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GIVING A VIRTUAL VOICE TO THE SILENT LANGUAGE OF CULTURE: THE *CULTURA* PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a Web-based, cross-cultural, curricular initiative entitled *Cultura*, designed to develop foreign language students' understanding of foreign cultural attitudes, concepts, beliefs, and ways of interacting and looking at the world. Our focus will be on the pedagogy of electronic media, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the Web can be used to reveal those invisible aspects of a foreign culture, thereby giving a voice to the elusive "silent language"[1] and empowering students to construct their own approach to cross-cultural literacy. We examine these new areas of cultural knowledge which the Web now renders accessible and attempt to redefine the meaning of foreign language "teaching" in the new world of networked communication.

This article is written by four of the instructors who have been using *Cultura* in their classes, two of them teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, and two at the Institut National des Télécommunications in Evry, France (one has since changed universities). This "four-voiced" approach serves to illustrate the multi-faceted aspects of the project and the different types of readings to which *Cultura* lends itself, and explains the shifts in perspective the reader will encounter.

Cultura was first developed in the summer of 1997. Since then we have continued to experiment with and develop it, using it in university level courses. Last year, it was used experimentally at the secondary school level as well. This particular paper focuses mostly on the work done during the spring and fall semesters of 1999 between MIT and INT.

INTRODUCTION: THE NOTION OF CULTURAL LITERACY

Cultural literacy came into mainstream discussion in 1987 with the publication of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book, *Cultural Literacy* (1987). The subtitle of the book, "What Every American Needs to Know" is significant in that it equates the notion of cultural literacy with the pragmatic itemization of "knowledge." *Cultural Literacy* concludes with a substantial appendix entitled "What Literate Americans Know," a checklist of proper nouns, phrases, concepts, expressions which "should" be part of every American's cultural knowledge. It lays out what can be viewed as common ground seen from a monocultural, assumptive framework. We argue in this paper that cultural literacy can not be reduced to the idea of a product or list of items, but must be seen as an ongoing dynamic process of negotiating meaning and understanding differences of perspective. Furthermore, cultural literacy needs to be grounded in an understanding of embedded cultural concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of interacting and looking at the world -- in a word, what Raymonde Carroll (1987) calls the *"évidences invisibles"* of a culture.

The development of electronic media has now expanded the boundaries of "literacy" itself to include "media literacy." The word "media" has added yet another layer to the idea of literacy to encompass not only knowledge of media itself, but also an understanding of how semantic perspectives differ according to the linguistic and cultural background of users. In other words, for communication to be meaningful, we need to do more than link computers: We need to construct an approach to how other people, in other cultures, experience their world. The *Cultura* project situates itself within a fully constructivist pedagogical approach to learning -- an approach whereby students themselves gradually construct an understanding of the subject matter, at the intersection of language, communication, and culture. Our focus is on the domain of cross-cultural literacy and how computer-mediated communication can help students go beyond a checklist approach to knowledge.[2]

Using a hands-on approach, students produce and analyze their own data. In this way, they become aware of how semantic networks are construed in both the target and source cultures. They are then able to construct a personal approach to the attitudes, values, and concepts which underpin the "other" culture. We hope to show how understanding the other culture requires more than a list, and is grounded in developing a curiosity toward the culture of "otherness." That area of cultural literacy is rarely approached in our language classes, for reasons that are both simple and complex. These aspects of culture are essentially elusive, abstract, and invisible. Our challenge was to make them visible, accessible, and understandable.

This paper presents, discusses, and analyzes a collaborative, Web-based curricular initiative whose goal is to develop students' understanding of those very elusive features of the foreign culture. In the following section, we will give a brief overview of the project followed by a description of *Cultura's* methodology. We then provide an in-depth look at what and how

students learn using *Cultura.* The perspective presented is that of an MIT intermediate French class. The subsequent section shifts points of view and examines how this method can effectively be used to reveal the interaction of cross-cultural semantic networks which can enhance cross-cultural communication or, if ignored, can cause misunderstandings. We then explore changes in the teacher's role that accompany the use of *Cultura.* Finally, the last sections provide an overview of the facts and figures of the project, outline current assessment efforts, and suggest future developments.

CULTURA: BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Why Such a Project?

In our global world, in which multinational companies constantly form and merge and in which people of diverse nationalities are increasingly asked to communicate and work together, the need to understand a culture other than one's own has become of paramount importance.

We, as educators, must prepare our students for this new world and help them develop a deeper understanding of other cultures. This will no doubt be one of the most important skills graduates everywhere will need to possess in this century. So now, more than ever, is the time to search for ways in which this new level of understanding of cultures around the world might be attained.

One obvious place to start is in language classes, since they teach both language and culture. Yet, language pedagogy usually still focuses primarily on the mechanics of language skills and devotes little time to the real task of developing students' understanding of another culture, and particularly those aspects of culture that relate to attitudes and values. As mentioned earlier, there is a good reason for this: These dimensions of culture are essentially abstract, elusive, and difficult to access.

The *Cultura* project presented below shows a concrete and dynamic way in which the power of the Web can be harnessed to foster understanding between American and French students. It offers learners (and teachers alike) on both sides of the Atlantic a unique comparative, cross-cultural approach for gradually constructing knowledge of other values, attitudes, and beliefs, in an ever-widening approach to understanding the foreign culture.

Even though the focus here is on fostering mutual understanding across French and American cultures, *Cultura* provides a basic and broad methodology which can be easily applied to any two cultures, whether they are national cultures, business cultures, or even sub-cultures.

Cultura was initially created and developed in the Summer of 1997 by the authors. It has received funding from both the Consortium for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning and the National Endowment for the Humanities and is currently being tested and expanded

through a close collaboration between the MIT team and a team of colleagues at the Département de Langues et Formation Humaine of the Institut National des Télécommunications in Evry, France (hereafter referred to as INT).

The Fundamental Characteristics of *Cultura*

Our project has been inspired and guided by these words of Marcel Proust:

> La seule véritable exploration, la seule véritable fontaine de Jouvence ne serait pas de visiter des terres étrangères, mais de posséder d'autres yeux, de regarder l'univers à travers les yeux des autres. (The only true exploration, the only genuine fountain of youth, would not be to visit foreign lands but to possess other eyes, to look at the universe through the eyes of others.)

