

Creating Synergy between Collectivism and Individualism in Cyberspace:

A Comparison of Online Communication Patterns between Hong Kong and U.S. Students

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Abstract

In recent years, studies have proposed the use of intercultural communication to promote understanding among students across geographic distances and foster students' global awareness and international experience. This study compared Hong Kong students' WebCT discussion postings with those of U.S. students to investigate differences in their online communication patterns. Results showed that while Asian students were more interactive by inviting other students' opinions, American students were less responsive and more interested in stating their own views. In addition, American students tended to be direct and straightforward in expressing their positions whereas Asian participants used ambiguous language and conveyed their thoughts implicitly.

Key words: intercultural communication, online discussion, collectivism, individualism

Introduction

Computer-mediated communication technology has enhanced the ability to connect people from anywhere in the world by facilitating the distribution of ideas and information across distances. This development has provided new opportunities to improve learning about and from others who share similar interests, but who have different cultures and life experiences. Many universities in the United States have established intercultural distance learning partnerships with Asian countries to promote multicultural understanding and to explore the benefits of diversified learning environments (see Nickel 2001; Shih & Cifuentes 2001).

Teachers and students are enthusiastic about the benefits of learning with partners beyond traditional classroom boundaries, but there are important communication issues to consider when planning distance learning with partners from different cultures. These communication issues extend beyond levels of written language proficiency and technical competence with computers. For example, researchers have noted cultural differences in patterns of communication as a significant factor in online discussions between university students in different countries (Liang & McQueen 2000; Shih & Cifuentes 2001). Case studies of American middle school students from different cultural backgrounds also provide insights into the complex role of cultural differences in communication patterns and learning styles and emphasize the importance of teacher planning and scaffolding to maximize learning for students (Cifuentes & Murphy 2000; Freedman & Liu 1996).

For successful partnerships and learning through distance education to take place, educators must pay attention to the cultures of their students. Culture is an important consideration because, as Scollon and Scollon (2000) state, cultural values and norms determine forms of communication of different groups. In his study of cultural diversity in instructional design, Jian (2001) emphasizes the need for designers, trainers, or teachers to take into consideration the cultures of students when designing and delivering educational technology, because these students bring "culturally based rules, expectations, value systems, and educational needs to the learning environment" (Jian 2001:300).

With the growing interest in forming learning partnerships between the U.S. and Asian countries, there have been consistent efforts to understand differences in communication patterns between American and Asian cultures. Hofstede (1986, 1997) provides insights into major differences between the two cultures. According to Hofstede's perspective on collectivism versus individualism, the Asian culture is a collective culture where people value harmony with others and emphasize human relationships. In addition, influenced by the teachings of Confucius, called Confucian dynamism, Asian people pursue a long-term orientation in life, where they believe in working hard to acquire skills and education in preparation for the future. On the other hand, in the American culture people seek the independence of each individual, and the society is loosely connected. These cultural differences between the two groups influence their communication patterns. Hall and Hall (1989) and Gudykunst et al. (1988) note that Asian people, seeking harmony in a group, tend to avoid direct expression of their own intentions and positions. In contrast, American people use more explicit language and more direct expression of their thoughts.

The existing literature on this topic raises the following question: Can the communication patterns of these two cultures be observed in online discussions? The little research addressing the differences in online communication patterns between American and Asian students makes it difficult to answer this question. In contrast, given a heightened importance of intercultural communication, research in this area represents a vital step towards ensuring the active exchange of knowledge between the U.S. and Asia. In response to the need for empirical examinations of this topic, this study investigated how differently or similarly American and Asian students communicated in WebCT threaded discussion forums, specifically focusing on differences with the following three guiding questions: (a) how actively did the students participate?; (b) in what manner did the students respond to a previous message?; and (c) in what manner did the students add substance to the conversation?

