Third Place Learning Environments: Perspective Sharing and Perspective Taking

M. Alagic[1], G. M. Rimmington[1] & T. Orel[2]
[1] Wichita State University, Wichita, USA
[2] York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract—**In this paper we deliberate on intercultural and global communication strategies of perspective sharing and perspective taking, and potential perspective transformation. Consideration to these strategies is given within the two instances of third place learning environments: (a) Role-play simulation environment in which learners experiment with strategies for resolving intercultural misconceptions, and (b) a professional virtual learning network that may provide just-in-time support for its members while encountering disorienting dilemmas. The central purpose of the second environment is actually development of a knowledge basis for understanding of Third Place Learning.**

Index Terms—**Intercultural communication competence, global communication competence, misunderstanding/ disorienting dilemma, role-play simulator, third place learning, perspective taking and perspective sharing.**

I. INTRODUCTION

What is a "Bosnian", "Australian" or a "Russian"? What is Brian's culture? Brian lives in Indonesia, was born in Canada, educated in Canada and Australia, speaks English, French and Indonesian, his mother is from the USA and father is from the UK. Brian holds Australian, Indonesian and Canadian citizenship? Yes, this is based on a real person. How do you prepare for teamwork in a meeting, virtual or not, with members from Turkey, China, Thailand, Brazil and Italy?

Models of intercultural communication based on the assumptions of constancy and homogeneity of culture at a national level [e.g. 13] are of limited use in today's fast-paced international business world. "It is akin to trying to use a national climatic averages map to forecast tomorrow's weather for a given town within a country." [9, p. 13] *Cultures* like ecosystems are by their very nature continually evolving, *dynamic* and *hybridizing* over time.

A growing proportion of the future workforce will need to be prepared for a workplace team environment that is increasingly interculturally and globally diverse. Preparing the future workforce for this level of complexity will require the development of both *InterCultural Communication Competence* (ICCC) [4, 9] and *Global Communication Competence* (GCC) [3, 9]. This will be a substantive and sustained task for educators and workers alike. At the same time as the technical skills of Internet-based communication are being developed, there is a need to facilitate certain enabling processes and conditions for the development of ICCC and GCC.

Chen's [4] definition of ICCC includes a set of components clustered into four dimensions: Personal attributes (self-disclosure, awareness, concept and social relaxation); Communication skills (message and social skills, flexibility, interaction management); Psychological adaptation (frustration, stress, alienation, ambiguity); and Cultural awareness (social values, customs, norms, and systems). GCC, on the other hand is a set of abilities to foster and continuously revise one's cultural landscape, dialectic interactions, and global identity [3, 4, 9].

II. DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

In this paper, we introduce the Third Place Learning Environment (TPLE) [9], which provides a set of 8 conditions and processes that in combination can facilitate improvement of ICCC, beginning with a trigger such as a cultural misunderstanding, preconceptions, or disorienting dilemma. Third Place Learners from a variety of discipline areas can improve their ICCC during opportunities to collaborate globally or interculturally. The TPLE facilitator first provokes this disorientation and then models and cultivates active listening [14], bodymindfulness [12], minimization of the effects of power distance so that each participant has a voice [5, 17], encouragement of a dialectic flow of thinking [7, 16], critical (co-) reflection [15], cultural proficiency [6] and finally perspective Sharing and Perspective Taking (PSPT) [9]. Implementation of these conditions and processes—*active listening, bodymindfulness, power distance awareness, dialectic thinking, critical (co-)reflection, cultural proficiency, perspective taking and perspective sharing*—increase the possibility of developing multiple perspectives.

A. Third Place Learning

Third Place Learning was conceptualized while studying ways in which people overcome misunderstandings in communication during global and intercultural interactions. A clue came from Bhabha's [1] idea of third space. The notion that "…the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity…" [p.55] together with transformational learning theory [8], resonated into the new concept, *third place learning*—a kind of learning that can change one's strongly held beliefs and transform one's perspective and worldview [8, 9].

The Third Place Learning Environment (TPLE) does not provide a "place" as described by Bretag [2]. It is closer in nature to the Third Space, articulated by Bhabha [1]. TPLE comprises conditions and processes that facilitate development of multiple perspectives (Fig.1).

Figure 1.   Third Place Learning: Conditions and processes

B.   Perspective Sharing and Perspective Taking

In response to a trigger and facilitated by TPL conditions and processes (Fig. 1), the 4 strategies of PSPT can meaningfully occur.

