emphasizes group-to-group communication. In general, a class sits in front of a large screen where they can view the participants at the other site as well as a smaller image of themselves. This form of videoconferencing is typical in distance-learning programmes because it allows distally located students or teachers to take part in classes.

Wilcox explains that "[t]he stigma of videoconferencing is that, throughout its history, next year has always been the year it was going to 'really take off'" (2000, p. 17) in distance education in general. This would also appear to be the case for FL education. For some time now, much of the CALL literature has spoken about the imminent arrival of videoconferencing in the language classroom and about the benefits that this will have for both teachers and learners (Egbert and Hanson-Smith 1999; Furstenberg *et al.* 2001; Moore 2002). For many, the technology has come to be seen as the next logical addition to the wide range of text- and audio-based communication tools that are currently available to educators. The contribution of visual images to online communication and the immediacy of "live" face-to-face interaction seem to offer a much more authentic and personal side to

long-distance telecollaboration. While reports on the use of videoconferencing in FL education are still scarce, a review of how videoconferencing has been used to date may offer some insight into how the technology could contribute to online ethnographic interviewing.

First, there does not appear to be a consensus as to whether the visual aspect of videoconferencing enables learners to see and interpret the body language and other non-verbal cues used by their distant partners. For example, Buckett and Stringer found that the visual aspect "provides a way of gauging reactions (e.g., frowning, smiling, puzzlement), of clarifying meaning (e.g., by mime), and as a way of learning some of the non-verbal gestures relevant to the language being taught" (1997). However, Goodfellow *et al.* (1996) found that the technology did not facilitate natural group discussion and that body language such as gestures and facial expressions were distorted and difficult to interpret. Similarly, Zähner, Fauverge, and Wong (2000) found that transmission delays in desktop videoconferencing interfered with the unmediated turn-taking process between learners of French and learners of English in *The Leverage Project*. Furthermore, students reported receiving limited visual feedback from partners. The authors explain that "participants have a range of signals, eye contact, facial expressions, body language, and so on, to indicate their intention [in face-to-face communication]. Over the network, most of these clues are not available. The visual channel is quite restricted by the nature of desktop videoconferencing" (2000, p. 197). My own previous research into group-to-group room-based videoconferencing between American and Spanish students (O'Dowd 2000) showed that students were able to use the large visual representation of the partner group on the big screen to become aware of cultural differences in appropriate classroom behaviour as well as in posture and appearance. The Spanish students, for example, reported that they were shocked that their American counterparts found it acceptable to sit in a slouched manner and to drink and eat during the conferences.

A reported advantage of videoconferencing is that students often find electronically mediated interaction with distant peers less stressful and intimidating than engaging in traditional oral practice with their teachers. However, this was only the case in desktop videoconferencing set-ups. Butler and Fawkes (1999), for example, relate how students of French at *Monkeaton High School* in England conversed in both French and English every week in a one-on-one format with students of EFL in a partner school in Lille, France. The students were given access to desktop computers with videoconferencing capabilities and interacted with an assigned partner. One of the main findings of the project was that students found it less intimidating to be corrected by their foreign peers than by their teachers. Zähner, Fauverge, and Wong (2000) reported similar outcomes for desktop exchanges; however, the group-to-group format did not always yield the same results. In fact, Kinginger warns of "the new forms of language classroom anxiety induced by the stress of public speaking in a networked or linked environment" (1998, p. 510).

A further finding common to most of the studies reviewed here is the necessity to locate videoconference sessions within a pedagogic structure and to carefully plan the content and development of the sessions in advance. Zähner, Fauverge,

and Wong (2000), for example, warn that the success of videoconferencing as a tool for language learning depends on three important aspects. First, students should be given appropriate, engaging tasks. Second, a writing tool (such as a shared whiteboard) should be available to support the oral interaction. Finally, tutors should be on hand in order to step in when problems emerge. In their work on French–American telecollaboration, Kinginger, Gourvés-Hayward, and Simpson point out that teachers have to ensure that "technology is in the service of a coherent teaching approach, and not an end to itself" (1999, p. 861). They offer some examples of tasks which are suited to intercultural videoconferencing exchanges, including comparative discussions of parallel films, children's fairy tales, and other texts that had been written for one of the culture's involved and then adapted for publication in the other. The authors found that the interaction with individual NSs via videoconferencing allowed learners to check their developing theories about the target culture and also reminded them not to make overgeneralisations. In my own research (O'Dowd 2000), I found that videoconferencing sessions were most effective when they formed part of a task-based framework, which involved engaging students in pre-videoconference preparation and post-session analysis of the videoconference. This post-videoconference session usually involved watching a recording of the session and discussing aspects of the session related to language and cultural content.

The findings reported here have various important consequences for program coordinators who are considering integrating videoconferencing technology into their language programs. First, it will be necessary to carefully consider whether room-based or desktop videoconferencing is the most suitable set-up for the learning context. While desktop videoconferencing is more suited for student-to-student tandem learning, room-based videoconferencing is more accommodating to class-based and teacher-guided contexts. Second, videoconferencing should not be seen as an activity which merely involves the actual *contact* time. Instead, students who are going to take part in videoconferencing activities will require class time both before and after the conferences in order to sufficiently benefit from the experience. It remains unclear, however, if videoconferencing can make a particular contribution to intercultural telecollaboration that other communication tools such as e-mail or chat can not. It is also unclear how ethnographic interviewing can be adapted to this networked format.

The Partnership

The Participants

A class of 25 German-speaking learners of English in the fifth or sixth semester of University study in Essen, Germany, was paired with class of 21 American students in a Communication Studies course at the Zanesville campus of the *University of Columbus* in Ohio taught by Sheida Shirvani. Sheida was interested in engaging her class in a project which would give learners hands-on experience in intercultural communication. She explained her interest in the exchange in the following way: "It is not an easy task for me to provide experiences of exposing my

students to a new culture so, when I came across this project, I thought my students would benefit from the new first-hand experience rather than reading between the lines of books and articles" (personal communication).

Due to differing semester dates, the partnership lasted for eight weeks in Spring 2003. Students were required to write a minimum of one e-mail per week; a videoconferencing session took place once every two weeks for a total of four sessions. The exchange took place entirely in English because the American group was not studying German and was therefore not interested in interacting in German. As a result, the German students were exposed to a greater amount of interaction in English than would have been the case in an exchange which involved German and English.[1]

Sheida and I exchanged over twenty e-mails during the five weeks prior to the beginning of our exchange in which we told each other about aspects of our private and professional backgrounds, the social and cultural contexts in which our students were studying, as well as how we envisaged carrying out the exchange. These lengthy e-mails served two functions. Obviously, they allowed us to plan our exchange in some detail. However, they also helped to establish a relationship of trust between us and enabled us to demonstrate our commitment to the exchange. Developing a successful telecollaborative exchange requires a great deal of extra work on the behalf of the teachers; those who do not have enough time to establish a working relationship with their partner teacher in the weeks before the exchange are unlikely to be able to invest sufficient time when the exchange begins in earnest. Furthermore, the socio-cultural contexts and the working conditions of teachers and students in both countries may differ radically. This does not mean that the exchanges will inevitably become unworkable because of these differences, but if the teachers are *unaware* of them they may lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdown. Exchanging in-depth e-mails helps teachers to find out more about the socio-cultural and educational contexts within which their partners are operating (Belz and Müller-Hartmann 2003).

