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Principles and Practices of the *Standards* in College Foreign Language Education

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Chapter 7

Using Online Forums to Integrate the *Standards* into the Foreign Language Curriculum

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Introduction

Culture is a fundamental component of foreign language (FL) education, but achieving an understanding of different cultures beyond impressionistic and subjective accounts is still a slippery endeavor (Dubreil, 2006). Since their publication in 1996, the *Standards* have become a framework that has increasingly shaped the professional discourse (Aguilar-Stewart & Santiago, 2006; Ketchum, 2006; Lee, 1999; Polanski, 2004; Scott & Huntington, 2002, 2007; Weist, 2004; Yamada & Moeller, 2001). Yet, despite numerous references to the *Standards* in professional venues and FL textbooks, their actual application and integration into the college-level FL curriculum remains a challenge.

Technology—particularly Web-based applications—is ideally suited to provide an environment that supports such integration. In particular, discussion forums—online bulletin boards where anyone can read others’ messages, write responses, raise questions, and expect answers—have provided an ideal environment for students to share knowledge and cultural perspectives. Face-to-face or synchronous online interactions offer little time for reflection; however, the time lag between reading and posting in an asynchronous online discussion forum provides time to “understand others’ ideas and develop a detailed response or posting” (Meyer, 2003, p. 60). In contrast to other forms of asynchronous discussion, online discussion boards are inclusive environments that enhance collaborative discourse among larger groups of students. Widely used to enhance cultural development and connections (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; Hanna & Noy, 2003; Lomicka, 2006), the discussion board has been instrumental in enhancing students’ cultural reflections (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; Wildner-Basset, 2005). Though discussion boards have frequently been used to connect students from different cultures (Furstenberg et al., 2001; Hanna & Noy, 2003; Lomicka, 2006), there is also a valuable place for online forums within the domains of any FL classroom (Wildner-Basset, 2005).

This chapter describes an FL program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, that integrates both in-class and online discussions to reflect on and interpret a variety of documents and experiences. In particular, it focuses on how Intermediate Spanish I students used such interactions to explore, analyze, and reflect on cultural topics. We collected data while applying the five goals of the *Standards*: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Subsequent analysis of the

data showed that the online forums can become springboards for students to share, debate, and interpret information; to gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures; to reflect and make connections to additional bodies of knowledge; to compare and contrast the target culture with their own; and to participate in multilingual and multicultural communities. In particular, this study focuses on the extent to which online forums become spaces where students can develop an understanding of the target culture as defined by the *Standards*.

Literature Review

The *Standards* in Foreign Language Education

Byram's (1997, 2000) intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (1999, 2006) frameworks have provided directions for conducting intercultural studies as well as promoting cultural understanding in FL classrooms. Whereas studies examining ICC have focused on students' interactions among classes in other countries (Belz, 2003; Liaw, 2006; Lomicka, 2006; Müeller-Hartmann, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006), the *Standards* provide a pedagogical framework specifically targeted to the needs of students in FL classrooms. As well as fostering direct interactions with target culture communities (Polanski, 2004; Yamada & Moeller, 2001), the *Standards* have suggested other goals, which include, among others, incorporation of knowledge from, and to, other academic disciplines and interpretations of a wide range of target culture documents and linguistic comparisons across languages. Practical research has confirmed the value of this approach (Abrams, 2002; Aguilar-Stewart & Santiago, 2006; Ketchum, 2006; Scott & Huntington, 2007).

The five goals are further subdivided into two or three standards each. The goal of Communication includes Interpersonal, Interpretative, and Presentational modes of interaction. In the Interpersonal mode, learners learn how to converse in culturally appropriate environments; in the Interpretive mode, learners understand and interpret written and spoken language; in the Presentational mode, learners focus on "the presentation of information, concepts and ideas in spoken or written modes" (p. 45). As Scott and Huntington (2007) pointed out, interpretation was previously understood as a solitary process; however, interpretation is now understood "as a process involving a (re)construction of meaning through interaction" (p. 4). In this mode learners discuss, analyze, explain, and interpret their own beliefs, experiences, and newly acquired knowledge with others.