PSPT 1. At the sharing level, one participant simply asks about the perspective of another participant in order to understand the basis of a particular behavior or belief (e.g. why kissing on the cheeks instead of shaking hands?)

PSPT 2. The same participant then has to consider the basis of his/her own behavior or beliefs, when asked a question about his/her perspective.

PSPT3. After a period of perspective sharing, it is possible to move to the next level-perspective taking. In this situation, given that one now has an understanding of the basis of a cultural practice, one can then share about oneself, while attempting to do this from the perspective of the other person. (e.g. It would be okay for you to eat mollusks and crustaceans since their environment, where they grow is kept free of pollutants and waste.)

PSPT 4. A more difficult form of perspective taking is to pose a question for the other person, so she/he answers in your perspective. (e.g. If you were from my part of the world and used to smiling to express hospitability, but you came a place where this was regarded as "stupid", how would you express hospitability without being regarded this way?) In answer to such a question, you need to see the world through the eyes of the other person in order to reconcile his/her dilemma. Practice is needed to develop these strategies. Such practice will of course be inhibited if the other TPL processes and conditions are not in play.

III.   THIRD PLACE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

After briefly introducing the concept of Third Place Learning (TPL) above, two instances of potential TPLE are now presented: blog entries within a social/professional network, its analysis, and an online role-play simulator; both are resources for further development of global, intercultural communication.
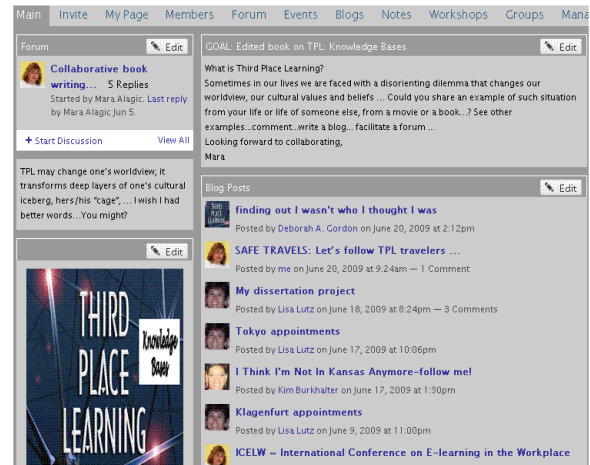

Figure 2.   Capture from TPL professional network [14]

A.   Third Place Learning Network

The array of web-based social and informational networks has broadened to those intended for professional collaborations. Gradually, the chat, threaded discussion, photo and video sharing, blogs and other capabilities are joining and often replacing traditional email as a communication tool. Online networks evolve with members' creativity, contributions, reflections and interactions.

Online social and professional networks often serve as a shared knowledgebase, which users can study, understand and apply according to their social, intellectual and professional interests. In addition to serving as an evolving knowledgebase, online social networks provide a means to increase social and intercultural capital. As Web 2.0 applications, online social networks are structured and controlled collectively by the membership [18].

The *Third Place Learning Network* (Fig.2) comprises educators and researchers from around the world, who have a shared interested in evolving the knowledgebase, resources, functions and dissemination of TPL (http://thirdplacelearning.ning.com/). Members participate in reflective blogs, threaded discussions and providing examples of experience accumulated from intercultural interactions in a variety of contexts. Such experiences may arise from working in multicultural teams, travel, migration and Internet-based global interactions. The TPL network is open to anybody, who is interested in using or contributing to third place learning. We will now present and analyze a *Reflective Blog Entry: Dating by Choice vs. Arranged Marriage* from the TPL network site (above).

B.   Reflective Blog Entry: Dating by Choice vs.
     Arranged Marriage (Posted on June 30, 2009 at [10])

From my worldview, arranged marriages appeared archaic and despotic. I considered a woman in such a society to be oppressed and without a real choice as to whom she can marry. The arranged marriage did not appear to involve a relationship that is developed and built based on a feeling of love. It was something arranged by the families of young people for family prosperity. I thought romance was an exception rather than a common ground for a relationship development. (My preconceptions about arranged marriage led to my feelings of indignation.)

Later, I had a conversation with a man from a society in which marriages are arranged. He shared his perspective in such a way that I felt encouraged to better under-

stand his perspective and re-examine my perspective about arranged marriages. (My friend was not insistent on sharing/imposing his perspective. He was open-minded and considerate. The atmosphere of this discussion felt friendly.) My former beliefs clashed with this new understanding. This conflict of perspectives prompted me to recognize and resolve my misconception. I reflected on the question of how I might be perceived by someone from a different culture. I realized that nothing is as simple as it might first appear."