During the first days of their classes, both groups of students filled out a short questionnaire to establish their attitudes to the idea of the exchange and working with network-based technologies. In general, the learners were very much at home working and communicating online. A large majority of their friends and family were reported to be online and almost all students in both classes had access to the Internet in their homes. However, the American group appeared to spend more time each day online. Furthermore, only half of the Germans had used technology in other University courses. The American students were more familiar with aspects of network-based learning (see also Belz 2001).

In general, the Germans reported a desire to find out more about the American way of life and culture and to improve their English writing skills. The American group also mentioned an interest in finding out about the target culture, but many of them suggested that they were hoping to "gain a friend" as a result of participation in the project. This possibility was not mentioned at all by the German group. Perhaps this finding echoes Kramsch and Thorne's (2002) suggestion that Internet communication in the United States is considered to be a very human activity which involves establishing close personal relationships and

taking a personal interest in the solution of problems. This interpretation appeared to be confirmed in the final feedback of some of the American students. For instance, one student commented that "after a few e-mails she didn't seem like a foreign student but more like a friend," while another American complained that "even when [she] tried to joke with [her German partner] he would respond seriously." These comments also reflect the notion that "in German conversations . . . the topic was more important than the human beings discussing it" (House 2000a, p. 155).

When the students were asked what cultural differences they expected to encounter during the exchange, the American responses appeared to show that they had an image of Germany as a rural, family-oriented society. One American student mentioned, for example, that she imagined the United States to be "a more fast-paced and technology-oriented country than Germany." Such comments seemed to demonstrate the influence of common American stereotypical images of Germany (Kramsch 1993, pp. 208–209); in point of fact, many of the American participants reported living and studying in quite a poor rural environment.

The Germans also seemed to have been influenced by stereotypical portraits of the United States. Their pre-telecollaboration comments often reflected the common portrayal of America in the European media when they suggested that they expected to find differences in issues such as patriotism, national pride, and religion. The exchange took place just weeks after the United States and Britain had invaded Iraq in the second Iraq war and the question of whether the war had been justified or not was frequently at issue. Whereas the vast majority of Essen students were against the U.S.-led invasion, many of the American students clearly supported their government's actions. A military base was located near their hometown and some students had family members in the armed forces. In addition, three of the American participants had been members of the armed forces before taking up their studies.

The Exchange

The partnership was divided into four key stages (see Table 1). In stage one, the U.S. students explored some background information on Essen and Germany, read the relevant literature on ethnographic interviewing, and sent an introductory e-mail to me in Essen. At the outset of stage two, these e-mails were distributed to the students and they chose partners according to the topics which the Americans had suggested. During the initial weeks in the German class, students were introduced to text extracts and videos on the topic of ethnographic interviewing (Agar 1980; Nemetz-Robinson 1985; Roberts *et al.* 2001; Spradley 1979) in order to prepare them for the use of typical ethnographic techniques such as descriptive or grand tour questions and creative listening in their videoconferences and e-mails. International exchange students from France, Poland, and Italy were also invited to the classes to participate in "practice" interviews so the German group could gain first-hand experience in trying out the techniques. As the students read extracts from other ethnographic interviews and studies, they were told that their

exchange did not require a critical approach to American culture, but rather an identification of the socio-cultural contexts which shaped the meanings of the behavior and beliefs of their partners.

Table 1
Overview of the Partnership

	German Class	U.S. Class
Stage 1	German university not in session	Introductory mails sent to Essen
Stage 2	Intercultural e-mail correspondence; four videoconferences	Intercultural e-mail correspondence; four videoconferences
Stage 3	Production of essays based on exchange	Production of essays based on exchange
Stage 4	Outcomes of exchange explored in class	U.S. university not in session

Students also began exchanging e-mails with their partners in stage two and they took part in four class-to-class videoconference sessions. The sessions lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Videoconferencing Between Essen (Inset) and Zanesville (Main Screen)

At the end of this eight-week period (stage three), students from both groups wrote essays reporting on the outcomes of their ethnographic research. As each pair of students had interviewed each other on a wide variety of topics, they were given a certain degree of choice for the topic of their essays. Some of the German students wrote comparative essays on themes, which they had explored with their partner and submitted work with titles such as "Discrimination Against Minorities in Germany and the USA" or "Religion in the USA and Germany." However, others chose to reflect on what they had learned from the intercultural experience itself and produced work on "The Challenge of Interaction between Cultures" and "E-mails: A Good Technique to do Ethnographic Research?" At this point, the American course came to an end. In stage four, the German class read additional texts on intercultural communication (e.g., House 2000b) and discussed their own experiences in the light of these texts.

Research Findings

The Contribution of Videoconferencing to the Intercultural Exchange

In general, videoconferencing interaction can be characterized as a fast and efficient form of long-distance interaction which allows students to quickly respond to and follow up on the comments and explanations of their partners in a way which other text-based telecollaborative tools may not be able to do. This type of interaction is illustrated in the videoconference transcript example 1:

(1)

Mary (USA) (1): We're considered non-traditional. Well, I'm 40 and Randi is about my age (laughter from Americans) and there is a lot of us who have already had our children or are changing job positions. I think a lot of it has to do with the economy because a lot of people are happy to switch jobs because of the downsizing and stuff.

Randi (USA): I've just made a mid-life carrier change myself. I went to a higher university back in the seventies so I'm old. It puts a whole new perspective on everything as an older adult, as an older than average college student I should say.

Mary: Older than dirt

Latasha (USA): This is Latasha. I am also a non-traditional student because after high school I also didn't have the desire to go to college and I became a soldier and that's why I lived in Germany for two years of my life. Once I got out I decided that to me, in our society to get ahead you do need a college degree so I decided to come back to school.

Britta (Germany): um, why did you want to become a soldier? I mean, that is quite unusual for a German woman. So is it unusual for you too?