Perspectives, practices, and products, among which there is a mutually influential relationship, are at the heart of Cultures, the second goal. The term *perspectives* is understood as the worldview, attitudes, and belief systems that frame what speakers of a language think and do (*Standards*, p. 45). *Practices* refers to the understanding of a society's patterns of behavior, what to do when and where. *Products* include both tangible and intangible manifestations, such as aesthetic expressions with or without a utilitarian purpose—literature, art, music,

pottery, musical instruments, or functional objects used in everyday life. Though sometimes it is possible to identify particular products, there is often a blurred distinction between products and practices when pertaining to social, political, economic, or cultural institutions (*Standards*, p. 45). For example, the family or health systems are institutions that cannot be understood outside the societies in which they are established. It is also true that none of these elements—products, practices, and perspectives—are static; in fact, “[they are] constantly in flux and changing” (Lange, 1999, p. 60). This continuous evolution facilitates a journey of constant discovery for the learner.

The third goal, Connections, concerns the links students make either to other academic disciplines or to their personal interests. When studying a foreign language, learners apply information studied and acquired in other subject areas to the products and practices learned about the target culture; this application of information allows them to acquire new knowledge and perspectives (*Standards*, p. 56). The connections are further supported by the use of the Internet, which allows learners to seek out, analyze, and process material of interest at ease, and makes them better informed citizens of the world (Abrams, 2002; Lee, 1998).

Comparisons, the fourth goal, invites students to understand the concept of culture by comparing the products, perspectives, and practices of various cultures, as well as by analyzing and comparing the different linguistic systems. Although the concept of culture permeates all of the standards, the second standard of Comparisons is even more closely linked to the goal of Culture (Lange, 1999) because, as Fantini (1999) pointed out, the goal of Culture would be incomplete without “explicitly and systematically engaging in Comparisons” (p. 166). Finally, as posited in the Community goal, the needs of today’s changing society and the possibility of worldwide instant communication require a skilled, multilingual workforce. The ability to communicate in another language for work or for leisure purposes enables students to better understand other cultures as well as to practice their languages skills.

Technology and the *Standards* in the Foreign Language Classroom

Since their initial publication in 1996, the *Standards* have been relatively absent in the college-level FL classroom curriculum. Yet, they have also been integrated through the use of literary texts (Aguilar-Stewart & Santiago, 2006; Ketchum, 2006; Scott & Huntington, 2002, 2007; Weist, 2004), traditional pen-and-paper pen-pals (Yamada & Moeller, 2001), video (Herron, Cole, Corrie, & Dubreil, 1999; Herron, Dubreil, Cole, & Corrie, 2000), ethnographic studies (Bateman, 2002), and tutoring services to the community (Polanski, 2004). Computer technologies such as the World Wide Web (Abrams, 2002; Dubreil, Herron, & Cole, 2004; Lee, 1998, 1999; Walz, 1998) or synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication have also become tools to achieve standards-based classrooms (Abrams, 2002; Lee, 1999).

The integration of synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication for cultural development is not a new concept (Dubreil, 2006; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Furstenberg et al., 2001; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; O'Dowd, 2006). From the wide range of synchronous and asynchronous tools, online forums provide "a critical common space in which [to] share and verify hypotheses and points of view, to ask for help deciphering meanings of words and concepts, and to constantly negotiate meanings and interpretations" (Bauer, deBenedette, Furstenberg, Levet & Waryn, 2006, p. 35). Moreover, students' use of online discussion forums has encouraged and enhanced their cultural reflections (Wildner-Basset, 2005). Participating in culturally focused discussion boards eases the process of developing "an awareness of other people's world views, of their unique way of life, and of the patterns of behavior which order their word" (*Standards*, p. 47). The time-delayed nature of online forums also allows students to bring in outside material and experiences (Kol & Scholnik, 2008), creating an ideal environment for connected learning.

The collaborative interaction promoted by discussion boards supports a constructivist, learner-centered approach that develops learners' autonomy, as well as aids "the development of the learners' capacity for a more active, reflective, and self-directed approach to [...] learning" (Wenden, 1999, p. 2). The instructor is not the authoritative figure and sole distributor of knowledge, but is an open-minded facilitator of learning (Barnett, 1999) who guides and supports learners in the process of knowledge construction. Rather than being passive consumers of facts that merely reproduce the teacher's knowledge, learners become active contributors by dynamically participating in asynchronous online discussions; thus, they take responsibility for their own learning as they take part in the collaborative construction of knowledge (Dawson, 2006; Jonassen, 1994; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2002).