This quote eloquently summarizes our goal, which is to help our students to "possess other eyes, to look at the universe through the eyes of others." The initial question was, how can it be done and where to start? We needed an approach and a tool.

We began with the notion of cultural comparisons. As is well known (Byram, 1997; Zarate, 1997), the side-by-side viewing of similar items from two different cultures (e.g., a newspaper ad, a political tract, advertising images) allows an observer to instantly see similarities and variations which, by virtue of being deeply embedded in the respective cultures, are usually hard to notice. As the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) also persuasively noted, "It is only in the eyes of another culture that 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."

The power of the process of juxtaposition had already become abundantly clear to us while developing such multimedia applications as *A la rencontre de Philippe* (Furstenberg, 1993) and *Dans un Quartier de Paris* (Furstenberg & Levet, 1999). In those projects, we had purposefully juxtaposed video segments in which different people (within a same culture) would use a same word or a same speech act. A close analysis, made possible only through the very process of juxtaposition, enables the viewer to uncover the different meanings a same word (e.g., *travailler,* to work) may have for different people or the many factors that come into play when expressing a request (such as the general context, the relationship between the people involved, and even the very nature of the request itself; Furstenberg, 1997).

Based on that initial work and premise, *Cultura* offers a comparative approach that asks learners to observe, to compare and to analyze parallel materials from their respective cultures. These initial observations serve as a starting point for attempting to decipher the meaning behind the differences revealed.

The tool which best serves our purpose is the electronic medium and, in particular, the World Wide Web. It offers two powerful features that are appropriate for our project:

1. the capacity to bring forward, juxtapose, and connect different and multiple types of materials on the same screen. The sheer process of juxtaposition allows the similarities and differences between the materials presented to emerge immediately, thus providing students with the unprecedented ability to see and identify what is usually hard to access, namely, different ways of representing reality, different underlying connotations, and different attitudes.

2. the ability for users to engage in a discussion about these materials via a forum, where they exchange their respective viewpoints and perspectives and try and understand each other's culture through the eyes of the other, in an interactive process of reciprocal co-construction.

Cultura came into existence out of the realization that the field of cross-cultural understanding could benefit immensely from a network-based communication environment. It combines what Randy Bass (2000) calls the three effective categories of educational uses of technology: inquiry-based learning, communication (building community), and constructionism. The *Cultura* project situates itself within a fully constructivist pedagogical approach to learning, at the intersection of language, communication, and the underlying semantic networks.

How It Works

Cultura calls for two groups of students (here, students of French at MIT and students of English at INT) to work together in their respective language classes, with the goal of better understanding each others' cultures. Both sets of students:

- observe, analyze, and compare similar materials from their respective cultures as they are posted on the Web;

- exchange viewpoints on these materials in a reciprocal and ever-deepening understanding of the other culture; and

- study and research an increasing array of materials (films, texts, online news media) designed to expand their cross-cultural analysis.

(Click here for a visual representation.)

The project provides a constructivist, interactive approach which allows both sets of students to gradually build, under their teachers' skillful guidance, knowledge and understanding of each other's values, attitudes, and beliefs, in a very concrete and dynamic way. In the course

of their observations and exchanges, students explore and develop insights into some key cultural concepts, such as work, leisure, nature, race, gender, family, identity, education, government, citizenship, authority, and individualism.

THE METHODOLOGY: A DESCRIPTION

As has been well documented (Bennett, 1998; Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Zarate, 1996), developing understanding of another culture is a process which involves a series of stages that take the cross-cultural learner along a journey of discovery and reflection. The approach we have developed therefore unfolds along a series of steps designed to introduce learners to progressively more complex artifacts in order to broaden their scope of inquiry. This section will detail those steps.

Step 1

After a preliminary stage in which students are sensitized to the very notion of culture.[3] *Cultura's* first step consists of having both French and American students respond in their native language[4] to an identical series of three questionnaires that appear on the Web. These questionnaires have been designed to highlight some basic cultural differences with respect to topics such as family relations, power structures, work, and so forth. Sample questionnaires are provided below:

Questionnaire 1: Word Associations
Questionnaire 2: Sentence Completions
Questionnaire 3: Situation Reactions

Both American and French students submit their answers on the Web. Their responses to each question then appear side by side

Answer 1: Elite (Word Association)
Answer 2: A good neighbor is someone who/ un bon voisin est quelqu'un qui... (Sentence Completion)
Answer 3: A mother slaps her child in the supermarket/ une mère gifle son enfant au supermarché (Situation Reaction)

Step 2

Students, first on their own, then as a group in class, make preliminary observations about the similarities and differences they see, analyze them, then start forming initial hypotheses about the reasons for these differences.

Step 3

Students then enter (via the Web) into an asynchronous dialogue with their transatlantic partners in which they (a) share their observations and hypotheses; (b) send queries for more details, clarification, and more in-depth understanding of the differences they observed; and (c) respond to whatever question was posed to them. Because each of the items in the questionnaires leads to a specific forum, there are as many forums as there are items, which leads students to exchange views on a wide variety of topics. These forums are open to all students participating in the project. The content is controlled entirely by the students, who take the initiative for guiding the discussions in any direction they wish. The instructors do not intervene.[5]

Step 4

A larger set of materials, such as comparative French and American opinion polls dealing with many societal issues, are then made available. This kind of data allows students to place their own initial observations as well as their transatlantic partners' comments and findings in a broader, more objectified, sociocultural context. Students are also provided direct access to the many American and French polling resources available on the Web, which allow them to research topics in greater depth. Archives containing the responses to the questionnaires and all the forums from the preceding semesters are also available, allowing students to check the "representativity" of the current responses and forum discussions against a much broader backdrop.

Step 5

Students continue to expand their sphere of investigation by examining (along the same cross-cultural, comparative approach) an increasingly wider array of materials (some accessible on the Web, some in videotapes, some in books). These materials include

1. French films and their American remakes (viewed on videotape), as well as press articles on those films. Analyzing films allows students to deal with issues difficult to address through written texts alone, such as the different ways in which humor, suspense, oral discourse, or body language can be interpreted in very different ways.

