

AAUSC Issues in Language  
Program Direction

Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign  
Language Education

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Julie A. Belz  
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**Editors**



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## Chapter 2

### The *Cultura* Project

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#### ***Abstract***

*This chapter presents an intercultural project designed at M.I.T. that makes use of Internet communication tools to develop students' understanding of the values and attitudes embedded in a foreign culture. Initially designed for an intermediate French class, Cultura has now been developed in Russian, Spanish, and German and has been used at various levels and institutions across the United States, connecting learners in foreign language classes with students living in France, Germany, Mexico, Russia, and Spain. Written by five faculty members from three different institutions, M.I.T., Brown, and Brandeis, this chapter describes the goals, approach, materials, and methodology of Cultura, and provides a detailed description of the ways in which students construct their understanding of other cultures in electronic interactions. It identifies the challenges of implementing such a project, the roles of learners and teachers, the tools and technologies used, and the issues surrounding assessment. Finally, the chapter presents two detailed case studies, a Russia–U.S. exchange and a Mexico–U.S. exchange, which highlight the challenges of adapting Cultura to new languages, cultures, and institutional settings.*

#### **Introduction**

Effective curricular innovations never happen simply; they require foreign language (FL) professionals to consider the interaction of course content, theoretical and methodological issues, learning tools (technologies), and institutional realities.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the challenges—for language program directors as well as for faculty developing projects in the field of computer-mediated intercultural FL education—are considerable. In terms of course content, it is clear that the focus of FL classes, which previously tended to lie on the development of linguistic competence, has expanded to include the study of target cultures in their own right. We see manifestations of this refocusing in the *ACTFL Standards*, which refer specifically to aspects of cultural knowledge, and in textbooks that incorporate

more in-depth cultural information. Cultural knowledge and intercultural competence (IC), however, are easier to advocate than define (see Byram 1997). Furthermore, while advances in technology, particularly, web-based tools, seem ideally suited to enhancing international and intercultural dialogue, we must ask how best to use these new resources to ensure deep and sustained exploration of the intricate relationships of language, perspectives, values, and all the many invisible components of culture. The very notion of initiating an online exchange with foreign partners immediately raises a host of questions, ranging from the theoretical (e.g., How does pedagogy interact with technology in such an exchange? How does one teach about culture without reifying it?) to the practical and specific (e.g., How does one find a partner institution and an English language class of an appropriate level for one's own FL students? Can electronic exchanges be implemented in multi-section classes?).

In this chapter, we present *Cultura*, a computer-mediated course that focuses on the promotion of students' understanding of the foreign culture (C2) in an intermediate or advanced (third through sixth semester) university-level FL class. Initially developed for French at M.I.T., *Cultura* has now been used in several languages at Brandeis University, Brown University, Columbia University, Smith College, and the University of California at Berkeley. This chapter deals with *Cultura's* adoption and use in French, Russian, and Spanish at three institutions (Brandeis, Brown, and M.I.T.) that happen to be fairly exclusive, private universities; yet, as indicated by *Cultura's* successful implementation in foreign partner institutions of varying types, including technological colleges, Ivy League resources and students are not necessary for this project to be productive. Most important are motivated instructors, institutional support for innovative teaching, and certain technological requirements that will be discussed in this chapter.

As we note at the outset, each of the institutions we discuss uses the components of *Cultura* in different ways and at different levels of instruction. Yet, they all share *Cultura's* basic configuration: a class of FL students on one of these campuses works with a group of students of English in the target culture (France, Russia, or Mexico), viewing materials in both languages on a shared website and communicating in asynchronous web-based forums in which they analyze and discuss their shared materials. In this chapter we will: (1) explain the project's design and methodology; (2) discuss pedagogical and institutional considerations for the implementation of *Cultura*; and (3) present two case studies involving relatively new versions of the *Cultura* project in Russian and Spanish at Brown University. While language and curricular issues are particularly prominent in the Russian case study, the Spanish language exchange with students in Mexico highlights the radical problematization of the very notion of a single national culture that can take place when students begin to compare their own habits and assumptions with those of foreign partners.

## The *Cultura* Project: A Description

### Foundation

*Cultura* was built on the premise that IC needs to become a much larger component of the language curriculum. Considering the globalization of our world, which increasingly leads all students to work and interact with people of many different nationalities and cultures, one of the leading educational priorities at the dawn of this century is indeed to provide our students with the ability to understand the languages, values, and attitudes of other cultures so that they can communicate more effectively across these different cultures, whatever their field or discipline. We, in the FL profession, are in an excellent position to play a very important role in that crucial endeavor because we teach both language and culture.

Too frequently, however, the main focus of language classes is on developing linguistic and communicative competencies. Culture remains at the margins, often reduced to lists of facts or “culture capsules” that give a simplified and stereotyped picture of the other culture. IC is much more than accumulating facts about C2. It is to be found at the intersection of knowledge (of both the home culture [C1] and C2), attitudes, and interpretive or investigative skills. As Byram (1997) notes, attitudes include curiosity and openness, along with a willingness to remain flexible as information accrues and perspectives change; these attitudes go along with the ability to acquire and place in context new information. Interaction with native speakers (NSs) must occur for far deeper reasons than merely “getting information on holidays, celebrations, food, celebrity figures, music and so forth” (Moore, Morales, and Carel 1998, p. 121). To reveal their true value, facts must be examined and interpreted in broader contexts, and this can happen only when students are involved in a dynamic process of inquiry. Therefore, our priority with *Cultura* was to “provide students with the investigatory tools by which they could come to an understanding of the perspectives of speakers of the second language” (Moore, Morales, and Carel 1998, p. 121).

The networking capabilities of the Internet seem ideally suited to an in-depth exploration, as they allow students in C1 and C2 to communicate directly. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is popularly thought to facilitate immediate and authentic intercultural encounters, which in turn are supposed to make a foreign culture more accessible than ever before (Kramsch and Anderson 1999). Many language classes across the United States currently experiment with student communication (via online forums, chats, or webcams) with their peers in the C2. However, as some studies have shown (e.g., Belz 2003, 2005; Kramsch and Thorne 2002; O’Dowd 2003; Ware 2005), CMC does not necessarily lead to better intercultural understanding. Kern and Warschauer caution that a technological tool “does not in and of itself bring about improvements in learning” (2000, p. 2); success depends on the practices of implementation (Dunkel 1991). Similarly, increased access to C2 text does not necessarily mean students will heed the complex interactions of language and culture that the material contains. It turns out that the productive interactions we wish to foster depend for their success on a complex web of factors.

## Approach and Materials

In the following paragraphs, we describe *Cultura* and illustrate how it brings students to understand the cultural attitudes, beliefs, values, and modes of interaction embedded within the other culture and to “look at the universe through the eyes of others,” a phrase attributed to Marcel Proust that is quoted on *Cultura*’s main web page. In particular, we describe the approach, the tools, the materials, and the process and then provide a detailed illustration of how students work together in the *Cultura* curriculum.

### The Comparative Approach

As the Russian social and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin wrote: “In the realm of culture, outsidersness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that a foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly. A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning” (1986, pp. 6–7). The *Cultura* approach is comparative: a closed group made up of two whole classes of language learners in two different countries (e.g., learners of French in the United States and learners of English in France) examine and compare, over a period of four to ten weeks, a variety of visual and textual materials originating from both cultures, presented to them on the Web.

Understanding the inner core of another culture, what Edward Hall calls the “silent language,” or the “hidden dimension,”<sup>2</sup> is a long process, akin to a journey on which one amasses pictures, words, impressions, fragments, and ideas, which one then tries to assemble into a coherent whole. In keeping with this notion, the original *Cultura* site has been designed to look like an itinerary with several “stops” that provide different materials for students to explore. [http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/spring2004\\_sample\\_site/index.html](http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/spring2004_sample_site/index.html)

Recognizing that language is culture, that it “reflects and affects one’s world view, serving as a sort of road map to how one perceives, interprets, thinks about, and expresses one’s view of the world” (Fantini 2000, p. 27), we decided to have the journey start with students on both sides (anonymously) answering three cross-cultural questionnaires. These include (1) a simple word association that probes such apparently universal notions as freedom, work, family, school, individualism, money; (2) a sentence-completion activity that explores, among other things, relationships and roles (e.g., a good neighbor/parent/teacher is someone who . . .); and (3) a set of situations to which students must respond (e.g., you see a mother in a supermarket slap her child, you see two men holding hands, how do you react?). The last questionnaire is designed to explore different attitudes and interactions with a variety of people (strangers, family members), contexts (private vs. public; personal vs. professional), and situations (school, restaurant, movie theater, supermarket). Questionnaire answers are then collected and posted on the *Cultura* website and become the first set of parallel materials that students analyze as they compare their own answers with those of their C2 partners.