Use of the First Language

The *Standards* advocate the use of culturally appropriate ways for learners to engage with the target or second language (L2). Learners may interpret information available through the L2, or discover practices, products, and perspectives related to the FL; they may also reinforce knowledge of other disciplines through the L2, demonstrate growing linguistic understanding, and access information and forms of entertainment only available to the speakers of the target language. Yet, the *Standards* also state that learners "can use critical thinking skills in beginning language classes by conducting some tasks in English" (1999, p. 35). Though there is no doubt that the use of the first language (L1) might delay the extent to which students can achieve linguistic development in the L2, the use of the L1 allows learners to embark on a reflective process and to develop an early ability to hypothesize about different cultural systems. Novice and intermediate language learners need opportunities to engage in reflective interpretations and discussions (Abrams, 2002; Scott &

Huntington, 2007), and the L1 is the cognitive tool that allows them to achieve higher levels of cultural reflection and understanding (Antón, DiCamilla, & Lantolf, 2003).

An increasing number of studies have examined and confirmed the benefits of the use of the L1 in the FL classroom (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Belz, 2002; Chavez, 2002). In particular, some studies have recommended the use of the L1 to avoid the possible dominance by a group of individuals related to differing levels of proficiency (Bauer et al., 2006); others have allowed students with low L2 proficiency to use the L1 to encourage more sophisticated reflection and analysis (Abrams, 2002; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Scott & Huntington, 2002, 2007). In this context, using the L1 enables students to express their views fully and in detail; it helps them formulate questions and hypotheses clearly, and to deal with complex, nuanced information unfettered by limited linguistic abilities (Bauer et al., 2006). Even when encouraged to use the target language, students may resort to their L1 to exchange “substantial ideas regarding their cultural inquiry” (Abrams, 2002, p. 144). Therefore, to move beyond content focused on utilitarian communicative needs—e.g., dining or entertainment activities—and to engage students in the level of critical thinking that allows them to be reflective, it is advisable to conduct activities primarily in the learners’ L1 at the beginning and intermediate levels (Abrams, 2002; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Scott & Huntington, 2007).

Methodology

The study was conducted during the spring semester of 2007. The objective was to examine the extent to which students, through their interactions with the online discussion boards, explored, analyzed, and reflected on different cultural topics. The aim was for students to investigate journals and Web sites and to reflect upon and share their discoveries about the target culture as well as their own culture(s). Students were asked to address, via the discussion boards, several topics initiated in the classroom. The data were subjected to a qualitative content analysis; however, because of space limitations, this chapter focuses on the quantitative than on the qualitative interpretations of students’ comments.

Participants and Setting

The course in question was a third-semester, intermediate-level Spanish class of 20 students from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. For the discussion board experience, which was completed as homework, the instructor decided to use small groups and randomly divided students into 5 groups of 4 students each to ensure all students were heard in the cultural discussions. Following the suggestions put forth by Arnold and Ducate (2006) and Weasenforth et al. (2002), each group had a leader who was in charge of starting, maintaining, and summarizing/closing the cultural discussion, as well as 3 members who answered the various postings. The role of the leader rotated among all the group participants so that each student was the leader for one discussion board and a regular member for

three discussions. Though all students could potentially see other groups' discussions (all the groups belonged to the course discussion board), students responded only to their own group members. The instructor provided the triggering prompt but did not participate in the online discussion. She told the students they were in control of the task and they could take the discussion in any direction they chose based on their own research.

Tasks

Students participated in 4 in-class and online discussions related to the chapter topics of the course textbook (bargaining, advertising, issues concerning the elderly, and urban versus suburban lifestyles; see Table 1). The textbook used for this class has some sections that deal with cultural comparisons by distinguishing

Table 1
Description and Aims of Tasks

Task	Title	Description	Aim
1	Bargaining	Students examine commerce in Spanish-speaking countries. Focusing on "bargaining," students investigate whether it is a customary practice, and if so, where and when.	Students reflect on commerce practices in Spanish-speaking countries and in the United States.
2	Publicity	Students research, read, and reflect upon the graphic and textual content in movies, music, and ads both in Spanish-speaking countries and in the United States.	Using movies and ads as a springboard, students discuss what these products say about a particular society.
3	The elderly	Students find information in journals and in Web sites about the elderly in Spanish-speaking communities. Students compare their findings to their knowledge and expectations regarding family life in the United States and Spanish-speaking countries.	Students discuss the concept of family, and the role of the elderly, in Spanish-speaking countries. Students also address the effect of modern life in traditional practices.
4	Living in the city	Students compare urban and rural settings in Spanish-speaking countries and in the United States. They examine common modes of transportation in Spanish-speaking countries and in the United States.	Students reflect on concepts of space and efficiency. They reflect on the economic, geographic, and historic causes of the differences that lead to the creation of various urban settings.

and reflecting on similarities and differences between the United States and several Spanish-speaking countries. Topics arising from the book were initially discussed in class, and all leaders responded to the same instructor-initiated prompt; however, students' cultural discussions tended to move in diverse directions according to the learners' interests and curiosity, or based on the information they gathered while researching the Internet, journals, or other sources.