"This man explained to me the negative consequences of young people making mistakes in the matter of choosing marriage partners. It is difficult for young people to differentiate true love since they are immature and lacking in life experience. Marriage is an important decision that will affect the remainder of their lives. Thus, parents become negotiators and choose 'the best match' on the basis of their more extensive life experience and greater wisdom."

"His society was structured in such a way that young people are not permitted to communicate with the opposite sex. Thus, there are no opportunities to choose. This lack of choice means that newlyweds of an arranged marriage will build their relationships within the new family. They are not exposed to the temptations of the outside world. Such a society has the norms and values concerning how a man and a woman should behave so as to create a solid basis for their family; a family in which mutual respect is fundamental."

"Now where this friend is from, parents do provide the opportunity, in some cases, for young people to disagree with the parent's choice. If the young people disagree with a choice three times, then the parents will search for another match. Divorce is possible but is not looked upon favorably by his society. His perspective about my society is that the freedom of young people to choose partners often results in divorce, single-parent families and disadvantages for the children. His culture regards the family as a fundamental unit of society and a determinant of the success of the nation state. (Although he was explaining the reasoning behind arranged marriages in his society, he himself is a good example of marriage for love where he has chosen his wife from a different culture without any mediators.)

As a result of this dialog, I could appreciate the basis of the practices and values of his culture and could take his perspective, even though I would not adopt it myself. In the process of resolving these conflicting perspectives, I carefully considered what he was saying as just as valid as my own opinions. I listened carefully and reflected critically on the basis of my own beliefs and values. (My feelings of indignation about arranged marriage changed to being more approving and understanding as a result of this conversation, although I would have no desire to be part of an arranged marriage. I am able to take this perspective, but I would not shift my perspective from one of desiring marriage for love.) (Posted on June 30, 2009, [10])

C. Blog Entry— TPL Analysis

The Blog entry in the previous section may be analyzed qualitatively in terms of the requisite processes and conditions for TPL. There are 8 elements of TPLE (Fig. 1) and six paragraphs (e.g. ¶2.6-9 refers to second paragraph, lines six through nine). The Blog began with reflections on being confronted with conflicting information about arranged marriages (¶1.1-6; ¶2.6-9). It was essential that the person posting the blog was culturally proficient [6] (¶2.2, .7-.9; ¶6.1). This person appears to know how to learn about other cultures and welcomes disorienting situations in a positive manner. The resolution of the situation described in this blog can be described as a synthesis (¶6.1-2) that arose from this person's thesis about arranged marriages (¶2.2, .8) and subsequent dialectic flow of thinking [7] (¶5.4, .6). During the dialog, she describes how they each listened actively [TPL] by thinking carefully about the other person's perspective as well as their own values and beliefs (¶6.2-3). Other elements of TPL depend upon power distance; not so much equalizing but being aware [5,17] and reducing its effects on how you consider the other person's perspective and your own. In this case there was power distance associated with gender, age and culture. The topic of this blog was in part related to power distance (¶2.2). In parts of the blog entry, she was aware of her somatic-emotional state concerning arranged marriages; she was bodymindful [12]. She underwent a transformation from being indignant (¶1.6) about arranged marriages, through openness (¶2.2, .5) to understanding and approval (¶6.4). She describes aspects of critical reflection and co-reflection (¶2.4,6.3) during the blog entry. Her blog entry does describe some aspects of perspective sharing and taking (¶2.2; ¶5.5; ¶6.1, .5) which are essential for improving intercultural communication in such instances [10]. Table I provides a summary of this analysis.

TABLE I.
ANALYSIS OF THE BLOG ENTRY IN TERMS OF THE TPL REQUISITE PROCESSES AND CONDITIONS

TPL	Blog
Disorientation	¶1.1-6; ¶2.6-9
Dialectic Thinking	¶6.1-2; ¶2.2, .8; ¶5.4, .6
Cultural Proficiency	¶2.2, .7-.9; ¶6.1
Every Voice Counts	¶2.2
Active Listening	¶6.2-3
Critical (Co)Reflection	¶2.4,6.3
Bodymindfulness	¶1.6; ¶2.2, .5; ¶6.4
Perspective Sharing/Taking	¶2.2; ¶5.5; ¶6.1, .5

In summary, this tool provides a way to systematically analyze situations to determine whether participants were able to share and take perspectives and come to a resolution of the misunderstanding and if not, which TPL conditions and processes were not in play. For example, if a large power distance had been maintained and the voice of one or other participant was not heard, then the likelihood of taking each other's perspective would be very low. Without multiple TPL conditions or processes, the chances of perspective sharing and taking would be negligible.