After several weeks, the field of investigation expands to include additional materials<sup>3</sup> such as C1 and C2 national opinion polls on similar topics (data), movies and their American remakes (films), a visual module (images), which is

meant to become a bicultural visual dictionary, print media from both cultures (newsstand), and a variety of parallel texts (library). The latter include, in the case of French, foundational texts such as the *Bill of Rights* and the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme* "Declaration of the Rights of Man," as well as literary, historical, and anthropological texts in which authors from each culture comment on the other. The last module (Archives) gives access to all questionnaire answers and forums from exchanges occurring as part of the *Cultura* project since 1997 (see section "Archives" for more information).

### The Online Forums

The main tools for communication in *Cultura* are the asynchronous online discussion forums that accompany each document and questionnaire answer. The forums serve as the springboard for sharing and debating viewpoints both online and in the classroom. They offer students a critical common space in which to share and verify hypotheses and points of view, to ask for help deciphering meanings of words or concepts, and to constantly negotiate meanings and interpretations.

We made two deliberate decisions with respect to the forums. First, the teacher never interferes and allows students to control the conversations.<sup>4</sup> Second, the students use their native language (L1) (or the language in which their education takes place) for posting messages in the forums. The decision to have all students write in L1 on the forums is an important and frequently misunderstood aspect of *Cultura*. It was based on the following considerations: (1) it eliminates possible dominance by a group or individuals with respect to differing proficiency levels in the foreign language (L2) and puts all students on an equal linguistic footing; (2) it enables students to express their views fully and in detail, formulate questions and hypotheses clearly, and provide complex, nuanced information because they are not bound by limited linguistic abilities; and (3) it enables the creation of student-generated authentic texts, which serve both as L2 input for the foreign partners and new objects of linguistic and cultural analysis. For instance, students on both sides of the Atlantic have discovered that American students tend to take themselves as examples and place themselves in the middle of their discourse when expressing their point of view, whereas the French students tend to make themselves the spokesperson for all French people and set themselves outside their own discourse, through the use of the passive voice, the indefinite third person pronoun, or other impersonal expressions (e.g., such as *il faut savoir que . . .* "it must be known that . . .," *il est important de noter que . . .* "it's important to note that . . ."). As one American student astutely remarked in class one day, the American students will not hesitate to see themselves as the voice of authority, while the French will bring in outside and more objective authoritative voices such as the dictionary or experts' quotes.

Note, however, that students use the L2 exclusively for in-class and writing activities (some exceptions were in Russian). The postings, which are done asynchronously outside of class and on students' own time, do not take anything away from students' "contact time" with the L2; on the contrary, the richness of L2 language input and ideas coming from the foreign partners more than offset what could be first perceived as a disadvantage. In-class work, which is done in L2 only,

focuses on the interpretation and discussion of postings (especially if students have had difficulty understanding them). In cases where comprehension of postings is an issue (as it was in Russian), instructors can select particularly difficult or complex postings to be read and clarified in class, in terms of vocabulary, structures, and ideas.

### The Process

Students work with the different materials (questionnaires, data, films, newsstand, library) in multiple ways: they first analyze them individually at home, then collectively in class as they share observations with their classmates, using the blackboards as mirrors that reflect their thought processes and discoveries and allow them to see emerging cultural and linguistic patterns. For instance, when looking at the side-by-side definitions of the words individualism/*individualisme*, students will immediately see on their own the differences in the meanings of these two words for the Americans (who associate “individualism” with “freedom” and “independence”) and the French (who associate “*individualisme*” with “*égoïsme*” or “selfishness”). [http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/spring2004\\_sample\\_site/archives/2000f/answers/individualisme.htm](http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/spring2004_sample_site/archives/2000f/answers/individualisme.htm)

The contrastive analysis of the answers to all the questionnaires generates many observations, allowing both sets of students to discover fundamental cultural differences.<sup>5</sup> Then the students enter the online forums to share perspectives, make hypotheses, and raise questions in the L1. After reading postings, students share insights gained from them in class, and the debate continues both there and in the forums. Re-examination of initial interpretations continues as additional materials from the modules (census data, surveys, news articles, and other texts) are explored and discussed in a reciprocal process of construction. This reflects a decidedly constructivist methodology, in which the emphasis is on student-driven interaction that encourages the development of analytical skills (e.g., classification or hypothesis building). Like cultural archeologists, students dig further, unearth patterns, bring new elements to the surface, and make connections that deepen their understanding of both cultures.

### How Students Gradually Construct Understanding of the Other Culture: A Detailed Illustration

The following example illustrates how students in a French-American *Cultura* course (intermediate students at M.I.T. and advanced students at INT) moved from the examination of two words, “freedom” and “*liberté*,” to the discovery of related, embedded cultural attitudes. As they examined questionnaire answers, M.I.T. students made several preliminary observations. They noted that both sides tended to associate their own country with the word “freedom” or “*liberté*” and that the associations elicited by “freedom” on the American side tended to highlight unlimited rights and choices, while “*liberté*” was often seen as illusory (*limitée* “limited,” *impossible* “impossible,” *incertaine* “uncertain”), and seemed to carry with it the idea of limits and boundaries, defined mostly by the presence of others, and as illustrated by words like *autrui* or *les autres* “others.”

On the corresponding forum, an M.I.T. student, for whom those differences became obvious, reflected: “For the Americans, liberty is real, for the French it is an ideal, almost too utopian to be achieved. That is interesting. Also the basis of the United States is freedom—individual freedom. Whereas for the French equality and community are also important. . . .” Another M.I.T. student chimed in, wanting to understand more: “Why do you feel that liberty and freedom are such illusions? I believe, in the United States, we definitely have certain very important freedoms and liberties. Is it because you interpret the word liberty differently from us? Does it have a more general and community minded meaning, unlike here, where we think of personal liberties?” Olivier, a French student, provided an explanation (translation):<sup>6</sup>

I think that many French people, when they hear about freedom in the United States, think, for instance, about the right to bear arms. But one can wonder: is freedom to . . . get killed still freedom? In fact, I think that the French have become (too) cynical and “disillusioned” towards words such as freedom, the meaning of which seems to be more and more empty. On the other hand, Americans stay (too) attached to these values and perhaps do not criticize them enough. Freedom can be seen as a rather utopian idea, but it has indisputable concrete manifestations.

That comment elicited many class discussions at M.I.T. (conducted in simple but functional French). Students discovered how skeptically the French seem to view the all-encompassing American notion of freedom (including, for example, the freedom “to get killed,” a swipe at what the French see as lax gun control laws). This led to a group discussion on the American concept of freedom, which encompassed the following questions: Is there such a thing as absolute freedom? What about the apparent contradictions reflected in U.S. practices, such as prohibiting the consumption of alcohol until age 21, but allowing gun purchase at age 18? Students also noticed that Olivier described the French as too “cynical” or “disillusioned” and Americans as “perhaps not critical enough.” In their view, this suggested a sense of French pride about their own critical faculties. Students also remarked on Olivier’s use of expressions like “I think,” “one can wonder,” “perhaps,” “seem,” as well as his enclosure of “too” in parentheses, which appeared remarkably diplomatic when compared to most of his classmates, who did not hesitate to make blunt statements about the United States.

This example illustrates how a single participant’s comment can lead students to discover several embedded cultural assumptions and to reflect on the particularities of both cultures. On the U.S. side in particular, self-reflection and discovery are enriched by the presence in the classroom of foreign students who bring new cultural paradigms to the discussion and are sometimes better able to point out what they see as contradictions. But the process does not stop there. As students continue working with other questionnaires, they gradually begin to see confirmation of a tendency by their French counterparts to want to set limits. They found a hidden link, for instance, between the “limits” associated with “*liberté*” and those imposed on a child. In a forum about a mother in a supermarket who slaps her child (where the U.S. students and the French responded in

radically different manners—U.S. students blaming the mother, French students assuming the child deserved the slap), one French student wrote (translation) that “one needs limits, otherwise it is anarchy,” thus highlighting in this new context the apparent yearning by the French for limits, order, and harmony.

Building on the work done with the questionnaires, the modular materials on the website further enabled students’ nuanced consideration of “freedom” and “*liberté*.” For example, in a national opinion poll on *Les Français et leur cadre de vie* “The French and their Lifestyle” ([http://www.tns-sofres.com/etudes/pol/151203\\_qualitevie\\_r.htm](http://www.tns-sofres.com/etudes/pol/151203_qualitevie_r.htm)), the French are asked what determines quality of life. The first item to appear is *argent* or “money” (45% of French people cite it as the main factor), whereas *liberté/indépendance/autonomie* “liberty/independence/autonomy” rally only 2% of French responses. This poll then returned M.I.T. students to observations they had made in analyses of the questionnaire answers and the subsequent forums about “money” and “*argent*,” in which they had observed that money did not seem very important to the French and that “*liberté*” (which the French had often equated with their country) now seemed relatively unimportant (or perhaps just taken for granted). Contradictions were then debated in class and re-examined in light of the French students’ responses.