2. A virtual "kiosque" or newsstand offering access to many American and French articles on similar topics taken from magazines and/or newspapers.

3. Excerpts from texts written in their native language by authors from different periods and from different fields (anthropology, history, literature, and philosophy), in which they express their views about the other culture while often comparing it to their own. Such texts include *Les Evidences Invisibles* by Raymonde Carroll (1991; in France) and *French or Foe* by Polly Platt (1988; in the US); *L'Amérique au Jour le Jour* by

Simone de Beauvoir (1948; in France) and *French Ways and Their Meaning* by Edith Wharton (1919; on the American side); *De la Démocratie en Amérique* by Alexis de Tocqueville (1961; in France) and *Sister Revolutions, French Lightening, American Light*, by Susan Dunn (1999; in the US). These texts provide crisscrossing perspectives on French and U.S. cultures.

4. Viewpoints about these materials were exchanged in the student forums.

Currently still in development, the *Cultura* site is being continuously upgraded. Last year, INT instituted a series of three videoconferences which serve as an extension to the forum discussions. We also intend to include additional materials, such as fundamental historical, literary, and philosophical documents that will allow students to ground their findings in ever-broadening domains and to make new and deeper connections. Students are also encouraged to add their own materials to the site, such as pictures and documents from their family and everyday life, with the goal of creating a richer mosaic of information, which can then be integrated into the overall structure of *Cultura.*

As can be inferred from the above description, this methodology requires a new pedagogy, one in which culture is not reduced to a series of facts to be learnt about the other country and in which knowledge is not based on just being "taught" what American or French cultures are like. It is rather an interactive process that comes about via the exchange of diverse materials -- raw or mediated -- by multiple partners: learners, teachers, other students, other teachers, and experts. This multiplicity of voices is meant to lead users, under the skillful guidance of a teacher, to gradually construct and refine their own understanding of the other culture, in a continuous and never-ending process. Nothing is forever engraved in stone. Rather, understandings are either confirmed, questioned, or contradicted in light of new materials being studied and discussed.

WHAT STUDENTS LEARN AND HOW THEY LEARN IT: A VIEW FROM AN INTERMEDIATE FRENCH CLASS AT MIT

This section is written from the perspective of what MIT students learn by using *Cultura* in an intermediate French class. It examines how they weave the various threads that create overall cross-cultural literacy. We will look at these threads one by one, with the understanding that only a constant intertwining of these separate threads can lead to any in-depth knowledge of a foreign culture.

The Questionnaires

Our very first experiment convinced us that students' responses to the questionnaires constituted a powerful base for entering the world of cross-cultural literacy. What makes them so potent is that they give students a concrete basis for comparison. They form a solid

and compact database containing what Claire Kramsch (1999, p. 33) note7calls "analyzable" pieces of information, and they boost motivation, since the students' own responses are part of the data being analyzed.

The side-by-side appearance on the Web of students' responses to the questionnaires immediately brings to the visible surface, and to the students' awareness, aspects of culture that are usually hidden. The following examples are derived from students' personal observations (as reported on their worksheets) as well as collective class discussions which, unlike the exchanges on the Web, are always written in the target language.

Quasi Automatic Associations Embedded in the Culture. For example, the word *école* (school) generated references to "Jules Ferry" and *"prépa"* (preparatory school) on the French side, and the word *police* elicited "doughnut" and "911" on the American side. This prompted immediate queries by students about these words.

The Existence of Mental Representations Behind the Words. For example, an analysis of the word *banlieue/suburbs* (which Americans associate with trees, yard, space, in contrast to the French associations of HLMs [Habitation à Loyer Modéré/low income housing], delinquency, danger) made them aware of the underlying different socio-economic realities.

The Importance and Relativity of Context. For example, class discussions have made students aware that a word can take bring very different associations to mind, depending on the context in which the user situates himself or herself. The word *police*, they realized, would generate different notions depending whether the speaker had in mind: the campus police, police in the suburbs, or police in the inner city.

How One Same Word can Bring Totally Opposite Connotations in Different Cultures. The word *individualisme/ individualism*, is a prime example where highly positive connotations of words such as "freedom," "creativity," and "personal expression" appear on the American side, while the French side is replete with such negative notions of *"égoïsme," "égocentrisme," "solitude."*

How one Same Expression can Conjure Up Different Cultural Schema. An initial examination of the responses about a *well-behaved child* shows the frequent appearance of the adjective *"poli"* on the French side (as opposed to the American side where it rarely appears). A subsequent close look at what constitutes *a rude person/une personne impolie* makes it clear that the notion of politeness differs greatly between the two cultures: Whereas it tends to be of a social nature on the French side (saying "bonjour," "merci," "au revoir," etc.), it takes on a totally different meaning for the Americans, for whom it is often equated with "not offending someone," or "not hurting someone's feelings."

How the Same Words can be Attached to Differing Conceptual Representations. American students noticed, for instance, that the word *liberté* on the French side tends to be attached to the notion of community (by the very fact that it is associated with "égalité," "fraternité") whereas the Americans tend to equate it with the ability to do anything one chooses to do. Such observations often lead students to then (partially at least) understand why the word *individualisme* might have negative connotations in French.

That the Same Words do not Necessarily Cover the Same Semantic Range. Students have observed that the word *friend,* for instance, seems to encompass a much broader category of people than the word *"ami"* (friend). (Inversely, a student recently remarked that the French word *"famille"* seemed to include a larger set of people than just the "nuclear" family -- a word that simply does not exist in French. Similarly, a close analysis of the way American students use "others" and the French use *"les autres"* in the sense of "people" reveals that "others" in the American sense tends to include "me, as an individual" whereas for the French, it usually represents "other people in society."

How One Same Word may be Associated with Different Semantic Fields. In France, the word *power* tends to be associated more with politics, while in the US, it is associated more with money and business. (For a closer analysis of how students create semantic networks, see the section, "How Semantic Networks Interact in the Silent Language of Culture: A theoretical view from an advanced English class at INT.")