Procedure

Each task took about 3 weeks to complete. At the beginning of each chapter, the instructor and students had an initial face-to-face in-class discussion related to the cultural topic. To continue the conversation, the instructor posted a prompt shortly thereafter based on the topic. In each prompt, students were encouraged to examine practices, products, and perspectives (*Standards 2.1 and 2.2*), make connections with their personal interests and other academic disciplines (*Standards 3.1 and 3.2*), and compare among cultures (*Standard 4.2*); only the prompt in task 1 asked students to comment on their experiences using the target language if they were bargaining in a Spanish-speaking area (*Standard 5.1*). (See Figure 1, pp. 100–101, for an overview of the standards.) The leader of each group answered the initial prompt and expanded the scope and depth of the discussion by seeking out additional information and then posting, explaining, and elaborating on the new information, as well as asking questions intended to elicit a critical and thoughtful response, thereby continuing the discussion. The group members also searched for additional information, then posted, described, elaborated, and asked further questions to keep the conversation going. At the end of the chapter, teacher and students discussed the asynchronous online comments and findings in their regular in-class discussions.

Data Analysis

The electronic postings made during the semester, which constituted the data for the study, were subjected to qualitative content analysis using the *Standards*. Given that most students used the L1, it was expected that standards related closely to the use of the target language would not be present in the resulting data analysis. As shown in Table 2, however, the data revealed the presence of other standards. For the goal of Communication, it was evident that students used the L1 to understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics. Under the goal of Culture, there were instances in which students exhibited an awareness of the relationship between practices and perspectives as well as between products and perspectives of the culture studied. For the goal of Connections, students appeared to broaden their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language and learned to recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are available through the foreign language. With regard to the goal of Comparisons, students revealed an understanding of the concept of culture by comparing their own culture with the target culture. Finally, for the goal of Community, students showed evidence that they were learning the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Table 2
 Descriptions and Examples of the Standards Found in the Data

Standard	Description	Example
Communication	1.2 Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.	“I also found a map of the metro in Madrid, which was very similar to the DC metro map. Not very exciting or anything, but just thought I’d put it in. http://www.metromadrid.es/acc_resources/pdfs/Plano_Metro_2008.pdf ”
Cultures	2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between practices and perspectives of the culture studied.	“Research has shown me that the families in Spain and in other Spanish-speaking countries feel a strong responsibility when it comes to caring about the elderly members of their family.”
	2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between products and perspectives of the culture studied.	“I found that there are only 2.5 nursing home beds for every 100 elderly people in Spain.”
Connections	3.1 Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.	“As someone who is heavily involved in the arts, I’ve tried to make a kind of ‘working definition’ for myself.”
	3.2 Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its culture.	“After what I read, I think the traditions in [Spanish-speaking] countries are a lot stronger than they are here.”
Comparisons	4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.	“The major difference that the United States has from many other countries is that there is very little to help the elderly. There is Medicaid and Social security, but unlike Spain, the government does not help the elderly as much. Still, most American elderly people do not live with their children; I believe that it is much more of a cultural difference that has been shaped by American ideals with the ‘American dream’ wanting to be fulfilled.”

(continued)

Table 2
 Descriptions and Examples of the Standards Found in the Data (continued)

Standard	Description	Example
Communities	5.2 Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by pursuing the study of language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.	“My sister and I became haggling fiends [by speaking Spanish].”

The unit of analysis used was the speech segment, which is defined as “the smallest unit of delivery, linked to a single theme, directed at the same interlocutor” (Henri & Rigault, 1996, p. 62); this analysis was also used by Arnold and Ducate (2006) to examine students’ interactions on discussion boards. Previous studies found that boundaries are not always clear when analyzing different units (Lomicka & Lord, 2007; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Therefore, the following sentence “after what I read, I think the traditions in [Spanish-speaking] countries are a lot stronger than they are here” was coded as being representative of *Standard 3.2* (referencing to a new point of view learned from the readings) and *Standard 4.2* (comparison between Spanish-speaking countries and the United States). The researcher and a second coder independently analyzed all students’ entries on the first discussion board for the presence of the *Standards*, reaching an inter-rated reliability score of 0.90. After this initial session, the researcher independently analyzed the remaining three discussion boards.