The same topic of freedom emerged at the end of the students’ journey as they read the *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme* (comparing it with the *Bill of Rights*), and found, in Article 4, the definition of “*liberté*.” That reading prompted an M.I.T. student to remark in a forum:

In article 4 of the French bill of rights it says that liberty is being able to do all that does not harm others. This is different from America where we are given certain rights whether or not they affect others (free speech, freedom of the press, right to bear arms, freedom of association). This reminds me of when the French government sued yahoo.com for offering Nazi memorabilia on its auctions website. In France I guess it is illegal to sell anything having to do with the Nazis. This law seems ridiculous to most Americans. What are your opinions on those types of laws and that case in particular?

Two French students responded to this question, one saying that, on the contrary, he finds it “completely normal to set limits to this kind of propaganda,” which he finds “dangerous,” the other adding, in regard to the *Yahoo* site, that “it is inconceivable in France to hear or see such racist or xenophobic comments. People would be immediately shocked by such an attitude. I approve of such laws because they prevent succumbing to a climate of violence and racism.” That perspective was supported by yet another French student who wrote (translation):

I think it is normal for the government to want to ban the selling or purchase of Nazi objects. They carry an anti-democratic ideology which promotes inequality. I am surprised in fact that the concept of freedom in the United States is defined as unalienable rights (freedom of press and of speech) since in the Yahoo case, this encourages Nazi groups to express themselves publicly, but when a group of people declare themselves opposed to human rights and they want to propagate those ideas, it seems normal to me to forbid them from spreading that type of ideology.

In-depth analysis of this last comment in class discussion highlighted French tendencies to (1) accept and even desire the limitation of certain freedoms; (2) emphasize the principle of “equality” (as the foundation of democracy); (3) accept the government’s role in limiting rights; and (4) insist on what they consider to be “normal,” implying that there are norms or limits to be respected (something M.I.T. students associated with French students’ frequent use of such expressions as “it is important that . . .”; “it is necessary . . .”; “one must not . . .”). The apparent French tendency to avoid extremes or excess and accept constraints and limits was revealed to our students in other contexts as well, whenever the French website materials stressed respecting conventions and rules imposed by society (Levet and Furstenberg 2002).

As they work their way through questionnaires and additional materials, students are never asked to draw final conclusions based on any single comment or reading. Instead, they are encouraged to avoid stereotyping and urged to keep questioning their partners about the validity of their findings, to verify their hypotheses, and to make connections between documents, looking for either confirmation or contradiction, as they try to “put the cultural puzzle together” (Furstenberg 2003, p. 118). The very process in which students are involved requires them to keep suspending their judgments and to be ready to revise them, question them, expand them, and refine them in the light of new materials and new perspectives. Our hope is that students’ work proceeds along the lines described by Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote the following about her journeys to the United States in the preface of her memoirs: “I want to make it very clear that no isolated piece constitutes a definitive judgment: in fact I often do not end with any final viewpoint (*point de vue arrêté*). It is the sum of my indecisions, my additions and rectifications which constitutes my opinion” (1947, p. 10)

## Implementation: Lessons Learned

*Cultura* has been used for more than nine years in a variety of academic settings in versions that have lasted different numbers of weeks. Faced with diverging academic calendars and multiple technological and pedagogical challenges, we have developed a set of recommended practices and implementation guidelines. In this section, we address some of the most frequently asked questions about practical aspects of implementing *Cultura* and illustrate them with examples whenever applicable.

### Working with Partners

The key to successful implementation of *Cultura* in any linguistic environment is identifying effective collaborators. At the local level, it helps to work with language faculty—in the same or different departments—who are already using or considering adopting *Cultura*, or to contact users at other universities to share information. Internationally, it is essential to find the right partner instructor (through study abroad, departmental exchanges, or personal connections) and workable institutional conditions. Partner instructors must be willing to devote time to coping with challenges and be good at planning in advance. It is entirely

possible that the partners' courses will have dissimilar goals and structures, and their only point of pedagogical intersection will be *Cultura* itself. It helps if one or both partners can secure some funding that would enable faculty to meet face-to-face. If this cannot occur, constant, detailed electronic communication is essential. Faculty are no more immune than students to cultural misunderstandings (see Belz and Müller-Hartmann 2003); classroom cultures can differ so radically from one country to the next that partner instructors must be clear about how they will handle even putatively simple activities such as the analysis of questionnaire answers. This is not to suggest that the classroom culture of one particular institution must become something it is not, but both instructors must be aware of the realities of each other's environment.

### **Calendars and Scheduling**

As a crucial first step, interested partner faculty should establish a reasonable schedule for implementing different aspects of the exchange. *Cultura*, which can be used over an entire semester as the sole course content, requires anywhere from three to six weeks of in-class time just for analysis of questionnaires and forum discussion. In addition, before the start of actual classroom work on *Cultura*, there must be enough time for students to complete questionnaires outside of class and for instructors to collect, process, and post the answers on the web (this takes approximately two weeks). Filling out a questionnaire takes only 30 minutes at most, but it is best to give students at least a week to complete it, given varying access to computers. Because of differences in academic calendars, the pace of the project deserves careful attention. Yearlong courses (in which students may have a semester break but remain in the same groups with the same instructor for an entire year) are the norm in some countries, with later starting dates than in the United States. Frequently, breaks are organized around different holidays. Partner teachers need to work together on scheduling to minimize long periods of silence in the discussion forums, and need to be sure students know when the other university will be on break, so no one becomes worried or insulted by a lull on the forums.

Culturally contingent aspects of technology use such as student access to and familiarity with computers (see Belz 2001 pp. 225–227) and cultural perceptions of appropriate workload as well as different ideas about the “work week” (weekends) also influence scheduling. At INT in France, students had access to computers everywhere on campus, including in the dorms, but preferred to wait until class time to post or read messages (as shown by computer-generated time stamps). In contrast, U.S. students tended to send messages in the middle of the night or over the weekend, and came to class with hardcopies of relevant postings. These different behaviors need to be taken into account when drawing up the schedule because they affect how students will work with material and how long certain tasks will take.

### **Teacher and Learner Roles**

*Cultura*'s highly interactive environment influences the roles of teachers and learners. From the beginning, students are at the center of the process of inquiry. Their own answers to the online questionnaires are the first documents they analyze;

the online discussions generated by their reactions to them become, in turn, the raw material for class discussions; they choose the forums in which they participate and navigate both discussions and other readings in various ways. Both online and in the classroom, each contribution by any member of the group can refocus the discussion in a collaborative construction between individuals and groups. Learners' analytical skills, notably their ability to summarize, evaluate, and react to others' comments, are honed as they move from classroom to forums and back again. The expectation that students will engage in these activities requires that instructors are capable of facilitating them (O'Dowd and Eberbach 2004). It is no exaggeration to state that the work done by teachers is absolutely crucial to the success of any *Cultura* project for more than mere logistical reasons (important as those are). Teachers encourage students to bring together different interpretations to their work, to reflect on them, and to try to make sense of the often contradictory viewpoints embodied in their partners' comments. Importantly, they must sensitize students to the requirements of intercultural learning (O'Dowd and Eberbach 2004), and be ready to become learners themselves (Belz and Müller-Hartmann 2003), not only studying the two cultures involved in the exchange, but also re-evaluating their own intercultural awareness and learning as much as possible about telecollaboration and how it can facilitate intercultural learning. This does not mean that a teacher must be or become a computer whiz; rather, she or he must be ready to reconsider assumptions about learning and teaching as work on the exchange progresses.

What do these requirements mean for classroom practice? Teachers must make sure that students are given clear instructions on how to do their research before coming to class. In class, students usually work in small groups to discuss their findings (e.g., people who have all analyzed the same words, or groups where no two people have analyzed the same words). The instructor must ensure that the discussions remain on-topic and should ask students to support their analyses and hypotheses with direct quotes and examples taken from their particular materials. We encourage students to record their observations on the board, look at what others have written, ask one another questions, and find connections or contradictions between different items contributed by different groups. The teacher does not provide students with answers, but instead encourages students to investigate and hypothesize. Ideally, students will develop an argument and base it on a concrete text (from the forums, questionnaires, polls, or readings) or other authentic C1/C2 material (images, advertisements, films).

In this environment, the teacher is no longer the sole purveyor of cultural information. We recognize that for some instructors this prospect can appear to "remove" teachers from the equation, their role as "authority figures" taken over by NS student informants in the partner group. Note, however, that the availability of these informants is a resource for teachers as much as for students; it frees instructors from the responsibility of having all the answers. In *Cultura*, students, teachers, and NSs from the C2 all help construct meanings. "Constructivism," as Kaufman points out, "is open-ended and allows for ambiguity, flexibility, and innovative thinking" (2004, p. 303). Note, however, that if *Cultura* is to create a flexible, open-ended learning environment, it is only through very precise

statements of goals and tasks on the part of the instructor that this can occur. Equally important is that students be encouraged to notice both connections and contradictions among topics as individual and group analyses unfold. This process is illustrated by the following posting on the forum about a good neighbor by a U.S. student at Brandeis University during fall 2002. In this example, the student refers to aspects of French and U.S. American culture that he has noted previously in other forums and questionnaire answers:

I find it interesting that French responses to the word "community" and "a good neighbor" emphasize a sort of respect for individualism. This is especially paradoxical since French typically see themselves as less individualistic and more socialistic than Americans. And Americans, typically considered lovers of individualism, seem to have a stronger predilection for community life. Is part of the explanation that French look to the national level to express their sense of community, while the American view is more local and personal?