The Notion That What is Regarded as Perfectly Acceptable or Mainstream Within One Culture can be Perceived Very Differently When Seen Through the Eyes of Another Culture. American students noticed, through an examination of all the reactions to the different hypothetical situations, a commonplace tendency by the French to behave more aggressively and be more confrontational in many situations (e.g., when someone cuts in a line or talks loudly in a cinema). They also noticed that the French seemed more likely to express their disagreement in words, directly and/or with sarcasm, than the Americans, who tended to just consider the person rude or give a glaring look at the offending party.

That Reactions to a Given Situation are Often Based Upon Culturally Different Underlying Assumptions. In analyzing the different responses to the situation *You see a mother in a supermarket slap her child,* students on both sides of the Atlantic observed that American students tend to automatically fault the mother, think she is in the wrong, and side with the child ("feeling pity for him"), whereas French students tended to side with the mother, assuming that the child must have done something to deserve that slap. Students also noticed the extreme reactions on each end of the spectrum, with some American students going as far as saying "I slap her" or "I'll call the police" and some French students going as far as saying (perhaps tongue in cheek), "J'applaudis!" (I applaud her) or "Bien fait!" (Well done! or That will teach him!).

The Different Planes on Which People may Operate When Reflecting Upon a Given Reality. Students notice the tendency by Americans to use concrete words or objects related to their own personal lives and experiences more often than the French, who tend to deal more in abstractions. The word *police*, for instance, yields a preponderance of words on the American side such as "badge," "ticket," "flashing lights," but *"ordre," "sécurité,"* and *"répression"* on the French side. Or the word *ecole,* which elicits such French words as *"apprendre"* (to learn), *"enseignement"* (teaching, instruction), *"éducation"* and American words such as "homework," "tests," and "books." Or the word *"famille,"* which brings out a preponderance of words such as "mother," "father," "brother" on the American side, but *"réconfort," "soutien"* (support), and *"chaleur"* (warmth) on the French side. A similar perspective was uncovered when analyzing the phrase *Mes plus grandes craintes/my greatest fears*, where the Americans saw that they tended to talk about their own personal fears (such as "failure," "having my family die," "being unhappy with my choices," etc.), whereas the French mentioned fears at the level of the planet, such as war, illnesses, and so forth.

As can easily be seen, the simple examination of these juxtaposed answers to the three questionnaires already yields an initial wealth of cultural data, allowing for culturally-based patterns to quickly emerge. It is, however, the linking of the three sets of data that provides the deepest insights. Such linking has led American students to astutely observe that the French seem to look at others and at the world from a more distant and analytical point of view, as opposed to their own more personal approach. MIT students have also, in the process, become more aware of their own culture and, in particular, of the high value American culture seems to place on affect. An analysis of the most frequently recurring words in multiple contexts has allowed students to notice a visible tendency by Americans to interject an affective slant onto words, people and situations. Whether they were talking about a *neighbor,* a *doctor,* a *teacher,* or a *friend,* words such as "feelings," "love/loving," "considerate" (of other peoples' feelings)," and "caring" kept cropping up.

A class discussion on the topic brought to the surface the fact that there is no exact French equivalent to the American "How do you feel?" since the phrase *"Comment tu te sens?"* relates solely to the physical well-being of someone, and "How do you feel?" is usually expressed as *"Qu'est-ce que tu penses?"*

The Films

The use of films adds yet another dimension to *Cultura,* as it allows students to access dimensions that are not accessible by text alone and gives them the opportunity to analyze oral speech and interactions as well as non-verbal behavior, such as tone of voice or proxemics.

The films we have chosen to focus on are *Trois Hommes et un Couffin* by Coline Serreau and *Three Men and a Baby* by Leonard Nimoy. They lend themselves particularly well to a comparative approach since they follow the same chronology, present the same set of sequences, and are essentially mirror films. This makes it easier for students to uncover cultural traits relevant to both French and American cultures (after purely Hollywood production aspects have been subtracted).

The comparison of the two films has led students to look at such diverse areas as the different modes of interacting with "others" (the men among themselves, with the baby, with women, with neighbors, etc.) and the different ways of telling a story (the uses of silence, suspense, and humor).

A close, side-by-side analysis[6] of the same item (e.g., the content of the note left in the baby basket) or of a same scene (e.g., the visit between Jacques/Jack and his mother) reveals many deliberate production changes that automatically lead to discussions about the reasons for those changes. Were they introduced to make the film more American (and in what way?) or to make it more acceptable to a wider public (and in what way?). Students have observed, for instance, that Jacques' mother has been entirely done over and transformed into what could be considered the "ideal" American mother. As Jack's mother in the American version she is impeccably dressed, looks very "together," does not criticize her son but makes him clearly face his own responsibilities, encourages him and boosts his self-confidence ("yes, you can do it!"). These observations invariably lead to discussions about the place of a mother in a young adult's life and to modes of child rearing.

After identifying and analyzing the key differences, students try to find some correlation between the differences they observed in the films and those they observed in the earlier responses to the questionnaires. Students have made links, for instance, between the way the French characters interact in the movie (often yelling at each other) and the tendency by the French students to be more confrontational, as displayed in the responses to the questionnaires. In contrast, they also made a link between some of the American responses to the phrase *a rude person.* Some students mentioned, for example, "someone who yells at me" and the "Don't yell at me" of Peter to Michael when discussing what to do after discovering the baby at their doorstep. Likewise, they noticed the tendency shared both by the French students and the characters in the film to routinely use (and without any apparent disapproval on the part of the interlocutors), words that might be seen as "offensive" in American culture (derogatory words like *môme* [brat], *mouflet* [kid], and *moutard* [kid, derogatory] to refer to the baby in the film). Seeing the same phenomenon (i.e., being "aggressive" or yelling) repeated in different French contexts without anyone considering it "abnormal" has led students to realize that the overall impact of such words and attitudes may be different in the respective cultures.

The Forums

The process of discovery first started when students analyzed materials on their own. It continued when they shared their observations during the class discussions, and extended yet again through the forums in which the French and American students shared their perspectives with each other. We have found that these forums are particularly apt at taking students a step further in their quest for a deeper understanding. They have led them to do several things.

