

Use of New Media in Intercultural Communication Instruction

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## Abstract

The context of Intercultural Communication has changed drastically since its establishment due to advancements in information and communication technologies. The authors conducted an online survey among instructors of intercultural communication courses to inquire into the use of new media as a tool for teaching. We found that about half of the respondents used new media to facilitate online interactions of their students with other students, experts, and individuals with diverse backgrounds from other countries, in order to foster intercultural communication competence. Despite the perceived benefits, the instructors reported many challenges in the use of new media for teaching Intercultural Communication. This research presents the diverse ways in which new media are incorporated in the teaching of Intercultural Communication and identifies the future direction of research focused on development of Intercultural Communication instruction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Keywords:* New media, intercultural communication, online interactions, information and communication technologies

### Use of New Media in Intercultural Communication Instruction

In 1962, Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village” (p. 31) to describe the situation where the world would become a small community due to the development of electronic communication technologies. Today, in the 21st century, our life revolves around the Internet: people are connected through a variety of new media, such as email, social network services, instant messaging apps, and smartphones. It is common for people to conduct business meetings, job interviews, and work collaboratively using text messages and videoconferences with those who live in different countries and have different cultural backgrounds. Thus, the context of intercultural communication has changed drastically since the publication in 1959 of Edward T. Hall’s *The Silent Language*. This book is considered to have established the field of Intercultural Communication.

The authors were interested in finding out whether the teaching of Intercultural Communication has undergone a change in the way people communicate with each other after the advent of the Internet. A few decades ago, working overseas, travelling abroad, and watching international news coverage used to be the primary means of intercultural encounters. Today, we conduct business through email and videoconferencing, take online courses as international students, and apply for jobs in foreign countries on the web. It is easy to invite foreign nationals to the classroom using new media and students get to learn about other cultures first hand without leaving the classroom. Do instructors of Intercultural Communication take advantage of these Internet based technologies? If so, what do they perceive as the benefits of incorporating new media for teaching Intercultural Communication? If the instructors do not take advantage of Internet based technologies for the teaching of Intercultural Communication, what is the reason for this?

To seek answers to these questions, the authors attempted to inquire into the use of new media in the teaching of Intercultural Communication by conducting an online survey.

Answers to these questions will help develop the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication courses. A better understanding of the various ways in which new media are used will provide teachers of Intercultural Communication new ideas in how to enhance their teaching methods.

### **Literature Review**

After reviewing the existing literature on the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication, three types of teaching approaches were identified: “lecture,” “activity,” and “interaction with unfamiliar others.” This classification was arrived at on the basis of the source of information: teachers, classmates, and individuals from different cultures. In a lecture, the teacher is the one who provides information to students. In student activities, the students reflect and create knowledge in class. In interaction with unfamiliar others, students interact with those with different cultural or ethnic background from their own.

The most common approach taken for the teaching of Intercultural Communication is “lecture.” Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) classified the different approaches to intercultural training and argued that the typical approach used is the didactic approach consisting of lectures. They called the lecture-based approach as the “university model,” where professors share information regarding the differences and similarities of other cultures with regards to American culture. In 1986, Beebe and Biggers conducted a survey of introductory courses in Intercultural Communication at U.S. colleges. They found that most of the class time was devoted to lectures, while guest speakers, videotaping, case studies, small group discussion, and field trips consisted of only about 10% of the class time.

The second approach is “activity.” According to Gudykunst and Hammer (1983), the “university model” was replaced by the “experiential” approach, which makes use of activities. The activities are designed to familiarize students with situations they might encounter in foreign cultures. These include simulation games such as Barnga (Thiagarajan &

Steinwachs, 1990) and *BaFa BaFa* (Shirts, 1977). In classroom activities, students are encouraged to share their perspectives, stories, and emotions through reflection and discussions.