Such questions are then posed and debated both in the forums and in the classroom as a means of broadening the cultural dialogue.

### **Technological Support and Institutional Constraints**

Before detailing the technological issues that accompanied our use of *Cultura*, we emphasize that the success or failure of *Cultura* depends much more on effective faculty collaboration and well-planned classroom interaction than on the technology itself. Nevertheless, there are a number of issues relating to technology that potential users should consider before implementing an Internet-mediated exchange.

The current availability of course management software (CMS) like *WebCT* and *Blackboard* for the creation of classroom websites has facilitated the adoption of *Cultura* by other schools because these technologies simplify the creation and navigation of Web pages and obviate the need for external discussion software. Templates of *Cultura*'s modules in CMS-compatible format have been developed in French, Russian, and Spanish. However, it is important to note that *Cultura* is not dependent on a specific technology; the original project was developed in simple HTML as no more than a large stack of web pages. The data from the questionnaires were collected via e-mail and copied into the pages, and discussion forums relied on software available at the time. Although the technology has evolved, the need for technical support has not decreased. One of the partner schools hosts and supports the website with technological help from computing support staff or language laboratory personnel (to date the U.S. institution has always been the host). The host institution sets up the website (e.g., posts answers, updates the pages); participants at the partner institution simply log onto that server from their location. The key is to support both groups and anticipate potential problems via thorough troubleshooting.

The ups and downs of adapting and supporting *Cultura* in different technological environments are illustrated by the Russian-American partnership between Brown University and the University of Petrozavodsk. Nearly all users on both

sides had no problem seeing Cyrillic at their individual sites, although U.S. students needed instructions on how to activate the Russian keyboard on their machines, and the one or two students using older Macintoshes reported some trouble. A few students in Russia had not used the Internet much; some had trouble with basics like navigating their way around a website and submitting questionnaires, despite training sessions in the computer lab. One pleasant surprise for the Russians was access to a password-protected site that recognized them. All were delighted that they were not only able to log on, but that they were already “in” the system and thus valid participants. In Petrozavodsk, there was a computer lab to which students were brought once a week. In this way, everyone was guaranteed access to the site at least once before every class. However, they were not permitted to print out questionnaire answers and postings (nor was the instructor allowed to use the departmental printer for this purpose). As a result, the students in Russia had to either take notes from the forums or work from memory during class discussions. Both instructors were aware of these difficulties in advance because they had met with instructional technology staff at Petrozavodsk, and they therefore planned accordingly to mitigate any potential negative influences on in-class work.

The Russian example demonstrates that the exchange can work even when there is a technological mismatch between partner institutions. However, we must consider whether there are any inherent institutional constraints (other than basic access to technology) that might hinder the implementation of *Cultura* in particular educational settings. In short, does it matter whether students are from an urban Ivy League university or a small college? What about students at a large and rurally situated public university, or students from an urban community college? For us the answer lies in the work that faculty must do with students during and in advance of the exchange, if the project is to proceed successfully. Program directors and teachers considering adopting *Cultura* work within a range of educational environments and with student populations whose sense of their national identity and its culture may vary widely. In particular, many student populations may be less receptive to foreign peers’ challenges to their views about the unique value of their own cultures and the actions of their national governments. Even where such resistance may be insignificant, it is important to preface the *Cultura* exchange with classroom discussions and activities designed to encourage awareness of the culturally bound nature of perceptions and values. The teachers’ manual on the *Cultura* website (<http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/guide/index.html>) offers a variety of suggestions.

## Tools

There are currently many tools at our disposal such as e-mail, chats, picture websites, webcams, and videoconferencing for facilitating intercultural exchanges. Although many of these tools are used successfully in other intercultural exchanges (see O’Dowd, this volume, for videoconferencing), we decided very early on to concentrate on the use of asynchronous online discussion forums in *Cultura* because they seemed to be the most apt at allowing students to exchange in-depth reflections and to carefully formulate their thoughts. Over the course of the

exchange, we have noted that students begin to see foreign interlocutors as individuals and to address and refer to one another by name (rather than as a group).

The fall 2002 exchange between a seventh-semester French culture class at Brown University and an English language class at INT demonstrates how students use the *Cultura* discussion part of the website. While students were roughly the same age and in the same year at the university, the declared goals of the two classes and their schedules were dissimilar. In the United States, the course lasted 15 weeks and met three times a week with *Cultura* as its core component; in France, *Cultura* was used only once a week for six weeks as part of a larger English writing curriculum. Given this arrangement, one would expect the French students to be less engaged in the project than their U.S. counterparts, yet, as the following table suggests, students' use of discussion forums largely made up for the difference in classroom contact time.

**Table 1**

Quantitative Overview of Message Postings and Readings in Fall 2002  
(Brown/INT)<sup>7</sup>

	<b>Total Messages</b>	<b>Lowest per Student</b>	<b>Highest per Student</b>	<b>Combined Semester Average</b>	<b>French Average/ Student</b>	<b>U.S. Average/ Student</b>
Hits		39	671	303	275	452
Read Messages	538	21	523	251	208	310
Written Messages	538	1	46	18	24	13

From Table 1, we observe that while the French students (who had the tighter schedule) visited the site less often over the course of the semester (275 times versus 452 times on average), they compensated by posting more messages (24 per student) than their American counterparts (18 per student). Exchange conditions account for this variation to some extent because the French students tended to concentrate their web activities in smaller periods of time during the week and read and answered as many messages as possible in one sitting. The U.S. students, who had more class meetings, tended to read postings (old and new) several times and participate in only some of the forums.<sup>8</sup> Students exhibited a range of approaches to using the website. For example, one student read 21 messages following a single discussion thread that she had originated, while another read almost all messages (523 out of a possible 538). Because they are asynchronous, the forums accommodate the often significant differences in educational environment between the two partner schools. Furthermore, they serve as the principal source and catalyst of student investigation.

As fruitful as the forums have proven to be, we felt images would allow students to explain (and visualize) more clearly their respective institutional and cultural realities. In spring 2004, students from M.I.T. and Paris II chose to illustrate

their daily lives with images that they uploaded to the website, attaching comments to both their own and others' photos. In those photo albums, just like in the online forums, the students are entirely in charge of the content.

These images have added an important dimension to the students' learning. For example, the juxtaposition of photos of a French *banlieue* and an American suburb immediately illustrate the divergent socio-cultural realities lurking behind those words. They also serve to aptly illuminate the different realities of the students' respective lives. An album titled "The daily life of a student at M.I.T. and Paris II," was very revealing in this regard. To illustrate, an M.I.T. student's photo of a food truck prompted a Paris II student to raise the issue of hygiene (putting on its head the clichéd notion that the French do not care about hygiene) and to send, in return, a picture of the whole French class standing in front of a beautiful *boulangier-pâtissier* "bakery-pastery shop" in which one could see an appetizing display of quiches, sandwiches, and tarts. Such photos not only helped to bring to life specific aspects of the students daily routines, but they also became yet another object of cultural analysis just like the postings in the online discussion forums. While examining the content of the images, the M.I.T. students started to reflect on the overall image that the French were projecting of themselves and came up with very interesting interpretations. They saw, for instance, that French students had chosen to show mostly exterior and formal views of their lives (as opposed to their own photos, which depicted more personal and intimate views such as the interior of a dorm room or a student sleeping in a chair). They then made a link between the images chosen by the French students and their discourse on the discussion forums, which again tended to be more formal and to present a more "objective" point of view. Such comments are proof for us that participation in *Cultura* enabled students to look beyond the surface and to uncover hidden cultural perspectives.

Interacting via images has proved to be very popular. A survey of students at the end of the spring 2004 semester revealed that both the M.I.T. and Paris II students chose the online forum photo projects as their favorite elements of the course. With two exceptions (from 12 responses posted) M.I.T. students said such things as: "it was great to see how different/similar life is in the different countries" and "pictures can illustrate concepts better than words." The French students' reactions echoed those of their M.I.T. counterparts: "we really have the impression (*la sensation*) we've shared something with the American students" and "it was great to see the environment and differences concretely."

## Archives

All French–American exchanges since 1997 have been archived at the *Cultura* website ([http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/spring2004\\_sample\\_site/index\\_arch.htm](http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/spring2004_sample_site/index_arch.htm)). When it is not practical or possible to create a live exchange with a partner school in a foreign country or when multi-section courses make such exchanges difficult to implement, archives of previous exchanges can offer a rich source of cultural and linguistic material for intercultural explorations. In fall 2003, a French class at Brandeis University took advantage of the archived materials and created its own experiment.