Ask for clarification and query each other about the specific meanings of some words, as illustrated by the following questions:

> *J'ai découvert le mot "nuclear" à propos de la famille. Quel sens lui donnez-vous?*
> (I discovered the word "nuclear" in relation to the family. What do you mean by that?; from a French student, sensing that the word probably did not refer to an explosive family)
>
> Damien: I don't know what are these events you talk about that occurred in France in May 1968 ... could you tell me (us) about them???? thanks, Amanda."
> (from an American student reacting to a French student's mention of "May 68" in reference to the relationship between parent and child)
>
> Could you please describe the situation with the "banlieues" in Paris? After watching "La Haine" I have an interesting picture of the life there, but I don't understand why the suburbs should be the ghettos of France."
>
> Why do French people want to live in the city? Americans like to live in the suburbs to get away from the noise and dirt of the city and to have more space and green trees and big houses. I am confused as to why people would always want to live in the city, especially if they are trying to raise a family.
>
> While living in the suburbs is part of the American dream, in France, it seems to be the antithesis of what everyone wants. What makes the suburbs in France similar to the inner cities in the United States?

Check their own hypotheses, often referring to earlier topics and discussions.

> (Commenting on the situation *One of your guests [the friend of a friend] goes and helps himself/herself in your fridge without asking for your permission,* a French student asks)
> *J'ai l'impression que beaucoup plus de Français que d'Américains utilisent l'ironie pour se sortir de ce genre de situation. Est-ce une réalite ou bien me trompe-je?*

(I have the feeling that the French would be more inclined than the Americans to use irony in order to get out of this kind of a situation. Is this true or am I mistaken?)

(Commenting on the responses to *a good citizen/un bon citoyen*, a French student writes)
Bonjour! Il me semble qu'il y ait une différence fondamentale dans la notion de citoyen : pour le français, un bon citoyen c'est celui qui se conforme à l'Etat j'en veux pour preuve le fait que les mots droits (4), devoirs (8), lois (8) reviennent constamment. Alors que pour les Américains, le citoyen est avant tout le membre d'une communauté : community revient 6 fois (et les mots rights (2), duty (1) et law (1) ont une faible occurence). Que cachent ces différences? C'est peut-être le même phénomène que pour le mot Police. Pour les américains, ce qui renvoit à l'Etat est une contrainte et est donc négatif.(?) D'autre part, la notion de communauté semble pour vous très importante. Qu'en pensez vous?
(Hello, It seems to me that there is a fundamental difference in the notion of what a citizen is. For the French a good citizen is someone who respects the State. I use for proof the fact that words such as rights [4], duties [8] laws [8] came up repeatedly. For the Americans the word "community" came up 6 times and words "rights" [2] "duty" [1], and "law" [1] only showed up rarely. What do these differences hide? It is perhaps the same phenomenon as for the word "Police." Americans see the State as a constraint, bondage, and therefore as something negative [?] In addition to this, the notion of a community seems to be very important for you. What do you think?)

(Prompting an American student to reply)
I think for Americans community is represented by the area in which you live. The immediate town or county, even state. Many of the states have different laws and different traditions. Even some of the towns within a state are very different. For example I grew up in Texas. In the southern part, more of the communities were similar in tradition to what would be found in Mexico. I grew up in the north, where it was very different. The community was not primarily hispanic, so our traditions were different than in the southern part. Does this help??

(This prompted the same earlier French student to write)
Salut. J'ai l'impression que les Américains s'intéressent peut-être plus à ce qui ce passe à proximité d'eux, sans se préoccuper de l'ensemble du pays (au moins dans un premier temps). Et c'est vrai que c'est certainement dû au fait que les cultures sont très différentes d'un bout à l'autre des USA. Mais, est-ce qu'il n'y a pas aussi une tendance pour les Français à généraliser, à théoriser des concepts comme par exemple ce qu'est un bon citoyen, un enfant bien élevé etc... alors que les Américains considèrent plutôt ce qui est concrètement autour d'eux, ce qui les

> *concernent directement sur le plan affectif, intellectuel...(sans que cela soit plus égoïste ou plus individualiste, c'est peut-être juste une différence d'attitude) (cela rejoint un peu ce qui se passe pour le Forum "Les plus grandes craintes).*
> (Hi, I am under the impression that the Americans are more concerned by what happens close to them, without really being concerned by what is going on at a national level [at least initially]. And it is true that this is certainly due to the fact that cultures are very different from one end of the USA to the other. However, isn't there also a tendency for the French to generalize, to theorize about concepts, such as, for example, what a good citizen is, a well-raised child etc., whereas the Americans are more interested in what is going on around them, concretely. Things that concern them directly on an emotional level [without this being more selfish or more individualistic, it may simply be a difference in attitude] [this can be related somewhat to what is being discussed in the Forum entitled "My Greatest Fears"].)

Explain to each other differences in their understandings of concepts. Such is the case with the word *"individualism/individualisme,"* where the responses are strikingly different to the point where one MIT student remarked,

> Hi everyone! When I first read the words all of you used associating to "individualism," I felt completely shocked. The ideal that Americans hold so closely to themselves is scorned by another country!"

The forums become the place where American students explain to the French what that word means to them and why they value it so much. The French students, in response, explain (based upon their own detailed analysis of the responses) why that word evokes for them notion of egotism and solitude, as illustrated by the following commentary made by an INT student:

> *D'emblée on constate que les Américains ont une vision globalement positive de la notion d'individualisme (à 92%), tandis que les français la considère plutôt négativement. On notera ensuite que hormis l'indépendance et l'égocentrisme, aucune des réponses proposées n'est commune aux 2 pays. Ainsi, du côté des réponses positives, les français décrivent l'individualisme d'un point de vue " institutionnel " (capitalisme, libéralisme, indépendance, liberté), tandis que les Américains se situent dans une logique plus " personnelle ." L'individualisme n'est dès lors pas un comportement propre à un ensemble social ou le fruit d'une doctrine, mais le fruit d'une décision personnelle, justement en rupture avec la société, comme en témoignent les réponses mode de vie, anticonformisme, choix. En revanche, lorsqu'il s'agit des aspects négatifs les français se situent au niveau strictement individuel. L'individualiste devient alors un être égocentrique, solitaire et fermé d'esprit.*

(From the very beginning we noticed that the Americans have a positive vision of the idea of individualism [92%], whereas the French consider it in a negative light. We then noticed that, with the exception of "independence" and "egocentrism," none of the associated words are shared by both countries. In this way, as far as the positive responses go, the French describe individualism from an institutional point of view [capitalism, liberalism, independence, liberty] whereas the Americans refer to a more personal viewpoint. Individualism is no longer a kind of behavior related to a social group or the result of a doctrine but the fruit of a personal decision. This break away from society can be witnessed by the responses "way of life," "anticonformism" "choice." On the other hand, when the French refer to negative aspects, they situate them on a strictly individual level. The individualist then appears as someone who is selfish, alone, and narrow-minded.)