The third approach is “interaction with others.” Edward Hall encouraged his trainees to meet people belonging to different cultures as a means of learning how to communicate with others (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). When guest lectures and field trips allow students to interact with individuals from other cultures, these teaching methods will be categorized under “interaction with others.” In this paper, this approach is further divided into two categories: “face-to-face interaction with others” and “online interaction with others.”

“Face to face interaction with others” is the category of teaching method where students actually engage in face-to-face interactions with those whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own. Additionally, instructors can ask students to interview an international student on campus or an expatriate for a class assignment. One of the most common examples of this approach is the study abroad program.

“Online interaction with others” is the category that the authors would like to investigate more in order to understand whether teachers of Intercultural Communication take advantage of new media as a way to help students interact and engage with others. Kume and Hasegawa (1966) conducted an experiment using an innovative method of teaching cross-cultural communication that consisted of real-time video conferencing between Australian and Japanese universities for the first time. Brown, Cummins, Figueroa, and Sayers (1998) reviewed successful cross-cultural collaborative learning projects using communication technologies and stated: “the students have become more aware of their own culture as a result of the contrast they have experienced with another.” In 2003, Chia, Poe, and Young (2011) piloted a real-time intercultural communication course between Chinese and American universities using video-conferencing and IRC chat, which developed into a global

education network called Global Partners in Education (GPE). The authors are part of this network and have taught Intercultural Communication courses coordinated by GPE (<http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/globalinitiatives/>) for 7 years. These studies suggest that online intercultural encounters help students gain intercultural competence including sensitivity to different cultures, openness to the unfamiliar, and skills to cope with issues arising from cultural differences.

### **Procedure**

In order to find out whether instructors of Intercultural Communication take advantage of new media, the authors developed an online survey which consisted of questions regarding background of the instructor and the class, teaching methods, and perceived benefits and challenges of the use of new media in the teaching of Intercultural Communication. The authors sent emails explaining the survey, providing a link to the online survey, and inviting members to participate. Listservs of members of the National Communication Association, the Center for Intercultural Dialogue (<https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/>) and the Center for Intercultural New Media Research (<http://www.interculturalnewmedia.com/>) were all used for contact potential survey participants.

### **Results**

#### **Respondents and Classes**

The survey was conducted from February 27, 2017 to May 7, 2017 and 48 instructors responded. After eliminating deficient data, 38 responses were obtained. Out of these 38 respondents, 11 were male (29%), 26 were female (68%), and 1 person did not specify their gender. The age of the respondents ranged from 27 to 79, with the average age being 47 years ( $SD = 11.8$ ). The mode was 40 which constituted 49% of the respondents. The academic positions of the respondents included adjunct/part-time instructor (8%), full time instructor

(5%), assistant professor (18%), associate professor (29%), full professor (24%), and others such as adjunct professors, Ph.D. candidates, and teaching assistants (13%). Out of the total number of respondents<sup>1</sup>, 27 were from the communication field (71%), 2 from psychology, 1 from anthropology, 1 from linguistics, 1 from business, and the rest belonged to other departments including education, international education, cultural studies, and a multinational company.

All the respondents stated that they taught courses related to culture and communication. As reported by the respondents, Intercultural Communication was the most frequently taught class, followed by other courses including Cross-cultural Communication, Culture and Communication, International Communication, Intercultural Business Communication, Global Communication, International Studies, Inter-ethnic Communication, and Study Abroad. The number of students in their classes varied from 1 to 240. The average class size was 46.

### **Teaching Methods**

**Face-to-face intercultural interaction.** To the question “In your intercultural communication class, do you provide an opportunity for your students to engage in actual face-to-face intercultural encounters?” There were 14 respondents (36%) who answered “always,” 11 respondents (28%) answered “most of the time,” and 8 respondents (21%) answered “sometimes.” Nobody answered “never,” but there were 5 respondents who did not answer. Surprisingly, 86% of the respondents reported that they had created opportunities for face-to-face encounter.