As in the live situation, the comparative approach remains central to the process. Therefore, students answer the questionnaires (individually and anonymously) so that they may compare their responses with previously posted responses in the archives. This process gives them a sense of their own collectively held views and decreases the risk that they might dismiss archived C1 responses as the product of a U.S. American subculture other than their own. At this point, the process diverges from what would occur in a live exchange. Instead of engaging in an online discussion with their foreign keypals, students read archived forums and look for answers to their questions. It is possible to create a discussion forum for the entire class where students post their own comments as well as reactions to classmates' comments. In this case, students use the target language because participation in such a forum is seen as an extension of class meetings. Because the French archives now extend over many years (with other languages to be added in 2005), students can track a particular concept (e.g., freedom) over time to see if there has been a change in attitudes toward that concept or, as in the live version of the exchange, use the modules (data, library, newsstand) to examine a concept in different contexts. Finally, an instructor may decide to use some of the archived materials in other classes, for instance, responses to the word *banlieue*/suburbs in a beginning French class.

## Assessment

Because *Cultura* can be used in a variety of settings, assessment criteria must be clearly defined for students. While CMS tools allow us to track how students use the website, this information should be used primarily for evaluating the effectiveness and flow of the project rather than grading individual students. Note, however, that because CMS makes tracking easy, students can be reminded individually if they are not spending enough time on the site. Assessment of student work, however, is based not on the quantity of postings (there is no mandated number), but on participation in classroom discussion, individual written analyses, class presentations, longer final essays (or other final projects) in the L2, and on their active participation in the forums. Successful completion of the latter requires that students spend considerable time with website materials.

Because different students read different postings and concentrate on different issues, they often follow very different developmental paths in the course. It is therefore important that students map out for themselves and the instructor the trajectory of their investigation over the course of the semester. For that reason, we ask them to record their itinerary in what the French version refers to as a  *carnet de bord*, i.e. a journal of their progress. In it they record interesting points of in-class discussions; list questions they have asked, in class and in the forums; paste in forum answers to their questions; and note important or confusing observations made on the forums, highlighting contradictions. Complete  *carnets de bord* reflect both the "itineraries" of individual students and their process of reflection and analysis. Additional assignments include L2 essays, in which students explore connections between different concepts they have studied (e.g., family and home), basing their analyses on specific examples from questionnaires, forums, class

discussions, or other modules. At the end of the semester, students can work on a final project for which they compare different sets of corresponding C1/C2 documents such as television newscasts, advertisements, newspapers, or websites of one multinational firm.

## Two Case Studies: Russian and Spanish

### Russian: Logistics and Language

In adapting *Cultura* for a Russian course at *Brown University*, we faced a number of logistical issues, which included class size, project duration, and instructor workloads. The first issue involved matching class size between Russia and the United States. Because English is a popular FL in Russia, classes tend to be large (20 to 25 students). In contrast, fifth semester Russian classes at Brown typically have no more than 12 students. In 2002, the fifth-semester group was unusually small with only six students. As a result, questionnaires were filled out by students in both the third- and fifth-semester courses. Students in Russia attend classes in more or less the same small group for all five years of their undergraduate experience. Therefore, they did not understand why their exchange would last for only one semester and viewed the prospect of losing it during the second semester as a deprivation. As a result, the Russian–American exchange was spread out over two semesters. Another factor that contributed to this scheduling decision was the fact that it took longer for students of Russian to comprehend forum postings.

There were additional institutional differences that affected both faculty and student work. Most language instructors in Russia have a larger course load than instructors in the United States—20 contact hours per week is common—and thus relatively less time to devote to preparation. Furthermore, Russian university FL instruction splits classes by modality (conversation, reading, writing are all dealt with by separate teachers in independent courses). Cultural differences connected with the use of the Internet affected the online forums as soon as certain topics were raised and discussion became more frank.<sup>10</sup> Soon after forum discussion began, some of the Russians asked if they could post anonymously or take a nickname that would mask their identity. When queried about the reason for this, they indicated discomfort with the fact that “other people” (possibly the instructors) had access to their personal opinions.

One of *Cultura*’s central design features, the use of the L1 in the forums, was an obvious plus, since it meant that differences in the relative language proficiency of the two groups would not play a significant (possibly intrusive) role in determining the success of the project. In terms of contact hours needed to reach “professional” or “superior” proficiency, the U.S. *Interagency Linguistic Roundtable* (ILR) and *The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (ACTFL) both describe Russian as requiring more than 1000 contact hours to reach that level. The suggested time to equivalent proficiency in French or Spanish is just over half that number of hours. The typical fifth-semester student of Russian has experienced only about 260 classroom contact hours. Students

of English at Russian universities usually study English in secondary school for anywhere from three to six years before continuing instruction at the university level. In addition, young people in Russia are exposed to English outside the classroom through texts of popular songs and the Internet. On the contrary, most U.S. students of Russian first come into contact with the language and culture at the university level. Thus, for the U.S. students of Russian the discrepancy in proficiency is effectively larger than in the case of French and Spanish.

Although instructors attempted to equalize the linguistic “power relationship” between the two groups with respect to production through the use of the L1 in the forums, the U.S. students were nevertheless hampered by their reading proficiency in Russian. The biggest challenge for U.S. students of Russian is their inability to read Russian at a rate that facilitates the types of deep intercultural exchanges made possible by *Cultura*. NSs of English reading Russian must cope with a huge amount of unfamiliar vocabulary (because the student typically is not acquainted with Slavic roots), syntax (common use of impersonal expressions with and without dative case subjects, for example), and relatively flexible word order where adjectives can be separated from nouns and verbs can occur before subjects. For these reasons, fifth-semester students of Russian have relatively limited experience with texts of any length (more than one to two pages) or complexity. A look at common Russian language textbooks reveals that students may have read short or condensed newspaper articles, examples of schedules and announcements, poems and songs, short excerpts from longer works of fiction (less than five pages), interviews with or letters from NSs, or short stories.<sup>11</sup> Texts tend to be heavily didacticized, both to facilitate basic comprehension and to provide scaffolding that enables class discussion to occur in the L2. In the case of the questionnaire answers, it was common for both the second- and third-year students to have to look up as much as 50% of the vocabulary in the Russian answers, and students reported that reading even one short forum posting carefully (which occurs outside of class as homework) could take more than an hour. On a course evaluation form, one second-year student reported her enjoyment of the project, but added that reading one of the smaller forum postings (100 words) had taken her 90 minutes. Especially in the second-year class, students admitted they sometimes chose postings because of their length.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the pedagogy associated with the French version of the project assumes that students are able to express a range of attitudinal responses in the L2 during classroom discussions including surprise, doubt, agreement/disagreement. Even in a program that attends to developing conversation management strategies, a fifth-semester student of Russian lacks control of the syntax required for successful use of some of these expressions as well as the connectors necessary to give detailed and coherent explanations. Finally, the process of checking hypotheses using outside sources or modules requires students to navigate large chunks of L2 text that is frequently written in styles very different from anything seen previously.

Thus, it was clear from the start that some important components of *Cultura*'s methodology (notably the extent to which student choice of topics drives both individual and classroom activities) would take a back seat to language issues,

which, in turn, would require substantive curricular changes for the exchange to be productive. U.S. students in the French and Spanish exchanges generally did not have global comprehension problems, whereas this was a constant concern with Russian. Solutions included: (1) reducing the number of items in the questionnaires; (2) assigning students specific questionnaire answers—and, subsequently, forum postings—to read at home in preparation for class discussion of them, rather than allowing every student free choice of what to read and talk about in class; (3) providing glossaries and reading guides for some of the more difficult forum postings; and (4) tailoring weekly logbook (journal) activities to materials discussed.

Why was *Cultura* used in third- and fifth-semester Russian courses rather than seventh- and eighth-semester courses, if there are so many language related issues? The *raison-d'être* for *Cultura* is that it gives those students who have not studied abroad access to a greater range of texts and to the diversity of viewpoints occurring within the target culture than they might otherwise encounter in instructed learning. Not every university has a fourth-year Russian language course. It is those second- and third-year students, many of whom do not ever plan to study in Russia, who can benefit the most from the project, assuming that the linguistic difficulties can be overcome.<sup>13</sup> After two years at Brown, it was felt that the exchange, while workable in the second year in a limited way, is much better suited to fifth- or sixth-semester Russian.

Work on the project caused many students to think critically about how meaning is constructed in both Russian and English. This reflection extended to changing the way they thought about linguistic features that could easily have been just so much grammar. For example, a 2003 discussion of the words “friend” and “*drug*” centered on definitions given by seven U.S. students, which involved “love” or “lover.” Petrozavodsk students expressed surprise at the number of U.S. mentions of “love,” which they translated as the Russian noun *liubov* rather than the verb *liubit* “to love” because it lacked the infinitive marker “to.” The U.S. students, who had not anticipated that this difference in these forms could result in misunderstanding, explained that one loves one’s friends: “the type of emotion that is linked to these words is hard to divide.” Katya, a student from Russia, responded in the following way (translation): “I can’t agree that friendship and love are the same thing . . . love, in my understanding, is something different.” Her response caused another U.S. student to remind the forum that

both terms, at least in English, have huge ranges of meanings. I can befriend someone at first meeting, but I have friends that are closer to me than family. Likewise, love is a flexible word. I love my mom and I love chocolate cake and I love that new song I heard on the radio.