Latasha: In my family, it was very unusual. In my family, we had a lot of men who were soldiers but I was the first female. I felt it was giving something to my country. I do love being a citizen of the United States and I felt like showing that love to serve. Because a lot of people don't understand what people go through and it's not even because I believe in war or I condone war but I believe I was doing my part because if there was a war situation I would support it but the likelihood that I would have to hurt anyone is extremely slim. I don't condone the war that we have now but I believe it was a chance for me to give something to my society.

Sylvia (Germany): Ok, Hi Latasha, it's Sylvia again. I would like to know if women are treated the same as men in the military? Because I know they have just changed the law in Germany about that and now women can join the military.

Latasha: For me personally I think that women are pretty much equal to men . . .

After asking a question on the subject of non-traditional students, the German group can quickly receive a variety of responses on the topic and then can immediately focus in on one of the comments from the American group which has caught their interest: "Why did you want to become a soldier? I mean, that is quite unusual for a German woman. So is it unusual for you too?" The language of the interaction is of an informal, oral nature (e.g., the use of fillers such as "well" and "um" and the colloquial expression "older than dirt") and the content is made up of personal accounts of social developments (e.g., the rising number of non-traditional students in U.S. universities and the existence of female soldiers in the U.S. military). The extract represents a question-and-answer format, which was common in the videoconferences.

Based on questionnaire data, many German students experienced the videoconferencing interaction as similar to "normal" face-to-face communication; they appreciated the opportunity to engage with their American partners in this way. They also found that turn-taking in this form of communication was more efficient than via e-mail and, consequently, they were able to collect more information about their partners and their culture than they were in their e-mail correspondence. The question-and-answer cycles shown above between Britta and Latasha and then between Sylvia and Latasha illustrate this efficient form of intercultural exchange.

A further advantage was that the videoconferencing enabled students to get to know their partners better and, as a result, made them more relaxed in their relationships via e-mail. Evidence for this can be found in Sylvia's e-mail to Latasha immediately after the videoconferencing session referred to above:

(2)

Hi Latasha,

I've just come home from the videoconference and I'm still excited although it was a bit hard to communicate because it was so unusual

> for us. I was glad I was able to spot you. Now I know what you are like and that helps me to write to you. That's great. On my way home many questions came into my head that I decided to sit down straight away and write to you. . . .

Further evidence appears in various students' comments in their end-of-course online interviews. Ana's (a Polish woman in the course in Essen) comments, for example, are particularly representative of this point of view: "The conference helped me realised whom I write to. Our contact got more personal after that and I think we can understand each other better."

The student feedback also reveals that the students often appreciated the opportunity to find out the points of view of other Americans besides that of their e-mail partners. Hans explained this in the following way in an e-mail interview:

(3)

> It was fascinating to see their reaction to certain topics face to face and to discuss the themes you have already talked about with a single person with other people whose attitudes are different to the attitudes of the special e-mail partner. The most important thing was to hear and see them talk and speak freely about their culture and their way of life.

While text-based reactions from partners can also be easily shared with other students (by photocopying correspondence or by forwarding e-mails), the opportunity to actually "see" other reactions in real time seems to be particularly valued by learners. This contribution is also quite significant to the intercultural learning process. By being exposed to the different personal experiences and points of view of the American group in the videoconference, the German group was able to put the information they were receiving from their e-mail partner into a wider context and decide to what extent they could generalize from this information. The following example from one of the German student's end-of-term essays shows how the different views expressed by the Americans during the videoconferences were noted and used by the Germans to write up their conclusions of the exchange:

(4)

> One of the most controversial topics during our exchange was the discussion concerning gun control. In one of our video-conferences the opposite opinions Germans and Americans have towards this topic have become quite clear. The most common pro-arguments mentioned by some advocates have been that tens of thousands of guns are used only for competitive target shooting, competitions or for protection and that criminals are the source of crime, no matter how they are armed. One girl of the American group said in the second video-conference that target shooting is one thing that is "bonding" her with her father.

Of course, the teacher needs to provide learners with other materials and content about the target culture which, in turn, will help learners to put this information from the whole class into a more representative context. Learners need to be aware of the extent to which they can generalize about the target culture based on

the information provided by one informant, or, in the case of videoconferencing, one class. However, these limitations should not take away from the value of the information that they receive from their partners. The individual stories and opinions of the exchange partners help students put the "factual" and statistical data from their textbooks into perspective and remind them of the dangers of overgeneralizing about the target culture. Kern addresses overgeneralization in the following way:

> By comparing what they learn through their e-mail exchanges with what they learn through teachers, textbooks, and other media, learners can evaluate information in a framework of multiple perspectives. For example, when American learners receive detailed personal accounts of life in twenty different French families, they can suddenly see the limitations of global generalizations in textbook portrayals of 'the French family'" (2000, p. 258).

A further contribution of videoconferencing to intercultural learning is that students used the opportunity of face-to-face contact to clarify doubts and explore theories about the target culture which had emerged in their e-mail correspondence. A short extract from the class which took place in Essen just before the second videoconferencing session illustrates this quite clearly:

(5)

Teacher: Have you all thought about what you would like to find out during the conference?

Jutta: I would like to know whether they think there is racism in Germany. Because I got a question from my partner last week, she wanted to know how black people are treated here and if it is ok with me because she would understand if I don't want to talk about that. So I get the impression that maybe they think that all of the German people are racist.

Teacher: But how do you ask that question in a way which doesn't come across as "Do you think we are all Nazis?"

Teacher: That's the problem, because if you ask direct questions like that you will get the answer "of course not," so how do you find out how they really believe?

Jutta: I would ask them about general opinions about Germans I suppose.

Teacher: Remember, when you ask a question you have to hold a microphone. So when you ask a question and they answer, don't just say "thank you" and pass on the microphone. Quiz them about their response. Remember ethnographic interviewing? From their answer, you try to develop it more.

In this extract, Jutta first mentions how she wants to explore in greater detail impressions which she felt their American partners have of Germany. She felt she had identified certain stereotypes about Germany written "between the lines" in their partners' e-mails and she saw the videoconferencing session as an opportunity

to find out if these stereotypical images really existed or not. The videoconferencing medium was considered a quicker, more direct way than e-mail to clear up their doubts and to clearly establish how the Americans saw their German counterparts. Müller-Hartmann (2000) similarly found that synchronous communication tools (e.g., text-based chat programs) served this purpose of clarifying aspects of intercultural dialogue which were proving difficult to deal with in the asynchronous mode.