In order to find out how instructors facilitated such encounters, we asked a multiple answer question: “How do you provide the opportunity for your students to engage in actual intercultural encounters?” The results are shown in Table 1. As Table 1 clearly shows, many of the instructors of Intercultural Communication who participated in the study facilitated

interactions between their students and those with different cultural backgrounds. Some instructors invited guest speakers from other cultures so that their students could hear authentic stories directly from the culturally-different others. The guest speakers included international students, colleagues, or scholars; individuals from the community with different cultural backgrounds; country experts and businesspersons returning from foreign assignments; visually impaired persons; and gang members, among others. One of the instructors teaches international students, so the class consists of students representing different cultures. Additionally, they encourage their students to get first-hand encounters with the local community by assigning homework outside of the classroom. The assignments include having students interact with prison inmates, attendees of international festivals, and customers at local bars.

In addition, they help their students build relationships with the cultural others by matching them with international students. They stated that they coordinate meetings between their students and ESL students or other international students on campus, or assign group projects with exchange students. Other activities include watching foreign movies, observing in-group/out-group behavior in various school settings, participating in festivals, and visiting temples of different religions and international restaurants, in order to interact with individuals belonging to other cultures.

***Benefits and challenges of face-to-face intercultural interaction.*** None of the instructors answered “never” to the question of whether they enable their students to meet the culturally others face-to-face and most of them favored face-to-face meeting with individuals belonging to different cultures. When asked about the benefits and challenges of face-to-face interaction in Intercultural Communication instruction, some of the respondents stated that they think that students learn from experience and that they believed face-to-face interaction is necessary for students to learn how to communicate with others. Moreover, they stated that

face-to-face encounters help students understand the concepts of Intercultural Communication better as it allows them to apply theory to practice, observe nonverbal cues, and discover contrasting perspectives on various issues.

As for the challenges, some of the respondents expressed lack of access to individuals belonging to different cultures. While it is easy to arrange face-to-face encounters in a university that has a large population of international students, it is not easy to implement this opportunity in other areas where guest speakers are not readily available. One respondent stated that she did not learn about this pedagogy in her graduate program and that it did not occur to her that face-to-face intercultural encounters could fit with the traditional lecture style.

**Computer-mediated intercultural interaction.** To the question “In your intercultural communication class, do you provide an opportunity for your students to engage in computer-mediated intercultural encounters?” There were 53% (17 respondents) who stated that they used new media. Out of these, 7 respondents (22%) answered “always,” 2 respondents (6%) answered “most of the time,” and 8 respondents (25%) answered “sometimes.” However, 47%, (15 respondents) chose “never,” and 6 respondents chose not to answer. Contrary to the responses to the question on face-to-face interaction, half the respondents to this question stated that they have not incorporated new media in their teaching. Those who answered “never” explained that they “never thought of it,” “never had an opportunity to do so,” that they thought it was “unnecessary for this course,” that they “never established any reliable/viable counterpart outside of the U.S.” The other negative comments on computer-mediated intercultural interaction were that “the encounters could be replicated on campus without using computers,” and that there were “always computer issues either on our campus or the other sides.”

In order to find out how instructors facilitate such encounters, we asked the following multiple answer question: “How do you provide the opportunity for your students to engage in computer-mediated intercultural encounters?” The results are shown in Table 2. Compared to Table 1, Table 2 shows less number of online activities implemented. Nonetheless, more than half the respondents incorporate computer-mediated intercultural interactions in their teaching, which is quite impressive given that the use of new media in the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication is not yet taught in graduate programs of Intercultural Communication. Many indicated that they invite experts from several continents to interact with their students through Skype or Zoom. They also collaborate with fellow universities and conduct online discussions and activities which involve international individuals. The students collaborate online to create and test intercultural games. Skype, Zoom, Email, QQ, and WhatsApp are used to facilitate these interactions. Another program used is called Soliya (<https://www.soliya.net/>) and connects classrooms around the world.