Results

Although learners’ cultural perceptions might not be fully captured in the online forums, the online discussions still provide us with a window to observe learners’ understanding regarding the products, practices, and perspectives, of different cultures. As the researcher collected evidence of students’ connections between FL learning and other disciplines or interests, she was able to evaluate the extent to which the discussions are a forum for cultural awareness. The quantitative results of the discussion board analysis are presented here in the following order: (a) descriptive statistics of the discussion boards, (b) Friedman tests, and (c) correlations of the standards. With regard to the statistical analyses, because of the small sample size, nonparametric statistics were used. Given the low number of students in each group, the results need to be interpreted with caution. They do, however, provide some preliminary insights.

Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 3, not all standards were addressed in students’ interactions. The two standards most evident in the data were *Standard 2.1* (171 instances, 39.86%) and *Standard 2.2* (112 instances, 26.1%); these percentages illustrate

that the students' primary focus was on the goal of Culture, namely on the practices, products, and perspectives of the other culture as well as their own. The third most frequent standard addressed was *Standard 4.2* (105 instances, 24.47%). Fourth and fifth were *Standard 3.2* (23 instances, 5.36%) and *Standard 3.1* (11 instances, 2.56%) under the goal of Connections. For this goal students tended to make connections with their own interests rather than with other academic disciplines. *Standard 5.2* came sixth (6 instances, 1.39%), followed finally by *Standard 1.2* (0.23%).

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for all of the standards that were represented in the data. Therefore, medians are provided in addition to means and standard deviations.

Table 3
Raw Numbers for the Standards Present in the Discussion Boards (DBs)
(N = 4)

Standard	DB1	DB2	DB3	DB4	Total
Communication (1.2)	0	0	0	1	1 (0.23%)
Culture (2.1)	44	32	80	15	171 (39.86%)
Culture (2.2)	14	38	41	19	112 (26.1%)
Connections (3.1)	2	6	0	3	11 (2.56%)
Connections (3.2)	1	0	18	4	23 (5.36%)
Comparisons (4.2)	25	25	35	20	105 (24.47%)
Communities (5.2)	6	0	0	0	6 (1.39%)
<i>Total</i>	92 (21.45%)	101 (23.54%)	174 (40.56%)	62 (14.45%)	429 (100%)

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for the Presence of the Standards in All the DBs (N = 4)

Standard	Median	M	SD	Range
Communication (1.2)	0.0	0.25	0.50	0–1
Cultures (2.1)	38.0	42.75	27.54	15–80
Cultures (2.2)	28.5	28.00	13.50	14–41
Connections (3.1)	2.5	2.75	2.50	0–6
Connections (3.2)	2.5	5.75	8.34	0–18
Comparisons (4.2)	25.0	26.25	6.29	20–35
Communities (5.2)	0.0	1.50	3.00	0–6

Table 5

Friedman Test Across the Standards Using Subscales (N = 4)

Standard	Mean Rank	X^2 (df)
Communication (1.2)	1.75	19.78 (6)**
Cultures (2.1)	6.25	
Cultures (2.2)	6.00	
Connections (3.1)	3.00	
Connections (3.2)	3.00	
Comparisons (4.2)	5.75	
Communities (5.2)	2.25	

** $p < .01$

Table 3 illustrates that some standards, for example, *Standards 2.1, 2.2, and 4.2*, appeared more frequently than others did in the discussions. To determine statistically whether some standards were appearing more frequently than others, the Friedman test was applied (see Table 5). The Friedman test, a nonparametric test, is appropriate for assessing mean differences across multiple measures that are measured on the same subjects. For the current study, the “subjects” are the discussion boards and the “measures” are the frequencies with which each of the seven standards appeared. To conduct the Friedman test, first the frequency with which each standard appeared in each discussion was ranked so that standards that appeared more frequently in that discussion were given higher ranks, and standards that appeared less frequently were given lower ranks. The mean ranks (averaged across the discussions) for each standard are presented in Table 5. The Friedman test computes whether the mean ranks are significantly different across the 7 standards.