Finally, videoconferencing provided learners with authentic practice in developing the skills of discovery and interaction, i.e., being able to interact successfully with members of other cultures and illicit information about their world view *in real time,* as well as critical cultural awareness (Byram 1997, pp. 52–53). In asynchronous communication, students have ample time to reflect on how to interact appropriately with their partners, but in the videoconferences students are required to elicit knowledge about the American culture and to negotiate meaning between the two groups then and there. This obviously made the task of intercultural communication much more challenging for the students but their feedback would suggest that the occasions when there were misunderstandings or disagreement in the videoconferences proved to be the most insightful and rich with respect to cultural learning for the German group. The following event in the third videoconferencing session, for example, made a particularly strong impression on the German students:

(6)

Mary (USA): This is Mary. I know where I'm from everyone was in support of the war because we all have a military unit in our home town. We are just very supportive of the soldiers. The whole country in general, we don't, this is a real emotional topic for me.

Robert (teacher in Germany): Ok, thank you Mary.

Sylvia (Germany): This is Sylvia again. Would you relate this decision pro-war to what happened Sept 11. That is something I would understand. That happened in your country and this was a war of revenge which made you feel better. Would you agree with that?

Teresa (USA): I'll answer that. I don't think that it was so much revenge but everything changed on September 11th. This is the first time in a long time that the USA was an aggressor in a war and that's an example of how things have changed in this country since that day.

Robert: We have a Polish lady here too.

Ana (Germany): My name is Ana and maybe you know that Poland was the first country to be attacked by Germany and very many people died. For me war is the worst thing and there can be no reason to explain it.

Mary: This is Mary again. I know that this is not a popular opinion. I think the other day I said that war is necessary sometimes. I guess where I'm coming from is if we didn't step in during the civil war we would still have slavery. If we didn't step in during the Nazi time-frame,

> Hitler would have killed many more people. I feel like we get blamed a lot of times for stepping in, but a lot of times we are asked to step in and then we get blamed for it. That's where I'm coming from with my feelings, my emotion, my anger 'cos a lot of boys have died (Mary begins to cry) for a cause we had no business being there but we were asked to be there and we were blamed for it later (Mary continues to cry and then the session is disconnected).

In this extract, the American student Mary becomes emotional as she expresses her feelings about the war in Iraq and begins to cry as she explains her ideas. She states at the beginning of this extract that "this is a real emotional topic for me" and it appears that she interprets Ana's comment ("For me war is the worst thing and there can be no reason to explain it") as a direct challenge to her beliefs. In order to defend her beliefs, she then tries to link America's involvement in Iraq to her country's actions against slavery and Nazi Germany. At the end of this excerpt, the IP connection was lost between the two sites and it took the technicians approximately five minutes to restore the connection. In the interim, the German students confessed that they felt very awkward in this situation. When the session restarted, one of the German students immediately suggested changing the subject and the conversation turned to the topic of religion in Germany and the United States.

This emotionally charged event clearly illustrated to the German students how cultural beliefs and values can differ greatly between two supposedly "similar" western societies. An extract from German Katya's final essay demonstrates this point:

(7)

> We were discussing the European attitude towards the war in Iraq when suddenly Mary, one of the American students, started crying and began to defend the American point of view very strongly and emotionally. The reason for her strong reaction can be found in her personal background. She comes from a military family which was deeply involved in the war business. She even might have lost some loved ones. Her personal experience didn't allow her to discuss the topic objectively. In my eyes it is almost impossible to exclude a person's individual background from cultural exchange. It is a real challenge to cope with situations like this where a lot of intuition and sensitivity is needed. We felt overwhelmed by Mary's reaction and it would have been easier if we had been prepared for a situation like this. So how can we prevent misunderstanding each other and overcome the fact that we have been trained our whole lives to react to things in a certain way? What are the skills that we need to communicate more effectively?

In this extract, Katya reveals how she and her classmates have become more aware of how social, historical, and personal issues can influence cultural perspectives during the videoconferences. Katya's reflections on Mary's emotional reaction to the question of the Iraq war led her to take into account how the

social and political contexts within which a person is living can influence their political views: "The reason for her strong reaction can be found in her personal background. She comes from a military family which was deeply involved in the war business." It appears that the "first-hand" experience of an intercultural difference of opinion and the intense, personal nature of the videoconference interaction meant that the German students were not able to ignore the American perspective; instead, they had to look for the socio-cultural contexts which had shaped the development of their American partners' perspectives. Being able to identify the values which underlie the behaviour of members of the foreign culture is a vital part of Byram's critical cultural awareness or the ability to "identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures" (1997, p. 53).

Intercultural exchange by e-mail alone might have reduced the possibility of these students looking for the historical and social reasons behind the Americans' perspectives. With one or two exceptions, the e-mail exchanges between the two classes did not involve any misunderstandings or arguments about cultural issues. Students tended to present their perspective on the issues at hand and then wait to receive their partners' point of view. If these opinions differed in any way, this was simply accepted as a difference in opinion but it was rarely followed by any attempt to find out more about the foreign perspective. The "face-to-face" nature of videoconferencing, on the other hand, meant that learners could not simply present opposing perspectives on issues and move on. They were, in a way, obliged by the nature of the medium to delve further into the topics in question in order to find out why the other group felt the way they did. It was when they did this that the link between their partners' behavior and beliefs and the personal, social, and historical factors began to emerge.

Combining Videoconferencing and E-mail

While videoconferencing may allow for a quicker rate of turn-taking and may facilitate discussions on students' doubts and theories about each others' cultures, the e-mail exchange permitted students on both sides to write in great detail about their home culture and to develop their ideas and arguments in a much more fluent and insightful manner. The following extracts taken from the first videoconferencing session and one of the students' e-mails are based on the same subject, multiculturalism in Germany, and are quite representative of the two types of communication in this exchange. Example 8 is taken from the videoconferencing discussion:

(8)

Hans (Germany): We had this thing coming up in our discussion—multiculturalism. How do you feel about multiculturalism in the States?

Janet (USA): This is Janet. And we have many many co-cultures in the United States. How I feel about it personally is that I think it's a plus that we have as many co-cultures as we do. I think it's a good

learning experience to experience someone else's culture and try to understand how someone else lives their life and to communicate better with them and I think we would get awfully bored if we were the same.

Hans: You spoke about co-cultures. Are they integrated in your society or are they just this co-cultures living side by side?

Janet: We have a kind of salad bar arrangement. We have many cultures that live side by side and are mixed together in every day settings

Hans: I think that's the same in Germany. Living side by side but I have no example for this.

Eva (Germany): As a French, I have the feeling that it is not the same as in Germany. Here there is a big Turkish community but I never saw a German student speaking to a Turkish student. It is very rare and I am just wondering why there are such differences between the two communities.

Robert (teacher in Germany): Is it different in France than in Germany?

Eva: I think we have a big Arabic community and they are much more integrated, much more adapted than the Turkish community here. I was wondering maybe it is because the African community already speaks French.