Methodology

This study observed 83 undergraduate students at a western university in the U.S. enrolled in an introductory chemistry course and 59 students in Hong Kong (H.K.) taking the same course through a distance education program offered by the university. The U.S. and H.K. students, grouped separately from each other, were required to participate in WebCT threaded discussion forums for eight weeks. They were asked to post at least one message per week to receive 20% of their total points for the term. All the H.K. students were fluent in English and comfortable discussing topics in English. For the first week, both the U.S. and H.K. students were asked to post their personal introductions, which were to help the establishment of a friendly learning community and to serve as a trial run for learning to use WebCT. For the following three weeks, the students discussed the first topic based on environmental concerns. For the next three weeks, they discussed the second topic on health and medical concerns. The students then evaluated their online discussions through an online survey during the last week. The students were asked three questions to address what they liked and disliked about their online discussions and what they would want to change about the online forums.

In order to explore the first research question about differences in student participation, we compared the number of pages visited, number of posts read, and number of messages submitted between the U.S. and H.K. students. We then analyzed the content of the student messages to examine our second research question about in what manner the students responded to previous messages. Three different types of response were identified: agreement, disagreement, and offering an alternative. Some students responded to others' posts by agreeing to their arguments (e.g., "I also agree with the idea that Eric had about it increasing cancer"). Some students responded by disagreeing (e.g., "Some people mentioned that air quality is a more serious issue, but I would disagree"). Some students responded with alternative views based on previous messages (e.g., "I have enjoyed reading your comment, but I will take a difference

stance on it"). We examined how differently or similarly the two cultural groups responded to their peers' comments, and we coded them according to the three types of responses.

To investigate the third research question about in what manner the students added substance to the conversation, we coded the student messages using eight event categories identified by Jeong (2003) (belief, evaluation, experience, fact, hypothetical action, literature, prediction, and summary) and four additional categories that emerged as a result of the data analysis (example, question, reason, and solution).

Based on Jung (2003) and Seo (2007), the categories were defined as follows. A comment based on personal beliefs or principles was coded as "belief." A message judging the accuracy or likelihood of an argument was treated as "evaluation." A post supporting an argument with an example was regarded as "example." A statement based on personal experiences, actions, or observations was categorized as "experience." A comment based on factual information was regarded as "fact." A post describing a personal preferred course of action was treated as "hypothetical action." A message citing information from articles, books, or reports was coded as "literature." A statement predicting consequences, implications, or problems was categorized as "prediction." A comment posing a question to consider was treated as "question." A statement addressing why something is, should be, or will be was coded as "reason." A post proposing how a problem may be solved was categorized as "solution." A statement reviewing or synthesizing issues raised in the discussion was regarded as "summary."

In addition, the students' evaluations collected during the final discussion week were analyzed to examine their assessment of the online experience. The survey data helped us identify potential factors influencing the results.

Results

Participation

A cultural comparison of student participation between the H.K. group and the U.S. group revealed interesting findings. For the entire discussion period of eight weeks, the H.K. students accessed the forum and visited more pages of the site than the U.S. students, recording a total of 10,575 hits and 22.41 hits per student per week. The U.S. participants totaled 6,997 hits for eight weeks with an average of 10.54 hits per week. The H.K. group also read more messages than the U.S. students; while the U.S. group read a total of 3,832 posts and an average of 5.77 messages, the H.K. students read a total of 4,642 comments and an average of 9.83 messages. In terms of the number of messages submitted, the H.K. students posted more messages than the U.S. students. The H.K. group posted a total of 408 messages for the entire discussion period and an average of 0.86 per student per week, but the U.S. students submitted a total of 446 posts with an average of 0.67. Table 1 shows these differences in student participation.

Table 1

Comparison of H.K. and U.S. Student Participation

Group	Total hits	Average hits	Total posts read	Average posts read	Total posts submitted	Average posts submitted
H.K. (<i>n</i> = 59)	10,575	22.41	4,642	9.83	408	0.86
U.S. (<i>n</i> = 83)	6,997	10.54	3,832	5.77	446	0.67

The lack of participation of the U.S. students was reflected in the student comments collected through the survey. The U.S. students frequently noted their group members' low participation and procrastination as

shown in the following comment:

I feel like the people in my group did not post their messages. I would usually post mine on Friday night, and there weren't very many people who had posted theirs yet. So it didn't give me much to respond to.

Yet another U.S. student noted:

I didn't like how everyone decided to post at the last minute. There were times when I was ready to read the other members' responses, but there weren't any because it was early in the week. Thus, the ability to procrastinate bothered me.