Table 5 shows the mean ranks and the chi-square statistic for the Friedman test which was significant, $X^2(6) = 19.78$, $p < .01$, indicating that the standards do not appear with the same frequency in the online discussions. The Friedman test does not allow for specific posthoc tests to pinpoint where these differences lie in the presence of the standards. Therefore, the Wilcoxon Sum Rank Test was used to compare pairs of standards for differences; this analysis did not show any of the differences as significant (i.e., $p < .05$). However, four sets of differences were found to be marginally significant (all $ps = .07$) as follows: (1) between Communication (*Standard 1.2*) and Cultures (*Standard 2.1*), Cultures (*Standard 2.2*), and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*); (2) between Communities (*Standard 5.2*) and Cultures (*Standard 2.1*), Cultures (*Standard 2.2*), and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*); (3) between Connections (*Standard 3.1*) and Cultures (*Standard 2.1*), Cultures (*Standard 2.2*), and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*); and (4) between Connections (*Standard 3.2*) and Cultures (*Standard 2.1*), Cultures (*Standard 2.2*), and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*). These marginally significant differences

Table 6
Spearman Correlations Between the Standards (N = 4)

	1.2	2.1	2.2	3.1	3.2	4.2	5.2
Communication (1.2)	1						
Cultures (2.1)	-.78	1					
Cultures (2.2)	-.26	.40	1				
Connections (3.1)	.26	-.80	-.20	1			
Connections (3.2)	.26	.40	.40	-.80	1		
Comparisons (4.2)	-.82	.95*	.63	-.63	.32	1	
Communities (5.2)	-.33	.26	-.78	-.26	-.26	.00	1

* $p \leq .05$

suggest that we might have found more evidence of Cultures (*Standards 2.1 and 2.2*) and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*) than of Communication (*Standard 1.2*), Communities (*Standard 5.2*), Connections (*Standards 3.1 and 3.2*) if we had had more students and more discussion boards.

As suggested by Fantini (1999), there are some standards closely linked to others, such as Comparisons and Cultures; thus, it was of interest to know whether there was any statistical correlation between these two or any of the standards. Table 6 presents Spearman rank correlations between all pairs of standards, which shows that only two correlations were statistically significant: Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*) and Cultures (*Standard 2.1*) were highly positively correlated ($\rho = .95$, $\rho = .051$), and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*) and the two Cultures standards (*Standards 2.1 and 2.2*) combined were also highly positively correlated ($\rho = .95$, $\rho = .051$). The results of these correlations support Fantini’s claims regarding the connections between Comparisons and Cultures, and in particular to *Standard 2.1*.

Discussion

Qualitative and quantitative analyses provided information about the extent to which discussion boards facilitate cultural discussions. The qualitative analysis revealed that the three most frequent standards addressed were the ones related to Cultures and Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*). Although the Wilcoxon Sum Rank Test did not indicate any significant differences ($p < .05$), the near-significant differences ($p = .07$) between the more frequent appearances of *Standards 2.1 and 2.2* and *Standard 4.2* when compared with the less frequent appearances of the rest of the standards illustrate a consistently higher prevalence of these three in the discussion boards.

With regard to Cultures, learners focused their discussion on the practices, products, and perspectives of the other culture. From the two standards included

in this goal, while still addressing *Standard 2.2*, learners showed a tendency to focus on the target culture behaviors in everyday life (*Standard 2.1*). For example, in task 3 one group of students examined the topic of the scarcity of residential communities (product) for the elderly and considered the underlying beliefs and values that made that product almost nonexistent in Spanish communities (perspectives). They developed some understanding of the practice of grandparents living with or near the family by looking at it from the point of view of traditional Spanish values (perspectives). In keeping with constructivist views of learning, students demonstrated an awareness of the products, practices, and perspectives of the target culture, but they also understood that these customs were not static but rather dynamic, changing according to political and economical forces. As such, one student commented on the shift in family customs when he said: “[Latino] families aren’t necessarily not taking care of their elders like in the past because they dislike traditions, but because of forces that are beyond their control, mostly economic.” Through the interactive discussions, students engaged in a process of reflection and discovery that provided them with a dynamic picture of the family as an organization in constant flux (Lange, 1999).

Given that the concept of culture is integrated into the goal of Comparisons (Fantini, 1999; Lange, 1999), it was not surprising to find that the Comparisons (*Standard 4.2*) closely followed the two standards of Cultures. Learners often made comparisons between products, practices, and perspectives of the United States and the target culture(s). The connection between *Standard 4.2* and *Standard 2.1* is evident in the Spearman rank correlations. Although not significant, the moderate correlation between *Standards 4.2* and *Standard 2.2* suggests that there might have been significant results if there had been more students. Therefore, these results support Lange’s and Fantini’s claim that there is a close link between *Standard 4.2* and *Standards 2.1* and *2.2*. Though the comparison among cultures was constantly present in students’ interactions, the linguistic comparison (*Standard 4.1*) was nonexistent. Learners’ failure to address *Standard 4.1* was likely the result of communicating in the L1 rather than in the target language. It might also have been a result of the particular task that emphasized the comparisons of products, practices, and perspectives rather than linguistic comparisons.