Although the conversation is quite animated, it is clear that the cultural content is, at times, superficial. Janet recognizes the value of living in a multicultural society and describes multiculturalism in the United States as "a kind of salad bar arrangement," but the German group never gets to hear in detail what this actually means. There is no attempt by the American group to offer concrete examples of what this metaphor means and the German students do not ask. The learners do not progress to a higher level of analysis where they might compare the term "salad bar" with the contrasting notion of the "melting pot." The German response is equally vague. Things are "the same in Germany" but on the spur of the moment Hans cannot offer any practical example of multiculturalism in Germany. While videoconferencing may be suited to interaction based on students' own experiences or their personal opinions on specific topics (as was the case in their discussions on the Iraq war and gun control), it may not be suitable when they are "put on the spot" and asked to report factual information about general issues in their society with which they may be unfamiliar or have not thought about to any great extent. It could be argued that this is a disadvantage related to other synchronous telecollaborative tools as well (e.g., text-based chats and audio-conferencing); however, the fact that videoconferencing involves face-to-face contact may serve to increase the sensation of awkwardness produced by silences as students search for appropriate examples and explanations.

The opportunity for reflection and perhaps research on discussions topics afforded by the asynchronous medium of e-mail may produce rather different results as the following extract from a German student's e-mail on the same subject illustrates:

(9)

> As a future teacher I know that it's a fact that Turkish children have language problems and that they are mainly caused by cultural differences. There are prejudices on both sides and it's extremely hard to overcome the problems as long as nobody tries to make a step in the other one's direction. Some German parents don't send their children into schools with a high percentage of Turkish children because they fear that their lack of language knowledge could affect their own children's language acquisition process. That sounds hard but it's a reality in our schools. But on the other hand there are schools which especially train and try to integrate foreign pupils. Teachers are specially qualified and try to fill the language gap. In most secondary schools Muslim children have their own lessons in Islam. They don't have to attend classes where the Protestant or Catholic religions are taught. I went to a Catholic school for girls. Even there Muslim girls had their own lessons. You see the situation is not hopeless but it could be better. And of course September 11th didn't help to understand Muslims better . . .

In this extract, the student provides her partner with detailed examples from her own experiences as well as factual information about what she understands to be multiculturalism in German society. Expecting students to supply such detailed information in a videoconference (especially when operating in a foreign language) is probably quite unrealistic. Furthermore, if students were to speak in such detail in the videoconferencing sessions, they would quickly take on a "lecture" format and few students would have the opportunity to speak or ask questions. Writing by e-mail gives students the opportunity to reflect carefully on what they want to explain, to search for factual and statistical information to support their ideas, and to phrase what they mean more carefully. Rich descriptions of the home culture such as this are therefore best suited to the asynchronous written mode, while discussion and clarification of meaning based on this content can later be handled via videoconference.

In reference to the videoconferences, the German students had obviously recognized the intense, emotional nature of face-to-face exchange. On an end-of-term feedback form, Jessica suggested that "even if it became sometimes a bit too emotional you learned much more by this way. It was easier to understand what is important to them and what differs from us." Lucie, referring to Mary's defence of American involvement in Iraq in example 6, suggested that "writing was definitely much easier—if I think to the third videoconference and Mary when she began to cry about the war, phuuuu. Things like that don't happen while writing (or we just don't see it then)." In contrast to their experiences with videoconferences, the German students found that writing e-mails with their distant partners allowed

"time to think about answers and questions," topics could be "discussed in a more extensive and detailed way," and the writer could "get more time to collect [his or her] thoughts and formulate them, and it is easier to stay objective."

Feedback from the American group on the same question revealed similar views. Teresa suggested that in the videoconferences "it is difficult to express or ask a question that entails an in-depth answer because of the time limit," whereas Tammy reported that "the e-mails were more personal and allowed the person to write longer and expand more and was not on a time restraint." Finally, Latasha explained her experiences of the two media in the following way: "I enjoyed the videoconference very much, but in the e-mails it's easier to open up, and get time for your thoughts before you write anything. With the videoconference you have to have a quick response, or question. Videoconference doesn't allow for much time."

It appears that teachers can use videoconferencing to develop students' ability to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also to elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their behaviour and their opinions. These skills are at the heart of ethnographic fieldwork and are essentially what Byram (1997, p. 52) refers to as the skills of discovery and interaction in his model of ICC. E-mail, on the other hand, can be employed to both send and receive detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from the insider perspective. In other words, e-mail may be better suited to foster the "knowledge" component of ICC in Byram's (1997, p. 51) model. Learners can take as much time as they wish to describe in detail aspects of their own culture without feeling that they are encroaching on the other students' opportunities to participate. E-mail texts also give learners the opportunity to develop their skills of interpreting and relating at a slower, less stressful pace. Both modes of communication together can contribute to the development of students' attitudes of openness and curiosity as they both involve contact with "real people" from the target culture. If the interaction is sufficiently analyzed and discussed in class under the guidance of a teacher, both tools may also facilitate learners' reflection on their own perspectives, products, and practices and thereby develop their critical cultural awareness.

Online Ethnographic Interviewing

In his work on German–American online exchanges, Fischer reports on an argument which develops between a German and an American student about their respective educational systems and which one was "better" than the other:

> Being right or wrong is not the issue here. This issue is: Has Joern listened to what Sherri is saying? If she thinks school provides challenges for students, that is her perception. And this perception is her interpretation of a social reality. Of course, Joern can say at a later stage that he thinks he is smarter than Sherri. But that attitude has nothing to do with what his task in the learning experience could have been: the research of Sheri's interpretation of a social reality (1998, p. 64).

Like Fischer, I suggest that engaging in research on how members of the target culture interpret their social reality should be considered one of the central

aims of telecollaboration, along with becoming more aware of one's own social reality. Because the goal of ethnographic interviewing is understanding "the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand" (Spradley 1979, p. 5), it is ideally suited for developing such awareness in networked partnerships. However, it appears to be difficult to achieve this goal in the short time-span of the current online exchange. While many students did become aware of how their partners' perspectives were shaped by historical, social, and political factors (see the essay extracts by Katya presented previously), other data suggest that students were often unwilling to take on the stance of a researcher or ethnographer whose only aim was to explore and describe their partners' perceptions. Instead, like the German student in Fischer's (1998) example above, many students found themselves drawn into discussions on which culture was "better." In their final essays and on the feedback forms, they often judge or criticize the target culture instead of trying to understand and describe it *from the native's point of view*. While the students have the right to respond in this way, such a response is nevertheless not the aim of ethnographic research. In the following paragraphs, I explore the German students' inability to maintain an ethnographic stance in the course of the exchange.