A further analysis of the student comments revealed that one reason for this lack of participation was difficulty in remembering to post. Many of the U.S. students mentioned that they easily forgot to post their messages: "What I disliked was that I had a hard time remembering to do them. I do better when I physically have to hand an assignment in"; "In the hectic life of a student, it's easy to forget some things. I consider myself to be a dedicated student, and I forgot to post on time one week. I nearly had a heart attack." Another reason was the deadline set to be Friday. The U.S. students did not like the fact that the posting was due by Friday at midnight: "I don't think I disliked any of the discussion other than the time it was due. I would have made the discussions due maybe a little later than Friday afternoon"; "Let us do assignments during weekend. Change the due date from Friday to Sunday." Interestingly, the H.K. students had the same requirements and deadlines, but there was no such complaint in their survey comments.

Response

When comparing the H.K. students and the U.S. students, the disagreement percentage of the H.K. group was lower than that of the U.S. students. As shown in Table 2, the H.K. percentage was 1.23% while the U.S. percentage was 1.76%. In addition, when the H.K. students disagreed, they tended to do so indirectly, not using the word "disagree," as in the following posts: "I can see your point, but I think global warming is the most important thing that we have to pay attention to"; "Someone expressed that the factories need to control their pollutants, but I wanted to point out that without many of the factories and their way of production we would lack many resources." On the other hand, the U.S. students were more direct and straightforward when they disagreed: "I have to disagree with some of the assumptions that you have made about global warming, which you clearly based off of this one article alone"; "She said that the air quality is improving. I was wondering where she learned this. It is completely wrong."

Table 2

Comparison of H.K. and U.S. Response Types

H.K.			U.S.		
Agree	Disagree	Alternative	Agree	Disagree	Alternative
34.57	1.23	64.20	29.82	1.76	68.42

A further analysis of the student posts revealed that the H.K. students tended to seek more interaction and more peer approval. The H.K. participants frequently invited others' responses as in the following comments: "Therefore, ozone depletion is a serious problem too. Do you think so?"; "Can you suggest other methods to protect our world?" On the other hand, the U.S. posts tended to be conclusive, not encouraging a further discussion: "It helps out the wildlife, plant life, and us. Anyway those are my feelings on this discussion"; "I strongly doubt that anyone is willing to give up their cars. End of story."

Another interesting finding from the cultural comparison was that when asked what they liked most about their online discussions in the survey, the U.S. students pointed out the fact that the online forum allowed them to express their own views: "I liked being able to discuss my opinion freely"; "It made me think about some issue and really form my own opinion"; "I liked how we discussed important things and were

able to post our opinions towards them." On the other hand, the H.K. students appreciated the characteristic of the online forum allowing them to read other students' views and share ideas with others: "I enjoyed reading other group members' views on the topic"; "We could discuss a topic and know each other. It was nice to meet more new friends and know about their thoughts."

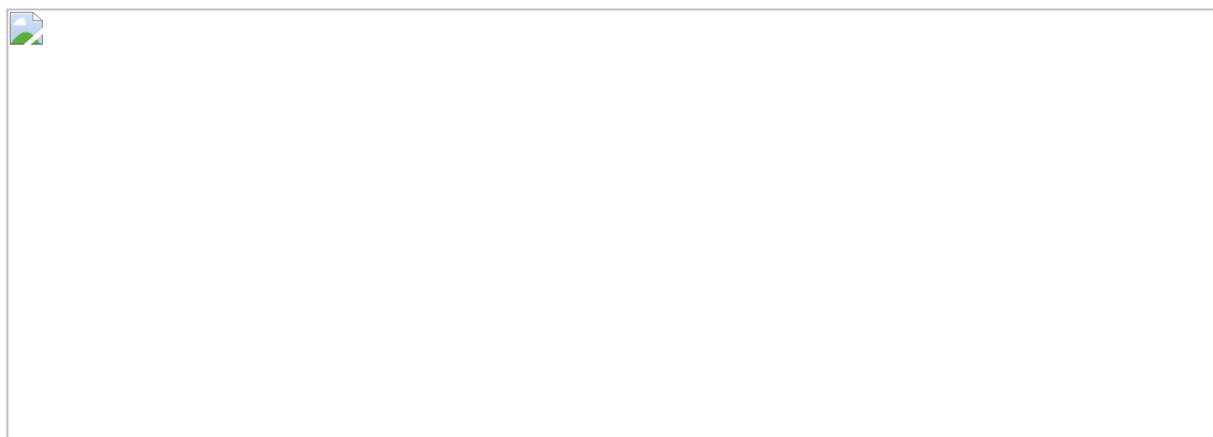
The U.S. students themselves indicated in the survey this tendency of being less interactive and not communicating with others: "The thing I think I disliked the most about the discussion was the lack of discussion. Everyone was posting every week, but it was more like reading individual essays rather than a discussion of a topic"; "I would have liked it better if my group responded more to one another and if we all got more feedback from each other."