For a closer look at a string of exchanges, please look at the discussion on individualism from Spring 1999.

The conversations may either stop there or may sometimes be summarized or editorialized upon by an individual student, like the following French student who wrote in reaction to a comment made by an MIT student:

Effectivement, je pense que Matthew nous offre une très bonne synthèse, qui explique simplement nos différences quant à l'appréhension de l'individualisme. Il y a, je pense, à prendre des deux côtés : nous aurions à gagner en France à laisser développer l'imagination, la créativité des individus; mais il y a, aux US, un "revers de médaillon" : à trop vouloir pousser l'individualisme, il me semble qu'on s'isole toujours un peu plus, et, même si l'on peut au début affirmer la force de son entité, l'on arrive à mal vivre son unicité. Partager, communiquer et échanger pour s'enrichir de l'expérience des autres, on peut aussi le faire de façon unique
(I feel Mathieu has provided us with a good summary which explains the differences in how we feel about "individualism." We could benefit from a little from each side. In France we would benefit from developing our imagination and individual creativity. However, in the US there is the "other side of the coin." By pushing individualism too far it seems to me that people are more isolated and even if at the outset we can assert the strength of our individuality we can also experience our uniqueness in a negative way. Sharing, communicating, and exchanging is a way to grow through the experience of others. We can also do this in a unique, and individual way.)

Forums have also **helped debunk such common myths** (held by the French) as "American students always help themselves in a fridge without asking for permission." Click here for an exchange which has presumably changed some French students' perspectives.

"American friendships are superficial." A forum discussion generated by the reading of a chapter comparing differing notions of friendship in the US and in France in Raymonde Carroll's book, prompted a flurry of comments by American students about what they considered to be excessive generalizations about "American style" friendship as described by the French author (click here for the full exchange), prompting one MIT student to write,

> I've a question. Would you folks over on that side of the Atlantic call me a friend? Well, maybe not just me, but us - the Americans. Are we your friends? We have never met, but on the other hand, we do know about each other and our opinions on a few somewhat personal topics...

And another to say,

> Hi everyone, I agree with Maria that to make a theory about the differences between American and French friendships, the author had to make some kind of generalization. I also believe that in the US (and throughout the world, I suppose) there are many different kinds of friends. There are the ones that last forever and those that are just passing acquaintances, as well as everything in between. The author may generalize all he wishes about American friendships, but what I think was unfair was that he compared the most intimate French friendships to various levels of friendships on the American side. And the result of this comparison was to make American friends seem superficial and French friendships seem more solid and honest. Perhaps the French have higher standards for what they call "friends"? Do you (French students) only consider the type of person described in the essay as your friend? Or are there people who are not as close to you who you would still call "friend"?

This prompted the following response by a French student:

> *Salut à tous, en France, nous avons deux mots pour traduire "friend." On utilise le terme "ami/e" pour quelqu'un qui est très proche de nous et en qui l'on a confiance. On utilise le terme "copain/copine" pour quelqu'un que l'on aime bien mais qui n'est pas très proche de nous."*
> (Hi everybody. In France we have two words to translate "friend". We use the term "ami/e" for someone who is very close and who we trust. We use the word copain/copine for someone we like but with whom we aren't very close.)[7]

Such exchanges presumably made French students realize that one of the reasons they see American friendships as "superficial" may have to do with the fact that the word "friend" is applied to a much broader range of people than the French would include in the category of *"ami."*

A large number of social issues are spontaneously raised. The forum on the mother slapping her child led to queries and discussions on the different attitudes toward child-rearing, on the different modes of discipline, of what is acceptable or not, of when discipline is acceptable or not (in public? in private?), on issues of child abuse, and so forth. This particular situation, coupled with the discussion of a chapter in Carroll's (1987(book *Cultural Misunderstandings,* generated very lively exchanges. Click here for an example of one of these exchanges.

General Observations About the Forums

Connections are frequently made between multiple materials, raising apparent contradictions. An exchange on the films *Trois Hommes et un Couffi* and *Three Men and a Baby*, and in particular a discussion on the completely opposite attitudes of the French and the American characters toward the police, prompted an American student to write the following:

> Hi Sebastien, I am surprised to hear that you think that the French don't accept authority well, and that is why you think the men didn't cooperate in the French movie. In the word associations for "police" and "authority," the French responses were much more positive than the American. Also, I was looking at the opinion polls on the Cultura page, and one poll asked French people if they had faith in the police ... 70% said yes. There seems to be a contradiction here... What are your thoughts on this?"

This prompted one French student to respond,

> *En répondant à la place de Sébastien, je dirai que la collaboration invoque de mauvais souvenirs pour nous... Je pense que les français veulent juste être tranquilles. Risquer ça vie pour mettre en prison 2 ou 3 dealers, ce n'est pas une attitude typiquement française*
> (In responding for Sebastien, I would say that "collaboration" brings up bad memories for us … I think the French just want to be left alone. We don't want to risk our lives just to put 2 or 3 drug dealers behind bars. To do so wouldn't be a typically French attitude.)

Another French student jumped in the discussion, providing MIT students with a rare insider's view of French culture:

> *Bonjour. La contradiction entre le sondage qui montre que 70% des français ont confiance en leur police nationale, et le fait que dans le film français la police se fait doubler, est caractéristique du fait que les français font toujours le contraire de ce qu'ils disent en public. On craint l'autorité, donc on dit qu'on est confiant en elle. Mais derrière son dos on n'y pense plus, ou pire on essaye de la contourner. N'est ce pas le contraire aux Etats Unis, la police n'est elle pas moins bien perçue ? en tout cas on pourrait le croire en regardant les réponses américaines au questionnaire sur l'association de mots. Mais en réalité on craint on pouvoir et donc on collabore avec elle. What do you think about it ? Bye.*
> (Hello. The contradiction between the poll results which show that 70% of the French trust the national police and then the fact that the police in the film get tripped up is characteristic of the fact that the French always do the exact opposite of what they state in public. We are afraid of authority, so we say that we trust the authorities. However, behind their backs we don't even think about them, or we try to get around them. Isn't this just the opposite in the United States? Aren't the police seen in a negative light? In any case that is what the word association responses would lead us to believe. However, in reality we fear power and therefore we collaborate with authority. What do you think about it? Bye.)