Results for the Connections goal illustrate that students linked the tasks either to areas of their own interest or to other curricular disciplines. Whether students made more connections to other academic subjects or to topics of their own choice depended on the topic of the task. Task 2, for example, which focused on the world of publicity, elicited several connections to some students’ majors in art or studies. For example, one student wrote “As a major, I can understand the need for a designer to want to make images that the public has not seen, and will be drawn to” (*Standard 3.1*). Task 3, however, which centered on the elderly, provoked more personal reactions, instigating students to search more widely for information that allowed them to recognize and learn about other viewpoints only available through the FL culture. For example, after reading about how elders are perceived in Spanish-speaking countries, students wrote comments such as “after what I read, I think it’s clear that the ‘typical’ American family and Latino family have different ways of caring for their elderly,” or, “Maybe the system is

just designed for the caretaker to make all the decisions. That is an interesting situation, because in America, if we did not grant one patient's rights, it would be all over the news. And of course, someone would be sued!" Reading about practices different from their own provided the students with a new perspective of the world.

The goal of Communities was addressed by a few students who demonstrated the use of the target language for personal purposes in the target language community (*Standard 5.2*). When talking about *el regateo* (bargaining), several students commented on their experiences of using the target language for this type of economic transaction. One of them even commented on how not speaking the language could be a handicap: "Many, many times I saw travelers who spoke very little Spanish attempting to buy something from the vendors and paying the full price." The topic of *el regateo* was perfectly suited for demonstrating how the use of language can help achieve one's personal purposes, because it asked the students whether they had ever tried bargaining in a Spanish-speaking area. Given that several students had traveled to Spanish-speaking countries, such as Guatemala, Mexico, and Spain, or had lived in predominantly Spanish-speaking areas, it was not surprising that some of them could discuss real examples of using the L2 in the target language community. The three other tasks, however, did not involve the same level of interaction with the community, and thus students were less likely to show that type of language engagement.

The goal of Communication was the least represented in the discussion boards. Students' use of the L1 implied that they were reluctant to engage in conversations about providing and obtaining information, or expressing emotions, in the L2. Similarly, students' presentation of information, concepts, and ideas in the discussion boards was conveyed in their L1. Regarding interpretation, students were required to search for information in books, journals, and Web sites. The instructor did not specify whether the material should be in the L1 or the L2. Students, on their own initiative, searched Web sites written primarily in English, which echoes Abrams's (2002) remarks about students' preference for using L1 sources. The use of L1 Web sites can be questioned, however, because "decisions of what is and is not translated into English often has political and social implications" (*Standards*, p. 451). Nonetheless, students tend to seek out material that puts them in contact with new information and perspectives. Using L1 resources, therefore, should not in itself be regarded as detrimental to the cultural learning process. Undoubtedly, directly accessing cultural Web sites in the target language allows students to advance their knowledge of lexical items and idiomatic expressions; develop their reading skills and strategies; and obtain valuable, updated information that improves their understanding of cultural phenomena (Lee, 1999). Yet, unless closely guided by the instructor, students can become overwhelmed when confronted with a language they only partially comprehend. Therefore, provided that students still access reliable and current information, deemphasizing the use of the target language at lower proficiency levels will probably result in cultural gains.

In keeping with constructivist views, the combination of the time-delayed discussion board experience and Internet information retrieval empowered the

students in the discovery of products, practices, and perspectives. Although the level of engagement with the task varied among the groups (one of the groups was not as culturally engaged in the discussion board as the other groups), by taking ownership of their own discussions, students became active researchers of the target culture. An excellent example of this occurred when the students engaged in a polemical debate regarding an advertisement that had been banned from the Spanish media. It was also the students who found that despite many of the elderly living with their families and actively contributing to the family well-being, “the biggest community for the elderly has a waiting list of over 20,000.” Upon learning this statistic, the student who found this information questioned whether the elderly stayed home because they wanted to or because they lacked other alternatives. This question then propelled that particular student group into a process of discovery about current social practices regarding not only the elderly but also of their possibly stereotyped and static view of the “Hispanic family.”

