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Web Supported Initiatives Facilitate Unprecedented Modes of International Exchange

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WEB SUPPORTED INITIATIVES FACILITATE UNPRECEDENTED MODES OF INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

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One of the advantages of web-supported learning is the sense of global community and interactivity that the global web can provide. Connecting students with technology allows the student to become part of a truly global community. Universities—in particular—are becoming electronically linked and provide venues for exchange and exploration of parallel curricula in many cases. Students can communicate in their native or a foreign language with other students and experts throughout the world using email, listserv discussions, MOO's (Multi-user; Object Oriented database), and MUD's (Multi User Dimension database). Information and ideas can be exchanged rapidly in a plethora of academic and international venues. This type of cyber exchange promotes “intercultural skills and direct experiences” with students from other cultures (ACIIE, 1996, 3).

Global collaboration among students is fostered and the quality of completed assignments is often quite impressive because students have better access to resources and greater reach. Sen. Zell Miller of Georgia notes that fewer than 10 percent of American undergraduates now study abroad, and international students make up only [a fraction] of [U.S.] college enrollment (qtd. in Garmon 2003). This statistic, although specifically referring to the American context, has comparable numbers in the Japanese university setting. These numbers demonstrate the need for venues that can advance intercultural experience. ePALS.com—a global classroom exchange at <http://www.epals.com/> is just such a venue. Students can register by logging onto the ePALS Web site, completing profiles, and accessing discussions specific to their age group. There are discussions for post-secondary students and post-secondary instructors—who can also use the web site in the context of the web-supported (Humanities, for example) classroom. This global exchange is an interesting and productive way for students to learn about other cul-

tures via the web and make friendships that may lead to home stays and study abroad. Jeffery Branzburg points out that “online experiences enhance face-to-face experiences, and vice versa” (2003).

On a more academic note, the global classroom uses e-mail to promote curricular development in higher education. In this project, pairs of faculty from different nations are linked by discipline to jointly develop curricula and jointly teach students in the U.S. and abroad by engaging them in important contemporary debates that are focused on global issues (2003). This project enables faculty to keep up with colleagues in other countries about issues that directly affect their teaching. Students subscribe via an e-mail listserv that can be accessed at uriacc.uri.edu. Such cyber activities are collaborative activities with institutions in other countries; moreover, they do have an impact on the inter-cultural experience of students. These cyber activities can and should affect the undergraduate curriculum, including the English-language curriculum. They involve undergraduates in international activities and collaboration in transnational research. Green notes that “many international collaborations involve relatively few students” (2002), but this is hardly the case with cyber collaborations. Since the late 1990’s, more than 20,000 students in over 100 countries have logged onto ePALS to exchange ideas, learn about other cultures, experience other ways of life, and network (<http://www.epals.com/> 2003) while thousands have also participated in the global classroom (uriacc.uri.edu 2003).

WEB SUPPORTED INITIATIVES PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING AND OPENESS TO OTHER CULTURES

Many experts in international education (like Altbach and Baer) would probably concur with Madeline Green when she points out that “knowledge and first hand experience of those who are culturally different can be a powerful antidote to prejudice and intolerance” and confirms that such exposure can be accomplished “through study or work abroad, service learning, or learning about other cultures in the curriculum and co-curriculum” (p. 16). Students can move beyond the bounds of parochialism by participating in critical conversations and exchanges with other students from all over the world via the web.

In a 1998 study, faculty at Georgia State University concluded that one significant benefit of web supported courses related to improved critical thinking. Developing students’ critical thinking skills is a most important goal for any educational institution, and even more important in the Japanese context since developing these skills have often been overlooked in Japan’s edu-

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cation system. The study pointed out that students are greatly empowered by learning how to access web resources. They frequently become independent learners motivated to explore topics on their own. They also develop strong critical thinking skills due to the interactive nature of the web. Students greatly expand on the information received by making use of links to related sites. Many students will click on a link much more readily than obtaining a print resource identified in a bibliography. Providing instruction on accessing information using the web, on-line databases, and other technology based resources can supplement a university library that may not have adequate resources for students—and web forums can provide international venues in which students can express their views (about war and peace for example) in an international context. A group called Empower Peace coordinated internet videoconferences for students to exchange information about their lives with their international peers. Students from Boston and Bahrain connected via videoconferencing in May and these videoconferences were streamed for the internet (www.empowerpeace.com 2003). Such experiences can also prepare students for future exchange programs—in which they can also complete online work while overseas. They can then continue to communicate and interact with acquaintances abroad via the web. This type of sustained exposure can provide students with new and more expansive ways of looking at the world and their individual role in the world. Such experiences can encourage students to re-examine and re-think conventional and isolationistic perspectives in favor of more international approaches. Web supported learning can help students strengthen and exercise the critical thinking skills that are really at the heart of global competence. The student who thinks critically is not going to accept the arbitrary and prejudicial rhetoric of his/her immediate environment—but will call convention into question by using a dialectical model based upon greater knowledge of the world. The student who knows about a variety of world religions may be less discriminatory than the student who knows nothing of other religions (but has been taught that there is only one legitimate religion, for example). It is easier to interrogate the standards of one's own society if one knows a bit about how things work in other countries and in the world at large. It is easier to accept the “diversity, commonalities, and interdependence” in the world—as well as “the importance of all peoples” if one can find ways of escape that lead to glimpses of other places and encounters with other peoples. These experiences empower and promote growth. Critical thinking also prompts one to “accept the responsibility for global citizenship” (ACIIE, 1996, 3). One has to first move beyond the narrow constraints of parochialism and nationalism to recognize one's place in and responsibility to a greater global domain.