The e-mail and videoconferencing data show ample examples of the German students using the techniques of ethnographic interviewing in their online interaction. Sylvia, for example, showed an ability to "listen" carefully to what she was being told by her partner and then to ask for more detail when she wrote: "I liked the description you made of Newark and there are some things we would like to talk more about. For example: what are Longburger baskets or what do you mean by Indian Burial Mounds? We are curious to know more about that." Feedback from the German group also showed that the interviewing techniques provided them with a certain amount of guidance in how to engage their partners. Jutta, for example, mentioned she used "open questions" at the beginning of her correspondence to avoid imposing an agenda on her partner and to allow her to speak about what was important to her. Finally, Nadine suggested that being introduced to the technique in general helped students to become aware of the fact that there are good and bad ways of taking part in an online exchange.

However, despite the generally positive reaction of the students to ethnographic interviewing techniques, the German group was often unwilling to retain their stance as observers and "cultural investigators." Like the German student in Fischer's example at the start of this section, some German students tried to establish which of the two cultures is "right" in the interpretation of issues and events. Inevitably, the majority concluded that their own culture held the moral high ground (see also O'Dowd 2003).

The students' unwillingness to consider how their own worldview influenced their exploration of the Americans' perspectives first became clear in the second videoconference during the discussion of gun control in the United States. Although this session began as an attempt by the Germans to find out

more about the American perspective on this topic, it quickly turned into a debate as the following extract illustrates:

(10)

Monica (Germany): I want to ask you a question which might be a bit tough and it came up to my mind when Tony asked about the shootings. One thing I could never understand about America was the right for U.S. citizens to possess guns. I thought this would stop after all the shootings you had in schools and so many innocent children died. This never happened and I would like to know what is the attitude of the society in general? Do you consider it as one of your natural laws to possess a gun? (Silence from Americans for 30 seconds as they discuss among themselves.)

Alice (USA): In our constitution we have the right to bear arms. I personally believe this. Guns don't kill people, people kill people. It is the responsibility of that person if they take that gun and use it for violence. A lot of people use guns for sports such as hunting, competitions for shooting. I personally believe that people should be allowed to have guns as long as they are responsible. There are laws that protect the citizens. (She looks at Tony.)

Tony (USA): This is Tony and I'm going to give two viewpoints. The first one, I do believe we should have the right to bear arms for personal safety and for sport. But I'm a police officer also. And it's hard as a police officer, everyone you pull over you wonder if they have a gun. So I can see both viewpoints. As a police officer, I don't think they should be allowed to carry guns. As a regular citizen, I think we should have guns for sport.

Alice: There is an intense debate in this country whether people should have the right to bear guns. A lot of people would like stricter laws and a lot of people would like to just throw them out.

Teresa (USA): What is the law over there? Are civilians allowed to own arms or not?

Hans (Germany): This is Hans. Civilians are currently not allowed to carry guns or weapons. Only people who have a hunting license and who have to be educated to be allowed to do this and it's very formal to get such licenses. You have to give certain reasons to carry them and handle them. That's how it is in Germany.

Lucie (Germany): You said people do sports with guns. But they carry them home again afterwards. I mean you could just leave them there at the sports center. You can't do sports at home.

Alice: Where I live out in the country, I have a shooting range out the back of my house. My father and I both own guns and pistols and we do it to bond together. It's like a father-daughter activity. We take targets out there and we practice shooting. We keep our guns locked in a safe with a combination lock as well. He gets the guns out and I do not have the combination lock. But we do keep our guns locked as well.

Tony: This is Tony again. For me having guns is a skill. It allows you to bond, like she says. But not only that, it gives protection. In the United States we have a lot of crime and we want to protect ourselves.

Hans: I would like to know how can you determine who has the right to have a gun and who is able to bear a gun. I don't know how you determine this right. How do you know if in his mental state a person can show responsibility?

Alice: There is a law, in fact, called the Brady law. The police do a three-day background check. They check for crimes. This helps curb it but unfortunately some people do get guns who should not be allowed to. But at least there are laws which try to stop this problem.

Sandra (Germany): Hi, this is Sandra. And Tony you have just said people need guns to protect themselves because there are so many crimes. But this is somehow like a vicious circle. Because these people who do crime, commit crimes, they get guns easier, too. So this is somehow a paradox, I think.

Tony: It's a paradox in a way but it's the American view that they should be able to protect themselves.

Markus (Germany): This seems to be a topic which everyone is interested in. I watched a movie called "Bowling for Columbine." It won an Oscar for best documentary this year. And he made comments similar to Alice saying people, not guns are killing each other. What do you think can help to prevent people from becoming violent, especially in the suburban areas of the United States?

Alice: We definitely need more community support. We have a lot of social problems over here. Fatherless children. Poverty. A lot of people need help. And this desperation leads them to drugs, gangs to find support.

Although the atmosphere of this exchange was not one of heated debate, it is clear that the German students were engaged in doing more than trying to establish the Americans' *emic* perspective. From the very beginning, when Monica prefaces her question to the Americans with the statement "one thing I could never understand about America was the right for U.S. citizens to possess guns," it is clear to the American group that one of their cultural practices is being called into question and they are expected to either defend it or accept that they were wrong. Similarly, the comments which come later from the German group all carry with them challenges to the Americans' explanations. Lucie suggests that people could leave their guns at the sports center, while Sandra points out that Tony's comment entails a "vicious circle." It seems that instead of trying to understand the American perspective, the Germans want to show them the error of their ways.

When I checked my interpretation of this encounter with Sandra in an e-mail interview, she sent me the following answer:

(11)

You are right saying that we were trying to prove the Americans wrong most of the time. The questions we ask are often meant to be rhetorical

> like when Hans says "How do you know if in his mental state a person can show responsibility?" The answer here of course can only be "We don't know." So we are trying to put the Americans into a position where they have to admit being wrong. During the videoconferences I sometimes felt like in court. Nevertheless, I do not regret having talked about even the heavy stuff. I think that it is something natural trying to persuade each other that one's own viewpoint is right.

It is interesting that Sandra reports the videoconferences "felt like a court" and that it is "natural" to engage in this type of debate with people from different cultures. This attitude was confirmed in the students' final essays. In reference to this videoconference exchange, Stefanie revealed her critical approach to the foreign culture when she wrote that "*our criticism* about [the American's explanation that gun ownership is a constitutional right], was that, according to statistics, most murderers in the USA are committed by the use of guns" (italics added). In reference to Alice's comment that shooting was a bonding activity for her and her father, Stefanie later wrote: "While others play tennis with their parents, she fires guns in order to bond with her Dad." The ironic tone of this sentence seems to convey Stefanie's opinion of this cultural practice.