Katya’s answer reflected that

in fact it’s all a matter of the words (you choose). The word “love” (*ljubov*) in Russian is associated more with relations between men and women. ☺ It was nice to find out about your associations with that word. Thanks.

In class discussion, and again in a final paper written in Russian, Brian, an American student of Russian, noticed how pragmatics might figure in the different opinions expressed (translation):

I was surprised that Russians and Americans could talk so long about the various meanings of words like family, friend, and happiness. I thought those words would mean similar things the world over. In the forums we talked a lot about the association between friendship and love. . . . In my opinion, Jeremy was correct [about friendship and love being hard to divide], but the Russian students didn't think so. However, then I read the next posting and understood. Russians can say, "I love," [using a verb] but the **noun** "love" can be used only about relations between men and women. . . . It really is all a matter of the words you choose (my new favorite phrase).

Language issues affected work even on linguistically "simpler" content, as the following example illustrates. It is explained in most first-year Russian textbooks that *shkola* "school" denotes only primary or secondary school, never university. Students on both sides of the exchange noticed huge differences in the answers to questionnaire item school/*shkola*. On the U.S. side, the words "Brown University" figured prominently, along with stress-related concepts like "deadline," "exhaustion," and "lack of sleep." The Russian answers, e.g., "childhood," "friends," "lessons," "dependency," "mischief-making," and "[school]bells," were clearly from a different world, but students on both sides were slow to hit upon the reason. A skeptic could argue that it would have been easy enough for the teacher to "give the answer" by reminding them of the cultural note on this subject from their first year textbook. Doing so, however, would have deprived students of the experience that followed, in which they not only found out "the answer," but also discovered some of its social and linguistic implications. The first forum questions from Julia in Petrozavodsk in 2002 were (translation): "Why do you associate the time you spent in school with hard work every day? Do you really have no bright memories at all? What about your friends?" American Sara answered that "we do have friends and fun in school," and that "we use the word school to describe school work." Several Brown students in 2003 explained that they had written "Brown" thinking school was a demographic question, not a word association (it was the first item on the list); that this response only confirmed the difference in semantic networks escaped them. In both years, several more postings were required for the linguistic and social implications of the "culture capsule" factoid to become clearer. Answering the eventual question from Nina at Brown about why no Russian had written a university name, Julia answered bluntly but in detail (translation):

because university is university, and school—is school. We start school at the age of seven (at that point we're children). In school we acquire our first skills, the necessary knowledge for continuing our studies at university, it's in fact in school that we make our good friends and learn to understand life. At university we learn how to be specialists in various areas of study, while in school we learn only the basics and don't go deeply into the details. It's in fact after finishing "univer" that you can get a job.

This posting provided material for different kinds of in-class analyses. Linguistically, it illustrated certain kinds of discourse markers typical of comparison such as the fact that the use of the conjunction *a* “whereas” rather than *i* “and” indicates a contrast. The content of the response gave students a linguistic “leg up” in order to compare Julia’s experience with their own, both individually and nationally. Neither of these things would have happened if the teacher had cut the exchange off with a quick reminder of the difference between “school” and “university” in Russian. There was disagreement among U.S. students about how Nina’s description tallied with their own conceptions; they did not seem to expect their own experience to be universal, but as school/*shkola* was further discussed, they were surprised by specific differences within their own culture. In 2002, a Brown student from Lithuania responded to Julia, asking about school bells and September 1st (the traditional first day of the academic year), which he had experienced in his post-Soviet homeland much as she had: “We were discussing in class whether these have emotional associations?” Nina’s detailed answer, which described such rituals of September 1st as the *linnejka* or “line” (the opening school ceremonies) made it plain that *shkola* is more than “not university.” Nina related images of first-graders reciting poems dedicated to the school and their teachers and the older children leading the newest arrivals to their first classes, and recalled being in that position herself ten years earlier.

Eventually class discussion brought out that Russian pupils in a grade are divided into groups in which they remain throughout their schooling, taking nearly all subjects for years with the same set of people. Such knowledge of C2 does not necessarily equal tolerance for or sympathy with it, as some U.S. students’ horrified reactions to this detail made clear (“six years with the SAME PEOPLE?!!”). However, discussion did not end there; U.S. students from small towns or who attended small private schools commented that the grouping concept was familiar to them. Those who had been schooled outside the United States in similar arrangements pointed out what to them were virtues of the system in Russia (stability, “better” friends). In class, several students recalled hearing Russian acquaintances or teachers say that friendships in Russia were “stronger” than in the United States. Thus, students saw not only the “hidden” implications of cultural facts, but also the complex interaction between individual and group conceptions of common “American” culture.

None of the discussion of Nina’s posting could have taken place without significant preparatory work on comprehension. Several students came to class on the day it was assigned irritated that Nina appeared to think them too dumb to understand that people make friends in grade school and that 7-year-olds are children. An analysis of their reading revealed they had not heeded her use of the adverb *imerno* “precisely, in fact,” which indicated that her statement was meant to differentiate *shkola* and *universitet*, not simply state that schoolchildren make friends, or that the parenthetical “at that point we’re children” was meant to set up an association of *deti* “children” with *shkola* and—by analogy—*vzroslye* “adults” with *universitet*.

The design of some of the *Cultura* tasks facilitates a focus on particular grammatical forms such as the use of the perfective future, e.g., *skazhu* “I’ll say,”

*pozvoniu* “I’ll call,” *otvechu* “I’ll answer,” and *dam* “I’ll give.”<sup>14</sup> Analysis of forum postings also leads to the study of the different ways of expressing opinions, agreement, disagreement, or surprise. Depending on the language, this can involve work on impersonal constructions, preposition/case use with the intransitive verbs used to express emotions, the use of the indicative versus the subjunctive, and frequently used connectors and rhetorical devices. Particularly difficult postings are analyzed in class to elucidate troubling lexicon and grammatical structures. Students are asked to keep a list of difficulties in their logbooks or journals as they encounter them.

Users of *Cultura* have observed that our students begin to imitate the discourse of the C2 in their writing. In their French essays, for example, the U.S. students tend to reproduce the structured discourse of their French-speaking counterparts by using such phrases as *d’une part* “on the one hand,” *d’autre part* “on the other hand,” *de plus* “moreover,” *donc* “therefore,” *par conséquent* “consequently,” as well as more impersonal expressions.<sup>15</sup>

Students are slower to appropriate L2 forms from the postings of their C2 partners in their spoken discourse and must be constantly and systematically encouraged to do so. Instructors can help them by designing specific oral activities in class where students are asked, for instance, to read aloud some comments of interest in front of the whole class or to circulate in the class sharing with other students the postings they have found particularly interesting. At first the students are allowed to glance at the text, but then they must echo the text orally. U.S. students of Russian were given checklists of phrases taken from Russians’ postings dealing with family, childrearing, and education and asked to decide to what extent they described their own reality, and how they would change them if they did not.

## **Spanish: Problematizing National Cultures from Within and Without**

Those considering implementation of *Cultura* in their own language programs sometimes express concern that, despite the flexible, iterative nature of its process, students might still generalize and form rigid judgments about either their own culture or that of their partners. Although bicultural comparisons clearly run the risk of oversimplification and polarization, the Brown University–Universidad de las Américas in Puebla, Mexico (UDLA) exchange described below demonstrates how the cultural self-reflections engendered by *Cultura* can foster an increasingly complex sense of national identities and cultural heterogeneity. This Spanish language version of *Cultura* was initiated by the Brown professor, who took advantage of internal grant monies and an existing study abroad arrangement between the two schools to visit the UDLA and meet with the Chair of Modern Languages to explain the project and ascertain the level of institutional and technological support for the exchange. A key factor for both schools was finding an appropriate level and course in which to pilot *Cultura*. Whereas the UDLA offered a third-year English course called “Intercultural Comparisons” that would serve as an ideal partner course for the exchange, the

Brown instructor was committed to directing and teaching a multi-section writing course and a third-year Spanish course on Hispanic Populations in the United States. After consulting with U.S. colleagues who had used *Cultura*, she decided that a pilot version of the exchange (questionnaires and subsequent forums only) could be best integrated into the single-section format and the content of the latter course. In a subsequent trip to Mexico, she met with her partner teacher to discuss calendars and possible modifications to the French versions of the questionnaires, some of which corresponded to course content (e.g., border/*frontera* and immigration/*inmigración* were added to the word association questionnaire). All subsequent questionnaire revisions and scheduling issues were handled through an extensive (and enjoyable) e-mail exchange that continues to this day.