D. Online Role-Play – Resolving Misunderstandings

The next TPL-based tool introduced here is an online role-play simulator. It is called the Cage Painting Simulator (CPS) (Fig. 3) and is a Web 2.0-based e-learning environment based on the *Cage Painting* metaphor [9, 11]. Very briefly, the act of painting a cage bar in this metaphor/model is to dialogically derive an understanding of the relationship between a behavior, belief or value and some underlying cultural characteristic, life experience or context.

Underlying each simulation is a scenario that presents challenges ranging from minor differences in viewpoint to more significant disparities with the learner's worldview. Learners proceed through a simulation and learn how to resolve such challenges via a dialog with the synthetic character Simea (shown in pink in Figure 3). CPS is very specific in its scope and encourages strategies of sharing and taking perspectives. These strategies can later be used in two ways, to add to the repository of scenarios by designing potential resolutions for encountered misconceptions and/or to apply these strategies to particular real-life situations. Both ways stimulate learners' improvement of communication heuristic. This heuristic has helped some individuals to overcome instances of disorientation in different contexts.

For example, Simea could potentially have been the person for who arranged marriage is the norm. The learner enters a simulated conversation prompted by Simea. The simulation has just 4 steps, each associated with a level of PSPT. In the 1st step, the learner needs to make a choice to ask for Simea's perspective. In the 2nd step, the learner makes a choice to share his/her perspective. The 3rd step requires the learner to choose to share something, but from Simea's perspective. The 4th and most challenging step is to make a choice in which she/he asks Simea a question in such a way that Simea answers, but from the learner's perspective. By playing several scenarios, a learner can begin to appreciate how this ICCC heuristic (the 4 strategies) can be beneficial for resolving disorienting dilemmas that arise from intercultural and/or global interactions.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR E-LEARNING & WORKPLACE

In an increasingly interconnected, interdependent and culturally diverse world the future citizen will benefit from a keen awareness and appreciation of the hybridity and dynamism of cultures. Possession of competences in both intercultural communication (ICCC) and global communication (GCC) during face-to-face or virtual interactions will be an advantage. Limiting our study of the cultures of other people through the lens of nation-based or state-based dimensional approaches is unlikely to be enough. It may not be obvious, but the other people are studying you, too. So, what might be an obvious cultural custom for one person and not for another person could easily precipitate a misunderstanding. You or your colleague may be trying to accommodate the other person's culture based upon either stereotyping or on careful research of your background [9].

Effective intercultural communication in the virtual corporate environment can be affected by factors such as levels of formality during meetings, understanding of each other's company's organizational structure, whether flat or hierarchical, and degree of restrictions on direct communication. In some instances it is expected that titles, honors and modes of address will be used according to the social status of each individual. In other instances a lower power distance and, consequently, informal address is appreciated. In some corporate settings usage of visual teleconference equipment is prohibited to avoid any confidential information leakage. This can lead to increased number of miscommunications and misunderstandings due to the absence of nonverbal communication cues.
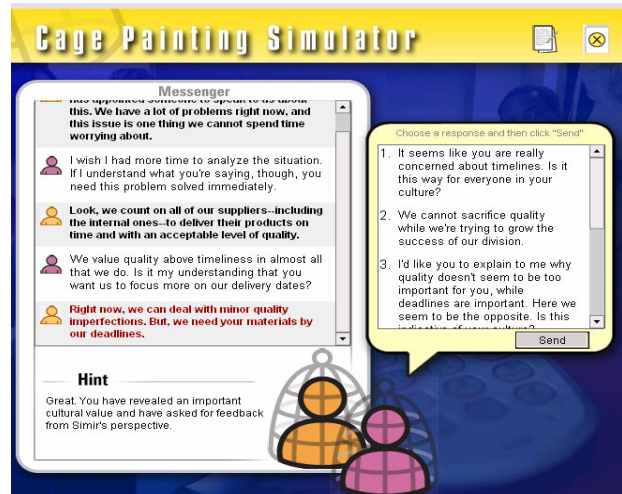