This process of expanding critical thinking is extremely important for young adults at this

historical moment. The future of the global natural environment as well as the global human environment is at stake. Only an increase in awareness (especially in ethnocentric and aggressive First World nations) of other peoples and cultures can prevent further destruction of the global natural environment and further destabilization and marginalization of the Third World.

WEB SUPPORTED LEARNING EQUIPS STUDENTS WITH TECHNOLOGICAL SKILLS REQUIRED IN TODAY'S HIGH TECH GLOBAL WORKFORCE

University students will become savvier in many ways as they explore exciting new cyber horizons. They will learn how to use numerous technology-based applications such as email, listservs, graphics programs, PowerPoint and HTML. These are considered essential skills for today's global workforce. Students who are exposed to web-supported learning become more comfortable with postmodern technology, overcome anxiety regarding technology, and are thus better equipped to explore the potential of technological applications. They are also more likely to recognize global systems and their connectedness if they have some solid intercultural web experience (via cyber immersion, virtual travel, discussion forums, and foreign language exchange). Madeline F. Green argues that "many careers are potentially international and all sectors need employees prepared to work in a globalized world. Communities around the world which were isolated in the past are becoming contributors in the global crossroads; the need for international competence is surfacing in unexpected places" (p. 16).

There is an obvious relationship between the expansion of the information age and the increased demand for information age workers who have both technological as well as intercultural savvy. Universities need to provide workers for the community who possess a more multi-cultural, global perspective. These students who achieve forms of global competency are more effective employees and more effective citizens. The university system can serve students well by providing them with the technological, diplomatic, and foreign language skills required in many economic sectors (like sales, banking, transportation, tourism, and so on). Donald J. Leu explains that globalization, information economies, and new forms of economic competition mean that the problem-information-resolution-communication process now takes place within collaborative teams that (more often than not) rely on the web for information and communication: this means that "The world of work has changed" (2003). He concludes that "to remain static is to become obsolete" and observes that this principle applies to all types of organizations—including educational institutions (2003).

CONCLUSIONS

John Garmon suggests that “After aggressively promoting the open door, colleges must provide high-level skills to students. These should be problem-solving skills that are individualized to fit the needs of each student. Access to cyber learning is as important as is access to on-campus learning. Students should have electronic access to learn at any place and at any time, but also enjoy the opportunity to benefit from highly interactive teaching and learning in the classroom, laboratory, and on the job” (2003). The potential of new technology in college education is revolutionary. Web supported learning has many advantages—and one advantage is that it does contribute to the enhancement of global competencies. Universities can serve their students by capitalizing on the interactivity, the interconnectedness, and the global edge that the web fosters. Colleges and universities can use web course tools to accommodate diverse learning styles, expand learning environments, provoke critical thinking, and equip their students with the technological skills they require to survive in the global workforce. Educators and administrators interested in using the web to enhance global competency in the general education curriculum must continue to focus on goals and outcomes. They need to ask themselves the following questions to help guide their thinking as they move forward into a global and digital age:

To what extent is global learning articulated as a goal of undergraduate education at the institution? How is it defined?

Does the institution's general-education curriculum include global perspectives?

Do collaborative activities with institutions in other countries affect the experience of undergraduates?

Do the international activities of faculty members have an impact on undergraduates?

How does the institution implicitly or explicitly encourage or discourage study abroad?

How does the institution review and assess the global dimension of undergraduate education? (Green and Baer, 2002).

All of these pragmatic questions must be explored if educational institutions hope to promote global competency—web focused or otherwise.

In *The Great Good Place*, Richard Goodwin speaks of Renaissance Florence but seems (at the same time) to capture the very nature of the Postmodern cyber experience: “A thousand minds, a thousand arguments; a lively intermingling of questions, problems, news of the latest happening, jokes; an inexhaustible play of language and thought, a vibrant curiosity; the changeable temper of a thousand spirits by whom every object of discussion is broken into an infinity of sense and significations - all these spring into being, and then are spent. And this is the pleasure of the Florentine public” (<http://www.missouri.edu/~writery/index2.html> 2002). The civic centers of Renaissance Florence were dynamic because there was much emphasis on great conversation and dynamic international exchange. Great conversation and dynamic international exchange often enrich civilization and lead to increased understanding and open-mindedness. We can find great conversation and dynamic international exchange today—and unquestionably via the web. Cyber experiences can be broadening on many levels and certainly in academia. The university can use web supported strategies (from using international MOO’s in class to creating expansive eCampuses with international reach) to support their pedagogical goals and extend the learning environment beyond traditional boundaries—and into promising new global directions. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges of the United States is convinced that universities must employ new technologies to transform access, speed the generation and diffusion of knowledge, transcend the dimensions of time and space, accelerate economic development, and connect our institutions with their communities, states, and the rest of the world (Magrath, 2003). I daresay that educational institutions everywhere should do the same.

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