During these discussions, the instructor also became a student through reading the conversations and listening to her students, showing a shift from being an authoritative figure to an attentive one who was open to reconsidering her perceptions of both cultures. Despite the relevance of the instructor-as-student role, her position as architect, composer, and facilitator remains fundamental (Dubreil, 2006). In the class, the instructor needs to model behaviors, post further questions, and challenge students’ conclusions to go beyond stereotypes or that which is simplistic. When discussing the banned advertisement designed by a famous Italian fashion house, students seized on the idea of Spain being a conservative country. The instructor’s intervention was necessary for students to consider the causes of the Spanish government’s actions, thus, challenging and reinvigorating students’ discovery of the target culture.

Practical Suggestions

The use of online forums provided an environment that allowed students to engage in meaningful interactions in which they reflected upon practices, products, and perspectives of the target culture and their own. Yet, it is possible to achieve higher levels of cultural discussions. The following suggestions are outlined to increase the value of the online discussion board as a space for reflection and engagement, where students can better achieve the goals established by the *Standards*.

- Design online tasks that allow students to reflect upon practices, products, and perspectives, and compare among cultures. Provide tasks that encourage students to make connections with other academic disciplines and to their own interests. Students will understand that studying a second language strengthens their knowledge of other disciplines and provides them with a different perspective only accessible through the target language culture.
- Provide models for students on the types of discussions that lead to discoveries of the target language culture. By showing excerpts from

students' discussion board posts, along with examples including comparisons, connections, and discussions of different cultural aspects, students will understand what is expected in terms of their own discussions.

- Monitor and participate in the online discussions. Though learners still retain the overall control of the conversation, the instructor, maintaining the type of guided instruction typical of a constructivist teacher (Weasenforth et al., 2002), can model a coherent construction of meaning. In the discussions, challenge students to inquire beyond stereotypes by examining the underlying causes.
- Be flexible with the directions students take in the online discussions. Challenging prompts should be designed from the beginning of the semester to ensure that they are well integrated with the topics of the course (Weasenforth et al., 2002). However, in-class discussions might lead each group to pursue sub-topics of interest to them. While still keeping the task in mind, the instructor needs to be flexible and open-minded and even encourage new discoveries.
- Bring the students' online reflections to the classroom. While students are participating in the discussions, read their comments, share them with the class, and connect them to the in-class interaction.
- Communicate the expectations for the assignment by providing students with the evaluation criteria in advance. These should explicitly reflect the purpose of the online discussions.

Conclusion

The study presented in this chapter arose from the need to understand the effectiveness of the discussion board to enhance cultural communication as framed by the *Standards*. The analysis of students' interactions illustrates that, to varying degrees, utilizing the online discussion boards allowed students to: (a) examine practices, products, and perspectives of the target culture; (b) demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own; (c) reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the discussion of the target culture; (d) present evidence of use of the target language for personal enjoyment; and (e) understand and interpret written language. Through their interactions in the discussion boards, students joined forces to discover, interpret, and reflect upon the target culture as well as their own.

Despite the positive results from the study, several limitations should be addressed in future studies. First, the small number of students provides an enlightening but still preliminary view of the potential of the discussion boards for cultural discussions. Further studies with larger groups of students would provide more generalizable results that can be applied in other contexts. Second, students in this study used the L1 for all their interactions and discussions. This choice meant that standards closely related to the use of the target language, such as *Standard 1.1*

and *Standard 1.3*, were not evident in the data. Although we acknowledge the value of using the L1 at the elementary and intermediate levels, the use of the L2 at higher levels of instruction would provide additional data about the use of the target language in similar cultural discussions. More proficient students should be expected to use the target language to interact, search for, and read information as well as to present their findings. Third, the tasks described in this study required students to discuss practices, products, and perspectives within the target culture and to make comparisons across cultures. Other tasks could require students to make connections to their personal interests and academic disciplines. In addition to allowing the introduction of further social dimensions such as economic, geographic, or historic issues, making connections beyond the foreign language classroom will encourage deeper exploration of the dynamic concept of culture.

This study aims to add to the research that examines best practices for integrating the *Standards* in the FL classroom at the university level. As with the interpretation of conventional or unconventional texts, ethnographic studies, or pen-pal interactions, this chapter illustrates that discussion boards are another venue to promote meaningful interactions about cultural topics. Their time-delayed nature, which encourages reflection and allows learners to research and consult outside sources, makes them ideal settings for the discovery of the ever-changing nature of target cultures.

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