***Benefits and challenges of computer-mediated intercultural interaction.*** We enquired about the benefits of computer-mediated interaction in Intercultural Communication instruction by asking, “What do you believe, if any, are the benefits of using new media such as video-conferencing in intercultural communication courses? Please mark all that apply, and write any other benefits that you may see.” The results are shown in Table 3. As shown in Table 3, no respondents indicated that using new media in intercultural communication instruction lacked any benefits. In other words, all of the instructors saw some value in incorporating new media while teaching intercultural communication. It was also stated by 23 respondents that computer-mediated intercultural encounters are beneficial, because new media can help connect people around the world. This benefit was recognized by 60% of the respondents. Out of these, 16 respondents believed that this would enable students to receive immediate feedback from others and 5 respondents thought that this would enable students to

learn experientially. Other answers stated that communication using new media is part of the students' life in the contemporary world and it is very real for millennial students, although most of the respondents left the text entry blank.

The respondents were also asked about the challenges of computer-mediated interaction in Intercultural Communication pedagogy: "What do you believe, if any, are the challenges of using new media such as video-conferencing in intercultural communication courses? Please mark all that apply, and write any other challenges that you may see." The results are shown in Table 4. Most respondents cited technical difficulties as the biggest challenge. Intercultural exchanges facilitated by new media require reliable facilities that provide a fast Internet connection along with audiovisual equipment. In addition, technological support for instructors is necessary because instructors of Intercultural Communication are not usually trained to be proficient in communication technologies and audio-visual equipment. As a result, they are unable to keep up with the rapidly developing communication technologies. One respondent described this issue by saying, "I have done this in the past, but it was too time-consuming and always led to computer issues either on our campus or on the other sides. The encounters could be replicated on campus without using computers." The language barrier has also been cited as a challenge for online intercultural communication. This issue is not evident when guest speakers are invited to the classroom directly, as they are likely to be able to communicate in English. However, when guest speakers are invited into the classroom via new media from different parts of the world, they often include foreigners who were not as proficient in English as are international students in American colleges or foreign nationals in the community. Time differences in class times is also an issue, because students should be able to meet foreigners living in other countries while classes are in session. One respondent noted that "having a 9 am class means that one would need a European counterpart to be available in the afternoon, or a Middle

Eastern or Asian person late at night, which is usually not feasible.” Other challenges included students’ willingness to communicate, lack of previous experience with the use of new media, availability of international partners, and lack of sufficient time to make arrangements.

***Future of computer-mediated intercultural interaction.*** Lastly, the respondents were asked, “Would you be interested in providing more opportunities for your students to have computer-mediated intercultural encounters in your classes?” The results are shown in Table 5.

Those who favored computer-mediated intercultural encounters included 13 respondents (34%) who answered “definitely yes” and 7 respondents (18%) who answered “probably yes,” while about half the respondents did not favor it or did not answer the question. Compared to the positive perception toward face-to-face intercultural exchanges, the perception toward computer-mediated intercultural exchanges is yet to be determined, as 42% of the respondents answered “might or might not,” or did not answer.

The authors did not ask the respondents why they felt that way, but it would probably be because some of the respondents explained that they had “never thought of using new media” when asked if they arranged for computer-mediated intercultural encounters. The reasons for why some of them are not willing to incorporate new media may vary. The reasons may be due to lack of training, lack of technical support, or lack of access to international partners. This topic needs to be investigated further to determine the reasons for this, because only by knowing them would it be possible for us to make use of the communication tools for the 21st century. It needs to be investigated further why 13 respondents chose to answer “definitely yes.” Their accounts of how they overcome the challenges of new media might help in developing the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication.