Substance

An analysis of the content of the student messages revealed that the students added substance to the conversation in 12 different ways: belief, evaluation, example, experience, fact, hypothetical action, literature, prediction, question, reason, solution, and summary. When comparing the substance types between the H.K. group and the U.S. group, the following differences were discovered.

First, the U.S. students used more diverse ways to add substance than the H.K. students; there were 11 categories in the U.S. group while there were only 8 in the H.K. group. Second, there was no "evaluation" in the H.K. group. This suggests that the H.K. students were more reluctant to judge the accuracy or importance of others' comments in public, thus being less judgmental. Third, the H.K. students used the "question" category more frequently than the U.S. students. This supports the previous finding that the H.K. students were more interaction seeking than the U.S. students. Finally, the U.S. students did not use "summary." They were less group oriented and less interested in integrating their group's opinions and creating their group's consensus. This also confirms the tendency of the U.S. students that they were more independent and less concerned with the group processing. Figure 1 summarizes these differences between the two cultural groups.

Figure 1



Comparison of H.K. and U.S. Substance Types

Be = belief; Eval = evaluation; Ex = example; Exp = experience; Fact = fact;
 Hypo = hypothetical action; Lit = literature; Pre = prediction; Que = question;
 Rea = reason; Sol = solution; Sum = Summary.

Conclusion

A cultural comparison between the H.K. students and the U.S. students revealed some remarkable patterns. First, the H.K. discussants engaged in the discussions more actively than the U.S. students, visiting more pages of the discussion site, reading more messages, and submitting more posts. According to the survey data, the U.S. students often expressed their frustration caused by the low participation and frequent procrastination of their group members while there was no such comment in the H.K. survey data.

Second, the H.K. students were more interactive than the U.S. participants. A content analysis showed that the H.K. students' posts tended to be more response inviting and more approval seeking while the U.S. students' messages were rather independent and conclusive. In terms of response types, the H.K. posts showed a low occurrence of explicit disagreement while the U.S. messages displayed direct confrontation when disagreeing.

Third, evident in the H.K. messages was the students' effort to integrate individual opinions and create a uniform group perspective on the given topic. In other words, the H.K. students were more interested in forming a consensus by posing questions to other members and seeking their approval than the U.S. students. In addition, the H.K. students more often reviewed the main points in other members' messages and summarized other students' views than the U.S. participants.

With the increased use of the Internet as an instructional mode, intercultural communication has now become an important element of student learning experience. A review of the literature found many studies proposing the use of intercultural communication to promote understanding among students across geographic distances and foster students' global awareness and international experience (see Cifuentes & Murphy 2000; Freedman & Liu 1996; Nickel 2001; Shih & Cifuentes 2001).

It is important to note, however, that forming culturally diverse discussion groups requires careful preparation because participants have different values, different communication patterns, and, in many cases, different languages. When poorly constructed and improperly managed, participants from one cultural group may dominate discussions, excluding the voices and experiences of others. Therefore, it is critical to understand how students from different cultures communicate their ideas in order to provide all participants with a successful intercultural experience. Yet there has been little research comparing online communication patterns between American and Asian students. In this regard, this study contributes to the existing literature by exploring differences in interactive manners between the two cultural groups in asynchronous, computer-mediated communication. This study represents a vital step towards ensuring the constructive exchange of knowledge and experiences between the two cultures.

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