While both Brown and the UDLA are elite, private institutions whose students generally have greater than average access to economic and educational resources, students need only Internet access, technological support for a course management system, and, most importantly, teacher guidance to navigate a fruitful *Cultura* exchange. In fact, while many of the student participants in the Brown–UDLA exchange had traveled outside their own countries and interacted with people from different cultural backgrounds, *Cultura* can be most useful for those who might not otherwise have access to travel, study abroad, or contact with multicultural communities in their country of origin. In the current, often intensely nationalistic post-9/11 political climate, U.S. students may be unprepared for the vehemence of foreign partners' associations with their country. Nevertheless, they can be prepared to confront and even reflect on opinions different from their own and they can be taught strategies for responding diplomatically even when they disagree.

In the Brown–UDLA exchange, several factors contributed to students' general awareness of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic subgroups and to their cognizance of the blurring of national borders precipitated by globalization.<sup>16</sup> For the Brown students, course content foregrounded the diversity of Latino groups in the United States as well as issues such as immigration, acculturation, trans-nationalization, race, and bilingualism. For the UDLA students, decades of political and economic history lived in the shadow of the giant to the north, sharpened consciousness of intercultural penetration through economic interdependence, the globalization of production, transnational media, migration, and tourism. For both groups of students, a shared border that the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes (1992, pp. 371–372) has likened to a scar marking the troubled divide between the First World and the developing world, promoted differing degrees of awareness of the porosity of national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries and of the existence of an international subculture of poverty.

If only a few of the students on each side of the Brown–UDLA exchange had direct experience with the geographical border between their nations, many more of them had confronted the demands placed on the intercultural language learner, who operates “at the border between several languages or language varieties, maneuvering his/her way through the troubled waters of cross-cultural misunderstandings” (Kramsch 1998, p. 27). Fairly well-traveled, even on their

home turf, many of these students were accustomed to a world where most people know and use more than one language and where each language varies by group and by context. At the UDLA, a university-wide English language requirement fostered awareness of the use of English as a *lingua franca* that transcends national boundaries. For Brown students, a course requirement of volunteer work in local agencies that serve Latino clients placed them in language contact with Spanish speakers from a variety of countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Three UDLA students reported that one or both parents were born in a country other than Mexico (e.g., the United States, Chile, Germany). Seven of the 17 Brown students had at least one parent who was born in a country other than the United States, and at least six grew up in households where they frequently heard and/or spoke a language other than English (five Spanish, one Hindi).

As intercultural speakers testing the ill-defined borders of multicultural and multilingual societies, the UDLA/Brown students were typically reluctant to form generalizations about either Mexicans or Americans. Brown students, in particular, felt compelled to insist frequently that their postings reflected the values of a unique university culture they saw as far more liberal, open, and respectful of religious, racial, sexual, and economic diversity than the country at large. For example, they regularly prefaced their frequently critical responses to direct queries about the war in Iraq or U.S. leadership with provisos about the deep divide in the country's current political map. Likewise, the hypothetical situation "A foreigner criticizes your country," prompted postings like the following:

It was crazy to me to see that so many of the students from Brown said they would agree with a foreigner who criticized their country . . .

I want to clarify to UDLA students just in case they are not aware: Brown University is quite a liberal school, meaning that a majority of students here seems to be on the left of the political spectrum.

If anything, as I am sure you know, American nationalism is higher than usual in the wake of the occurrences of September 11, 2001.

In a Brown–UDLA discussion of views on homosexuality, a dialogue elicited by the questionnaire item "You see two men holding hands," students again underscored the liberal bias of their own university culture, citing the current national debate over gay marriage as additional evidence of widespread U.S. homophobia not evident in the Brown *Cultura* questionnaires. On the basis of information gleaned from a public lecture, the American student Lincoln suggested a similar disjunction between the attitudes of UDLA students and those of Mexicans at large:

On another note, I attended a lecture last week at Brown by a former advisor to Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo (two former presidents of Mexico) and she said that approximately 70% of all Mexicans were against homosexuality. I do not in any way intend to be offensive, but I was pleasantly surprised when I read the UDLA students' responses to

this topic. Although I have met a few liberal Mexicans, my impression of the country has always been [that it is] rather conservative concerning social issues. I understand that we as Brown students and you all as UDLA students do not speak for our countries, but rather for ourselves.

To this one of the UDLA students replied (translation):

... we don't constitute, even in the slightest degree, a representative sampling of our population so that we could generalize and say that all Mexicans tend toward openness in issues relating to homosexuality. Nonetheless, and without trying to label UDLA students, I think that we DO represent a significant portion of the educated youth of our nation (which is for the most part middle, upper middle, and upper class)...

Although allusions to university culture surfaced perhaps most prominently among the subcultures mentioned in the UDLA–Brown exchange, students from both schools regularly nuanced and deconstructed the simple Mexican/American binary (already problematized for the three Brown students officially dubbed Mexican-American). Among the diverse cultural subgroups they identified in their postings, many were geographic: Mexico City vs. the border towns; Mexico City vs. Cholula (the town where the UDLA is located); and East Coast U.S. associations with “immigration” vs. those from Texas and the West Coast.<sup>17</sup> Other subgroups mentioned were ethnic (allusions to the indigenous populations of Mexico; references to U.S. ethnic and racial diversity), religious, and economic. In fact, some of the most salient Mexico-U.S. differences in the UDLA–Brown responses to questionnaires tracked the socioeconomic and psychological divide between a developing nation and its First World neighbor. For example, in the situation “You see someone begging,” UDLA students regularly distinguished between adult and child beggars, whereas Brown students never see children begging. Among the UDLA associations with the term “police,” the words “corrupt” and “corruption” were predominant because police in Mexico are paid so little that they regularly supplement their income with bribes.<sup>18</sup> When queried about why supposedly family-centered UDLA students rarely mentioned the need to consult with their families before accepting a good job in a foreign country (in contrast to several Brown students who said they would talk with their families), the UDLA students explained that they assumed family support since good jobs are so hard to find in Mexico. Finally, for the situation “A foreigner criticizes your country,” UDLA students commonly responded with a sometimes vehemently defensive attitude, which they attributed, in forum discussions, to considerable experience with negative attitudes of “superior” or insensitive European and U.S. tourists.

It was in this latter forum that UDLA students were most openly critical of what they regarded as U.S. abuses of power, its status as the most hated country in the world, the self-serving nature of U.S. foreign aid, and the negative consequences of U.S. intervention in Latin America. That this was done with a considerable amount of agreement and little ruffling of feathers can be attributed in part to generally receptive interlocutors, who regularly distinguished between

governments and the many cultures and subgroups they represent. Yet civility was also enhanced by the use of discourse strategies (e.g., “Thanks for your comment, X, I agree”; “I agree, Y, but don’t you think . . .?”; “Thanks for your tolerance”; “I’m telling you this sincerely without meaning to offend you”; “I hope you respond”; and “This is my opinion”) that can be modeled for students and even required in order to maintain even-handed dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

It is worthwhile noting that, within all language *Cultura* classes, students in the United States, who belong to a “third” culture, often spontaneously assume the role of a mediator between the two cultures being explored, as exemplified by the following example from an M.I.T.–INT forum in spring 2001 where students discuss formality versus informality in body language, modes of address, and food. In his first posting, Ryan clearly identifies himself as a foreign student:

Hi, I am from Saudi Arabia, and I have to admit how shocked I was when I came to study at the states. I found that students call teachers by their first names, which is something unheard of back in Saudi Arabia. What shocked me even more is having students raise their feet in the face of professors or teachers!! I still remember the first time this happened in front of me at an American high school and the teacher didn’t say anything. I guess it is a cultural thing. Even though I haven’t really worked in Saudi Arabia, but I think it is a bit more formal than the business environment here. I see my father’s colleagues calling him “Engineer . . .” and similarly with the doctors and other professions. The word Mr. or Mrs. is pronounced naturally when meeting older people. . . .

However, in his next posting, Ryan shifts his position and starts explaining the American point of view to the French students:

Hi again Sophie, that is an interesting point you made about sharing the food. I never thought of that as a concern here in the states. Generally, people are not obliged to invite their neighbors for the food they have. Actually, from what I have seen is that you are not really expected to invite the people around you for food except if you were generous. I can see how inviting your neighbors can cause problems in lectures, but I guess that problem doesn’t exist. I certainly like the system of eating in class. I am always busy during the day and I enjoy it when I bring my sandwich and drink to lecture and eat it without being in a rush like as usual :)

His dual position as both an outsider and insider to American culture gives him a unique vantage point and enables him to play a mediating role between the two cultures examined.