That response was echoed by yet another French student

> *Bonjour, Réponse au message #11, Je pense que la différence entre le questionnaire et l'attitude des acteurs dans le film est que nous acceptons l'autorité lorsqu'elle ne nous bride pas personnellement. Que la police s'occupe des voleurs c'est très bien mais quand elle commence à s'intéresser directement ou non à nos propres affaires alors là, la méfiance s'installe et les français considèrent alors la police comme un ennemi.*
> (Hello, in response to message #11, I feel that the difference between the questionnaire results and the acting in the film is that we will accept authority as long as it does not restrict us personally. It is just fine that the police run after thieves, but when they start to come after us directly or stick their noses in our own business, well, suspicion sets in and the French start to see the police as enemies.)

Click here for a look at the entire exchange.

Clearly, these forums go much deeper than traditional e-mail student exchanges that often limit themselves to sharing information about each other's daily lives. In *Cultura*, the bulk of the information takes place at the social, political, and cultural level, which is at the root of cultural literacy. Information about daily life and habits does find its way in, but it happens only after students have exchanged prior views on the concepts. A conversation on the topics of family and child rearing have led students to ask each other questions such as how and

when they have meals, where the TV is located, and so forth. Such very concrete requests for information (e.g., *"Mais au fait, vous écoutez quoi comme musique en ce moment?"* or "What percentage of you guys at INT work during the summers? How are the work opportunities in France for people our age during the summers?") that usually form the core of most e-mail exchanges, take on here much greater significance and value. They are grounded in a specific context and emerge out of a real need by students to understand how a particular concept (e.g., family or work) alluded to by the other student might be translated into a concrete reality.

A recent modification of *Cultura,* allowing students to post and exchange documents and photos within forums, has also led students to interact at yet another level. They are now able to create a "cultural visual dictionary" of sorts, where a street in a French *banlieue* is contrasted to a street in an American suburb; where photos of houses in Normandy, Brittany, or the South of France (illustrating the notion of "diversity," for instance) are contrasted to photos of houses in California, New England, or Louisiana; where the schedule of an MIT Freshman is contrasted to that of an INT first-year student, and so forth. This exchange of documents and photos, for which the students are solely responsible, forms yet another locus of exchange and comparison of perspectives.

It is important to add that in these forums, a French student will often comment upon and disagree with the point of view of one of his or her classmates. Likewise, it is in the forums generally that the non-American MIT students, start mentioning their native background. This leads to an increased awareness, on both sides of the Atlantic, of the relativity of points of view. Paradoxically, it makes the basic cultural patterns emerge even more clearly.

Finally, the forums themselves, by virtue of being written in the students' native language, become a focus of study in their own right. They will occasionally reinforce cultural traits already observed, such as the more "direct " and "aggressive" language used by French students to express their amazement. *"Appeler la police parce qu'une mère gifle son enfant? Alors là, je suis sciée!!!*" (Call the police just because a mother slaps her child? Wow, I'm [literally] floored), writes one French student after comparing the French and American answers to the situation where a mother slaps her child. Or, "*Y en a marre de ces happy endings a la con! Franchement, je trouve ca mievre, niaix et sans interet. Meme les contes de fees n'ont pas de happy end!"* (I'm fed up with these stupid "happy endings." Really I find that sickly sweet, inane and uninteresting. Even fairy tales don't have "happy endings") writes another one when referring to the happy ending of *Three Men and a Baby.*

These *Cultura* forums are also great illustrations of the different ways in which language is used to explain a concept: the more personal, concrete ways of the Americans versus the more abstract French ways, as illustrated in an exchange on individualism.

The videoconferences provide yet another extension to the forums and exchanges of ideas. They have proved very useful in terms of allowing students to go more in-depth on certain topics and to compare data orally during conferences. Being able to see "virtual" classmates,

their academic setting, and their physical appearance and gestures was also useful. For example, MIT students came to their 9:00 a.m. class carrying coffee in styrofoam cups. For INT students, despite the fact that it was 3:00 p.m., it was still relatively unthinkable to show up in class with a cup of coffee in hand. This led to discussion about attitudes toward language learning and academic environments as well as how to go about effectively presenting their mutually-produced data and justifying its lexical organization.

HOW SEMANTIC NETWORKS INTERACT IN THE SILENT LANGUAGE OF CULTURE: A THEORETICAL VIEW FROM AN ADVANCED ENGLISH CLASS AT INT

This section details a more theoretical approach to the same material as above, but from the perspective of an advanced English class at INT in France. Results from the *Cultura* experiment suggest that there is a significant structural difference between French and American semantic networks pertaining to the cultural items our students explored. Explicating these differences is one way to develop cultural literacy. This form of cultural literacy is not so much acquiring a checklist of "knowledge," as developing awareness of the relation between selfhood and otherness. Not only the target culture comes under study but fundamental elements that structure the source culture are revealed as well. In the previous section we showed how *Cultura* offers a hands-on methodology that encourages students to create and to learn through their creations. In other words, students try to understand the target culture and, at the same time, become aware of how their comprehension is grounded within their own culture. Uncovering the hidden structure of semantic networks is an essential form of teacher-induced mediation to help students grapple with the powerful juxtaposition of raw cultural items. This is the basic philosophy of *Cultura* since greater cross-cultural understanding, hence literacy, does not automatically come about via computer-mediated communication.