Figure 3. Snapshot from the online role-play simulator

A deeper understanding of TPL can help to heighten our awareness of potential cultural misconceptions in a face-to-face or virtual corporate setting. The PSPT heuristic can aid the dialectic flow of thinking toward the resolution of a disorienting dilemma. Third place learning lends itself to critical (co-) reflection and potential transformation of one's deeply held values and beliefs, which affect intercultural communication [8, 9]

The two TPLE examples described above each have their merits: (a) the online role-play simulator exposes learners various cultural misunderstandings and facilitates the process of developing a PSPT heuristic that can be of value in diverse cultural settings; and (b) the TPL network, which models how a group of professionals may go about developing knowledge bases and applications for specific areas of interest. These resources support the development of ICCC and GCC, theoretically and experientially; face-to-face and virtually. The essence of both approaches is captured in Fig. 1. Without such tools progress toward a full understanding of one's own perspective and those of others is likely to be slow. The fact is that dealing effectively with cultural dynamism and hybridity is no simple matter. PSPT as part of dialogic co-construction of meaning and identity requires a concerted effort and the discomforting experience of transformative learning [8, 9].

Both of the online TPL tools described here may prove beneficial as part of just-in-time e-learning for people in the corporate world, who face global and multicultural communication challenges on a daily basis. Much remains to be done to improve these tools and to add others. This improvement is underpinned by further research efforts toward a better understanding of intercultural communication competence and its development [10].

REFERENCES

[1] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture.* (Routledge Classics Edition). New York: Routledge.

[2] Bretag, T. (2006). Developing 'Third Space' Interculturality Using Computer-Mediated Communication. *Journal of Computer-*

Mediated Communication, 11(4). ([doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00304.x](doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00304.x))

[3] Chen, G.-M. (2005). A model of global communication competence. *China Media Research, 1*(1), 3-11.

[4] Chen, G. M. (1989). Relationships of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence. *Communication Quarterly, 37*, 118-133.

[5] Kincheloe, J. L. (2005). *Critical pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang.

[6] Lindsey, R. B., Terrell, R. D., & Robins, K. N. (2003). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

[7] Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (1999). Thinking dialectically about culture and communication. *Communication Theory, 1*, 1-25. ([doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00160.x](doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00160.x))

[8] Mezirow, J. (Ed.). (2000). Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

[9] Rimmington, G. & Alagic, M. (2008). *Third Place Learning: Reflective Inquiry into Intercultural & Global Cage Painting*. In book series Huber-Warring, T. Teaching <~> Learning Indigenous, Intercultural Worldviews International Perspectives on Social Justice and Human Rights. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc.

[10] Third Place Learning blog entry. Retrieved June 2009 from http://thirdplacelearning.ning.com/.

[11] Cage Painting Simulator. Retrieved June 2009 from http://gl.wichita.edu/cps.

[12] Nagata, A. L. (2007). Bodymindfulness for skillful communication. *Rikkyo Intercultural Communication Review, 5*, 61-76.

[13] Hofstede, G. (1980). Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

[14] Ishii, S. (1984). Enryo-sasshi communication: A key to understanding Japanese interpersonal relations. *Cross Currents, 11*(1), 49-58.

[15] Dewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and education*. New York: Free Press.

[16] Wong, W. (2006). Understanding dialectual thinking from a cultural-historical perspective. *Philsophical Psychology, 19*(2), 239-260. ([doi:10.1080/09515080500462420](doi:10.1080/09515080500462420))

[17] Freire, P. ([1968] 1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum International Publishing.

[18] Ganley, D., & Lampe, C. (2009). The ties that bind: Social network principles in online communities. *Decision Support Systems* 47 (3), 266-274. ([doi:10.1016/j.dss.2009.02.013](doi:10.1016/j.dss.2009.02.013))

AUTHORS

Mara Alagic is Associate Professor in the College of Education at Wichita State University, Wichita Kansas 67260-0032, USA and creator/owner of the Third Place Learning Network, http://thirdplacelearning.ning.com/ (mara.alagic@wichita.edu).

Glyn M. Rimmington is Boeing Distinguished Professor of Global Learning in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Wichita State University, Wichita Kansas 67260-0142, USA, and instigator and co-creator of the online role-play simulator, http://gl.wichita.edu/cps.

Tatiana Orel is ESL Instructor of the English Language Institute, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada, and researcher of fairy tales as a source of cultural identity formation.