## Future Directions and Sustainability

As new exchanges develop and additional modules are added, it will be useful to have all versions of *Cultura* (regardless of language or content) available through a centralized gateway that would allow access by interested faculty to all materials. Creating this resource entails mirroring all documents from the various versions. This will provide a vital repository of materials available to interested parties, including: links to the original *Cultura* web site at M.I.T. (along with discussions archives and content modules developed for French); zipped versions of HTML, *WebCT* or *Blackboard* packages for French, Russian, and Spanish; templates and suggestions for the creation of new language versions; updated pedagogical guides and suggestions for classroom activities and assessment; and a centralized, moderated teachers' forum to facilitate exchange of ideas and classroom materials. All these would help solve technical and pedagogical issues as they arise. Colleagues using *Cultura* would be encouraged to add their own archives at the end of any experiment, and teachers or researchers would be able to access and analyze data from any or all of the versions. The central website could be listed in professional web directories.

From its inception, *Cultura* was conceived as a methodology, not a technological product; therefore, it has evolved to meet changing technological standards. The number of faculty using *Cultura* has grown with the appearance of new discussion software, more sophisticated institutional IT systems, and greater instructor familiarity with technology. These adaptations have taken unexpected forms. Some institutions have been using *Cultura* content modules over several semesters, while others do not have a partner school and use only archived discussions from previous exchanges. In any case, new technology, if it is deemed pedagogically desirable, can be readily integrated into the existing design (with the caveat that introducing more advanced technological components is not always logistically possible in both countries). MP3s or voice discussion boards like *Wimba* would allow students to post voice messages alongside text in the discussion boards, which would give them access to features of postings (pronunciation, intonation) not apparent when they appear in written form only. Similarly, video recording would permit posting video clips to illustrate student comments with originally produced footage, e.g., scenes from daily life, short documentaries, interviews, or family footage that could complement the image database.

## Conclusion

Despite the many challenges described here, *Cultura* offers a way for students in a language/culture class to work at becoming what Byram calls "truly intercultural learners" (1998, p. 61). We believe that our approach, coupled with the use of the Internet and its online communication tools, can foster productive collaboration with foreign partners. *Cultura* provides conditions in which students can begin to access the complexities of both C1 and C2 attitudes, values and frames of reference as well as understand more about themselves. Student construction of C2 and L2 is part of a process extending far beyond the bounds of a university semester, year,

or degree program. It requires reflection on oneself and others, contact with multiple sources of information and perspectives, and opportunities for interpretation of texts, broadly understood. No one academic experience will “produce” interculturally competent students. However, a project like *Cultura* can affect this process substantively. Carefully implemented, it does not reduce cultural knowledge to capsules of discrete facts; it encourages students to explore both individual and socially constructed understandings of cultural phenomena; most importantly, it ties every insight to the culture that is language.

## Notes

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1. *Cultura*'s developers welcome new research. All French experiments have been archived since 1997, and that material represents a rich source of information for those interested in intercultural collaborations. Other languages' questionnaires and forums will be archived during 2005. We ask interested parties to contact us at: [cultura@mit.edu](mailto:cultura@mit.edu) or visit our website at <http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/>
2. These are the titles of two of Edward T. Hall's books.
3. The Spanish and Russian versions, which are in a much earlier stage of development, are currently limited to questionnaires and online forums.
4. Teachers never post on the forums themselves and do not control the content of postings, although, in rare cases, they have contacted students individually off-site about significant breaches of netiquette or posting in the wrong language. Any instructor “regulation” of student online activity occurs at the level of project design (for example, the fact that every word association item has its own forum, which helps ensure that discussions will stay on-topic) or as part of the pedagogy of *Cultura*'s implementation (giving clear instructions on how to use the site, budgeting enough time for questions to be asked and answered on the forums, requiring students to demonstrate that they are “digging deeper” by asking more—and more specific—questions).
5. In the case of the M.I.T. French-American exchange, these differences include: (1) the importance of the affective dimension in U.S. American culture (words such as “feelings,” “considerate,” and “caring” coming up frequently in the context of professional as well as personal relationships, as opposed to the prevalent notions of competence, *savoir* “knowledge” and *savoir-faire* “know-how” for the French); (2) the importance the French seem to attach to social norms, their notion of balance, their desire not to go beyond certain limits (as seen in their definition of “freedom”) and their frequent criticism of American reactions, which they often deem excessive (as illustrated by the propensity of Americans to want to call the police if a mother is seen slapping her child); (3) the tendency of Americans to want to avoid confrontation when dealing with someone who makes loud comments in a movie theater or who cuts in the line in front of them, unlike the French who will not hesitate to directly confront the “culprit,” an attitude which the American students tend to see as paradoxical because it is viewed by them as being very “rude” and inconsistent with the frequent French emphasis on politeness; and (4) the tendency in U.S. American culture to be much more explicit in most situations (except, students discover, when interpersonal relationships are at stake).
6. All French, Russian, and Spanish postings and other student writing have been translated into English for the purpose of this article and are marked “translation.”

7. "Hits" designates the total number of times students linked to the discussion section of the website. It also includes about 102 hits from a guest account set up early during the semester before some students were fully registered. "Averages" are based on 10 French students at the INT and 19 students at Brown. Students who dropped the course after two weeks are not included in any figures, which explains a small discrepancy in numbers.
8. Another possible explanation for the variation could be cultural; the impulse for immediate and frank expression of opinion being more characteristic of the French, versus an unwillingness on the part of the U.S. students to be perceived as too blunt.
9. Opinion polls from the *Public Opinion Foundation* (<http://www.fom.ru/>) have already been used in the Brown Russian class. One idea for parallel films, suggested in *Cinema for Russian Conversation* (Kagan, Kashper, and Morozova 2005) are the annual holiday classics *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Irony of Fate [Ironiia sud'by (ili c liogkim parom!)]*, both of which invoke cultural assumptions about family, friends, and daily life in the respective countries.
10. This happened as soon as political topics like the war in Chechnya or the Putin presidency were raised in the *Russia/Rossii* forum. While discussion of current events is not *per se* the purpose of the exchange, U.S.-Russian dialogue inevitably carried as baggage the central fact of the two countries' twentieth century relations: the Cold War and its aftermath. Discussion of Russia, as guided by the U.S. students, was itself a reflection of how reporting on Russia takes place in the United States. In both years, "What do you think of Putin?" quickly appeared in the *Russia/Rossii* forums and held center stage. In 2002, the exchange coincided with the Moscow hostage crisis at the musical *Nord-Ost*, which generated lengthy discussion of the war in Chechnya.
11. This observation relates to first- and second-year Russian texts in common use at U.S. institutions. First-year texts include *Golosa* (Robin, Evans-Romaine, Shatalina, and Robin 2003), *Nachalo* (Lubensky, Ervin, McLellan, and Jarvis 2002), *Russian Stage One: Live from Moscow* (Davidson, Gor, and Lekich 1997) and *Troika* (Nummikoski 1996). Second year texts include *V puti: Russian Grammar in Context* (Kagan and Miller 1996), and *Russian Stage Two: Welcome Back!* (Martin and Zaitsev 2001).
12. This occurred on both sides of the exchange, but for different reasons. Most of the Russian students chose shorter postings because they could visit the computer lab only once per week. In both years, Russians who had outside access to the Internet contributed the overwhelming majority of postings.
13. Since 1997, the number of Brown students who indicate on start of term surveys an intention to study in Russia has nearly always been less than 50% of the total, and in any given year there are fewer than ten students at all levels who actually do so (total semester enrollment of students in first through fourth year from 1995-2004 has ranged between 38 and 55). Nationally, according to the *Institute of International Education's* 2004 Open Doors report, the most recent figure for US students enrolled in study abroad programs in Russia was 1521 (<http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=50138>), which is a mere fraction of total undergraduate enrollment in the language; the latest *Modern Language Association* figure (2002) for undergraduate language enrollments in Russian at all levels is 20,208 (Welles 2004, p. 10).

14. English L1 students of Russian find the compound imperfective forms—*byt'* “to be” + infinitive—more familiar and often have a hard time recognizing conjugated perfectives as future at all. Nearly all the Russian answers, contrary to U.S. students' expectations, used perfective future verbs.
15. More detailed examples can be found here: <http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/classroom/essai/essai1.html>
16. For the differences between intercultural and more recent transcultural approaches that emphasize the “interwoven character of cultures as a common condition for the whole world” see Risager (1998, p. x).
17. Linguistic differences based on geography, such as the use of “y'all” by Brown students from the South and the comparison to the Spanish (not Mexican) *vosotros* “you” (second person plural, familiar) were also mentioned.
18. This is a very simplified summary of a system that, as the UDLA students elaborated in forum discussions, affects not only the police, but all levels of government and public life in Mexico, including language (e.g. *la mordida* or “the bite,” i.e. the money that Mexicans pay police in order to avoid getting tickets).
19. While students were given no instruction in this and there has been no formal statistical analysis, it is fair to say that these kinds of “bridging” strategies were frequently used in the forums: in a random sampling of 112 postings (there were 733 in all), 63 included formulae of greeting, politeness, agreement, from simple expressions of thanks (*gracias* “thanks”) to enthusiastic ratification (“Hola, Maria, I think your comment is very wise.”).

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