After reading her essay and studying the videoconferences, I asked Stefanie why she had "abandoned" the ethnographic approach to her exchange and had instead adopted a more confrontational and critical approach. In her e-mailed reply, she began by explaining how she started out the exchange:

(12)

> I had expected my partner and me to exchange information and tell each other about our culture and our way of life. Of course I was aware of the fact that differences would occur (because of the stereotypes and the prejudices we have about the United States of America and its citizens). So I decided to just accept a different viewpoint and not to try to persuade him/her that the way the Germans, especially myself, think about certain issues is the better one. All this was before the first e-mails and videoconferences. When talking about different attitudes towards religion, role of women or education, I still felt relaxed. I always just answered saying things like "That's rather interesting. Well, in Germany we do it a different way. We. ..." I did not mean to prove her wrong, but to make her understand that in another part of the world, things are being treated differently. We were trying to understand each other and find out about what makes us think the way we think.

Stefanie's approach, however, changed for a particular reason:

(13)

> But when it came to the questions of whether the war against Iraq was good or whether every citizen should be allowed to possess guns, I changed my mind. I just could not understand the Americans, especially my partner, anymore. The reason for that may be the fact that back then, the war was something that had been in the media for almost a

> year, I guess and which everyone was into. (I remember that the discussion about Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction had begun even before the elections on September 22nd here in Germany.) The war had just been over and I think that everyone of us still had the pictures in mind showing children with terribly burnt bodies, people who had lost their homes and families with all their children having died when the house was bombed. I think that there was and still is a lot of hatred against president Bush here in Germany, and I think that people over here wonder why the U.S. citizens have elected him for president. To put it briefly, my personal viewpoint is that all the incidents were still too recent to talk about them more objectively. Maybe it was just not the right time for an exchange with American students. Maybe a discussion with people from Australia would have been more peaceful.
>
> The same may be true about the discussion about gun control. If you had asked me a year ago, I would not have had such a "strong" opinion as I do now. The explanation for that is quite simple. It is the documentary which I also quote in my essay, "Bowling for Columbine" by Michael Moore. I first saw it in March this year and it impressed me very deeply.

Her comments show that she was unable to stand back and take a scientific approach to the exchange due to the emotional nature of the topics. Her experiences of the recent war in Iraq and her viewing of a film on gun control in the United States meant that she could not "talk about them more objectively." The principles and values of the American group seem to have collided completely with her own and she felt obliged to reject them instead of trying to find out where they come from.

This is probably a justifiable reaction among language learners when they encounter cultural perspectives different to their own. However, this does not necessarily mean it is a desirable outcome of ethnographic research or intercultural learning. A further example may illustrate the point more clearly. Hans concludes his essay in the following way:

(14)

> This was the point [after discussing our differing opinions on the Iraq war] I realized that her argumentation is totally opposed to everything I believe in. . . . the differences in our attitudes towards this topic made a discussion about it impossible. The only motivation was at this point to gather enough information to write our essays.

Despite our work on the principles and techniques of ethnography in our classes, Hans does not appear to be aware that the object of the exchange was not to reach agreement on the topics under discussion, but to become more aware of the social, historical, and political factors which had shaped his partners' opinions and beliefs.

According to Byram, the intercultural speaker, that is, the person who is interculturally competent, "can use a range of analytical approaches to place a document or event in context (of origins/sources, time, place, other documents or

events) and to demonstrate the ideology involved" (1997, p. 63). In essence, ICC involves the ability to identify the cultural context which gives meaning to people's beliefs and actions. In this case, the "document or event" which needs to be analyzed is the Americans' perspectives on, for example, gun control. The context in which they need to be interpreted probably involves historical reasons (the role of guns in self-defence when Ohio was still part of the American frontier), political factors (the importance students attribute to their rights as American citizens), and modern-day social issues (the need to have guns in order to hunt, take part in competitions in the local community, and, it would seem, to bond with members of your family). The German group was actually given a lot of this contextual information, both directly and indirectly, in the videoconference and in their e-mails, but many of them would appear to have chosen to on concentrate on their own beliefs (themselves products of a cultural context) that the Americans' reasons did not justify their liberal gun laws.

Based on the data examined here, I suggest two main reasons why students were unable to limit their research to an investigation of aspects of the target culture. First, this project was not a typical ethnographic situation in which there was one group of informants and one group of ethnographers. Instead, the exchange required both groups to provide questions and answers with respect to topics at hand. As a result, comparison and debate were perhaps inevitable. This was especially true when students began to exchange their perceptions of emotional topics such as war, multicultural societies, and gun control. It proved too difficult to simply accept and try to understand perceptions and values which appeared to be completely incompatible with their own. The feedback from Sandra and Stefanie appears to confirm this hypothesis.

The second reason for their unwillingness to act as ethnographers is related to the strategies which NSs of German use to interact and to gain insights from their partners. House explains that, in comparison to English speakers, speakers of German "tend to interact in many different situations in ways that can be described as more direct, more explicit, more self-referenced and more content-oriented" (2000a, p. 162). Furthermore, Byrnes comments that German speakers are known for their "inflexibility, at times combative directness, and domineering way of always appearing certain they are right in a discussion" (1986, p. 190). It is possible that this communicative style, as legitimate as any other, may have clashed with the requirements of ethnographic research. Some examples may serve to illustrate this point.

Regularly throughout the exchange, students made statements to their partners about how they interpreted the target culture. They then waited for their partner to either agree with this statement or correct it. One example taken from a videoconference is given in excerpt 15:

(15)

Nadine (Germany): This is Nadine again. Would you relate this decision pro-war to what happened September 11. That is something I would understand. That happened in your country and this was a war of revenge which made you feel better. Would you agree with that?

> **Teresa (USA):** I'll answer that. I don't think that it was so much revenge but everything changed on September 11th. This is the first time in a long time that the USA was an aggressor in a war and that's an example how things have changed in this country since that day.

Here Nadine presents her theory as to why the United States has adapted what she perceives to be an aggressive foreign policy and then checks with the American group to see if they agree with this. In the same way, Günther, writing in an e-mail, puts the following belief about his own culture to his partner and waits for her reaction:

(16)

> I know how Germans are seen in many other countries and I am really sorry that many people treat Germans with prejudices because I know that we have one of the best and most democratic governments around the world. The German society is a multi-cultural one and especially in our region people from all around the world live door to door. How do you think about that?