### **Conclusion**

Results show that the context of Intercultural Communication instruction has changed after the advent of the Internet along with related information and communication technologies. About half of the respondents answered that they use new media to facilitate interactions between their students and those from different cultural backgrounds. They take advantage of the benefits of new media by arranging for the students to listen to lectures by guest speakers, have discussions with students in foreign universities, build relationships, and work collaboratively on global projects. Their use of new media in Intercultural Communication was so creative and impressive that they should deserve more attention. It is unfortunate that about half the respondents seemed to be unaware of the opportunity that new media can bring to intercultural communication classes. The results of this survey clearly show that use of new media is taking roots in the current pedagogy of Intercultural Communication as against the results of the study conducted by Beebe and Biggers in 1986 that reported no mention of the use of new media in intercultural communication classes.

The survey also shows that there are many issues that need to be addressed in order for instructors to implement computer-mediated intercultural interaction. Compared to face-to-face intercultural interaction, computer-mediated interaction entails technical and language issues and requires more time because of lack of reliable international partners and scheduling difficulties. In addition, this study shows that about half the respondents are willing to use new media while the rest are not. We discussed the reasons for these conflicting perceptions and suggested future direction of research to enquire into the different perceptions toward new media in Intercultural Communication instruction. It is possible that the instructors need assistance in technical training, finding international partners, scheduling with partners in different time zones, or possibly with developing more creative ideas for incorporating new media in Intercultural Communication.

However, these findings are not totally conclusive. Not only was the size of the survey very small, but there was also a selection bias because we depended on volunteer participation and the respondents who volunteered are more likely to be interested in the use of new media in Intercultural Communication instruction creating additional bias. Therefore, another survey needs to be conducted to reach out to more instructors of Intercultural Communication in order for us to generalize our findings. Nonetheless, we believe we were able to provide useful information to those interested in advancing the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication.

We live in the age of the Internet, where for the first time in human history, we might be able to promote interactions between cultures by overcoming the physical distance that divides us. We believe that it is imperative to incorporate new media into the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication not only because there are benefits to it but also because it has become a part of our lives. Shuter (2012) has pointed out that communication researchers have not paid attention to the impact of new media on intercultural communication and that the use of new media is a new frontier in intercultural communication. Knowing how instructors of Intercultural Communication perceive new media, what challenges they experience, and how new media can be incorporated in the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication, this will ultimately help equip students with competence in intercultural communication.

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Table 1

*Responses to Question, "How do you provide the opportunity for your students to engage in actual intercultural encounters?"*

Ways to create face-to-face intercultural encounters	Number of Respondents
Inviting guest speakers into class	24
Face-to-face interview assignments	15
Matching students with international students for multiple meetings	12
Combination of the above	9
Others	10

Table 2

Responses to Question, “How do you provide the opportunity for your students to engage in computer-mediated intercultural encounters?”

Ways to create computer-mediated intercultural encounters	Number of Respondents
Lecture exchange/Video-conferencing by Skype, etc.	6
Discussion/In-class activity using Skype, etc.	6
Collaborative assignments	7
Texting by Facebook, etc.	4
Email exchanges	6
Combination of the above	3
Others	4

Table 3

*Perceived Benefits of Using New Media in Intercultural Communication Courses*

Possible perceived benefits	Number of Respondents
No benefits	0
Connecting people in other parts of the world	23
Instant feedback from the other	16
Experiential learning opportunity	5
Others	16

Table 4

*Perceived Challenges of Using New Media in Intercultural Communication Courses*

perceived challenges	Number of Respondents
Technical difficulties	20
Language barrier	15
Time difference	6
No challenges	1
Other	13

Table 5

*Interests in Use of New Media in Intercultural Communication Courses*

Response	Number of Respondents
Definitely yes	13
Probably yes	7
Might or might not	4
Probably not	2
Definitely not	0
No answer	12

<sup>1</sup> We did not ask nationalities of the instructors or which country that they teach currently, although we assume that most of the participants are those who resides in the United States, as the participants were recruited using American-based academic organizations such as NCA (National Communication Association) list serve.