Describing his own government as "one of the best and most democratic governments around the world" and then asking his partner what she thinks about that might appear to be almost a provocation on the part of the German student in order to find out her true opinion of Germany. In his final feedback, Günther seemed to confirm that this had been his strategy for finding out more about the foreign culture and adapting his opinions: "I hoped to find some of my clichés about American society refuted, but either they are rooted too solid, or my partner didn't come up with convincing arguments." Instead of trying to find out more about the context in which the American behavior was located, Günther (and many others) appeared to be looking to their partners for an intensive exchange in which theories and stereotypes about both cultures were put forward and debated before being confirmed or rejected. Sandra makes a similar comment with respect to the videoconferences: "I think that it is something natural trying to persuade each other that one's own viewpoint is right." What Sandra might not realize is that trying to persuade someone else that their opinions and beliefs are wrong may be more "natural" for speakers of German as a conversational style than it is for speaker of U.S. English. However, in intercultural exchanges such an approach may be less appropriate and it is not the goal of ethnographic research. Nevertheless, this "technique" would appear to be very common among learners in intercultural exchanges—even among speakers of other languages. In O'Dowd (2003, p. 234), a Spanish student, Manuel, also used this approach in order to engage his e-mail partner in dialogue.

What then can be done to avoid students drawing rather critical conclusions from their intercultural contact? First, teachers might establish more asymmetrical projects with contacts in the target culture which would more closely resemble the relationship between ethnographer and informant. Such projects are already quite well known and are described by Eck, Legenhausen, and Wolff as "open projects"

(1995, pp. 99–101). Nevertheless, it may be difficult to find members of the target culture (especially classes of students) who are willing to supply information about their culture and lives and yet not receive similar information from their partners.

A second, perhaps more realistic option (and one which may be more relevant to program coordinators) is to offer learners more extensive training in ethnographic techniques and to make them more aware of the ideal outcomes of intercultural contact. Roberts *et al.* (2002) provide a useful description of an introductory course in ethnographic research methods which is offered to language students at some English universities. Language program directors might offer separate courses in the techniques of cultural investigation in order to enhance the cultural components of their language programs. Such courses could be offered in English to students of a variety of foreign languages; the principles could later be applied to the students' specific context within their usual language classes.

When learners become more conscious that their aim is not to debate with their partners but rather to understand how they experience their worlds and why this is so, then they may become more objective in their approaches and less willing to expect their partner to change all the stereotypes which they have of the target culture. As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, the German class had had relatively little time to become acquainted with the principles and techniques of ethnography and this may have been the reason why they were unable to maintain their stance as ethnographers. Further work on this method may have led them to focus less on a "right and wrong" attitude to cultural difference. It is interesting to note that *The Ealing Ethnography Project* for language learning has also encountered the tendency among learners to judge the behavior of their informants according to their own frames of reference. Jordan reports that students often find themselves "slipping into inappropriate value judgements" (2002, p. 344) when they are writing up their ethnographic studies after they have finished their fieldwork.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore whether or not language learners could successfully engage in ethnographic research within their own classroom through the use of networked communication tools for the purposed of developing what Byram (1997) refers to as intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Particular attention was paid to the role of videoconferencing technology and its combination with e-mail in order to facilitate this learning goal. Two significant findings emerged. First, videoconferencing and e-mail each supported different aspects of ethnographic interviewing and ICC. Second, it can be quite difficult for teachers to develop in learners a critical cultural awareness during the necessarily short duration of a telecollaborative exchange.

Students found that class-to-class videoconferencing allowed them to bond and to get to know each other better; it allowed for quick and honest exchanges of questions and answers as well as the clarification of meaning; and it enabled them to receive multiple answers to their questions about the target culture. However,

the immediacy of the medium in conjunction with the visual cues meant that students were often unable to avoid or ignore awkward subjects and this, in turn, gave rise to misunderstandings and moments of tension between the two groups. Nevertheless, the medium proved to be suitable for the development of learners' skills of discovery and interaction in real time. E-mail, in contrast, was more suitable for sending and receiving more in-depth and extensive descriptions of the two cultures. It also allowed learners more time to reflect on what they were sending and receiving. The e-mail content provided learners with more detailed and well-explained information about the foreign culture which they could analyze and use as a starting point for further investigation. As a result, e-mail may be better suited for developing knowledge of the target culture as well as the skills of interpreting and relating. A combination of both communication tools is ideal for the comprehensive development of ICC and program coordinators may need to consider how to provide students and teachers with opportunities to use both in their telecollaborative projects.

The second main finding of this chapter is related to why the German group was relatively unsuccessful in carrying out their role as ethnographic interviewers. Bredella describes intercultural understanding as the ability to "reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes" (2002, p. 39). While students in the current study were able to identify the context in which the American behavior and beliefs were located, they were often unwilling to stand back from their own culture and accept this behavior and beliefs as the product of another cultural context. Instead, they often choose to compare it to their own and then reject the alternative as "wrong" or "unconvincing." This was especially the case for issues about which the learners felt particularly strongly.

Teachers need to emphasize to learners that it is necessary for them to abstract themselves from debates in which the cultural values and beliefs of a certain group are determined to be "right" or "wrong" because this is a futile activity and one that is inevitably doomed to failure. Instead, learners need to see themselves more as young social scientists or ethnographers who are objectively researching the cultural context which influences and shapes the way their partners see the world. Their task is not to agree or disagree with their partners, but rather to learn more about their partners' world—and their own. It becomes evident that intercultural exchanges do not involve a "natural" approach to seeing foreign behavior. Therefore, students involved in telecollaborative projects need to receive explicit guidance in developing cultural awareness. Further training in ethnography and in other intercultural learning activities are likely to help develop this attitude of openness to alternative perspectives on one's own and the target culture.

Notes

1. The names of students mentioned in the text are pseudonyms.
2. For a more in-depth discussion of the pros and cons of the different systems of language use in telecollaborative exchanges, see O'Dowd (2005). See Bauer *et al.* (this

volume) for exchanges in L1; see Belz (this volume) for the advantages of bilingual exchanges in the construction of contrastive learner corpora.

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Appendix 1
End-of-Term Questionnaire

Name (optional):

Your Home Culture:

This term you have taken part in an online exchange project involving students at the Universities of Zanesville, in the USA and Essen in Germany. This exchange involved interaction via both e-mail and videoconferencing. This questionnaire has been designed to find out your opinion and feelings about these online learning activities. Please take a minute or two to think about the questions before writing down your answers. In all cases be honest with your answers, and where possible, give examples to explain what you mean.

All your identities will remain *anonymous* in my research reports.

Thanks for your help, Robert

1. Generally speaking, what would you say you have learned from this intercultural exchange?
2. How did you find the task of analyzing the e-mails you received from your partner and writing an essay about it? Did you find anything difficult about this task?
3. Did you find it difficult to describe and talk about your home culture to your partner? What strategies or techniques did you use to get across your cultural perspective?
4. How did you find the experience of videoconferencing with the target group? Was it "different" from the e-mail exchange?
5. Do you think that each medium has advantages over the other one for these intercultural exchanges? If so, name them:
   Advantages of e-mail over videoconferencing:
   Advantages of videoconferencing over e-mail:
6. Did you find the ethnographic techniques we learned in the course useful in the exchange? Why? Why not?