Defining Cultural Literacy Though Semantic Networks

Cross cultural literacy can be defined as the ability to evaluate what someone from another culture understands of a given situation in a different culture and how he therefore reacts to it. Going to school, accepting an invitation to dinner with one's family, knowing what time to arrive, giving compliments (or not) are all subject to different interpretations according to cultures. We argue in this section that beyond observing the silent language of proxemics (Hall, 1966) and a knowledge of social etiquette, cultural literacy may also require an understanding of the semantic networks that organize both language and culture. Semantic networks are the relations that structure the position of different concepts. The description given by Fodor (1983) provides a working image: "Suppose the mental lexicon is a sort of

connected graph, with lexical items at the nodes with paths from each item to the other" (p. 80). Given such a graph-like structure, it follows that concepts could have relations of identity (synonymy), similarity (or partitive, generic structures), and opposition (antonymy).[8]

Results from the *Cultura* experiment suggest that there is a significant difference between French and American semantic networks pertaining to the cultural items we explored. Explicating these differences can be a useful tool in developing cultural literacy. Not only the target culture comes under study but also fundamental elements of the source culture are uncovered. It is important to note that the source culture authorizes the interpretation of attitudes, values, and concepts. It does not, however, grant them legitimacy in the context of the target culture. This is where the meaning of raw data must be negotiated through student interaction.

> Contrary to folk wisdom, understanding has not been made more immediate through the advent of multimedia technology. Rather, it has become more mediated than ever, with a mediation that ever more diffuses and conceals its authority. (Kramsch, 1999)

Such authority is often concealed in the way concepts relate to each other and interact. It is well-established that concepts and their designations do not exist in isolation but refer to each other in some structured way (Aitchison,1994; Gibbs,1994; Lakoff, 1987; Wittegenstein,1961). However, concept values and their organization can vary substantially between cultures. For example, what the concept "family" may mean to American students, away at college, is not necessarily the same thing that a French *élève-ingénieur* (engineering student) would understand of the same concept. Also, how the students experience the idea of family, at home or at school, may differ. Likewise, the idea of collective organizations such as the police or school/*école* can be contrasted with notions related to the individual and his relation to society. The comparisons of differences in the words students associate with each notion can be used to organize these discrete concepts into semantic networks.

For example, the idea of a *family/famille* is related in some way to the ideas of love or brotherhood. Expectations stemming from the cultural conceptualization of family values can lead to the way students experience the idea of school, or success, which can be seen as an extension of the idea of a family. Alternatively, the idea of *police* is in opposition to the idea of individual expression, lexicalized in this study by the antonymic concepts *individualism/individualisme.* And the concept *individual* is constrained somewhat differently from that of *family.* The organization of these elements has necessary cultural entailments. Awareness of the way students lexicalize these discrete, concrete concepts can stimulate discussions on how they feel about more abstract notions such as power and success or failure. It is in this way that semantic networks differ from the more traditional "word webs" used to teach vocabulary.

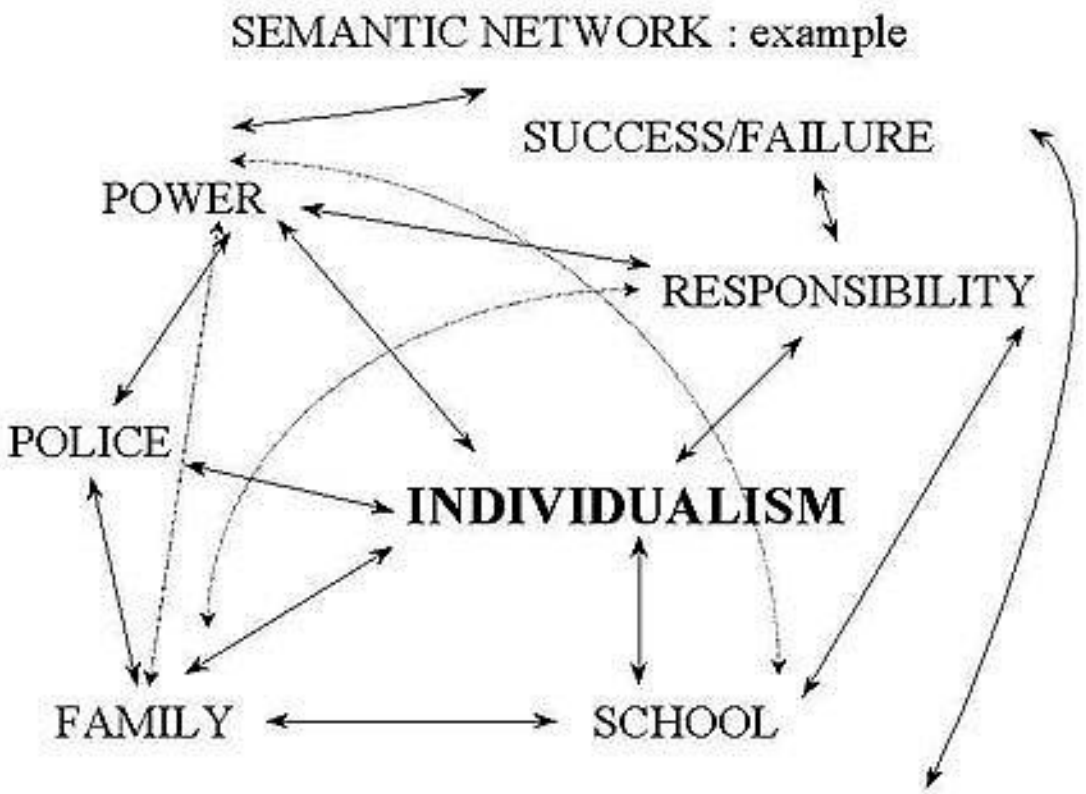

Figure 1. A semantic network grounded on *individualism.*

This example of one given semantic network shows how concepts can be organized in a constellation around a central idea. This particular example comes from the French student discussion and was written on the blackboard as their discussion evolved. It should be highlighted that this is a projection of how the French students perceived the target culture -- placing a high value on *individualism.* The surrounding concepts were taken from the list of word associations. Each word represents a specific relation to the central idea. For example, the idea of *police* interacts with the idea of *individualism* in that the role of police in a society is to maintain law and order and, as such, constrains individual liberties. The role of the *family* may be seen as support or restriction for the individual. Likewise, the concepts of *school* or *responsibility* relate to individual freedom of action and role in society. These concepts had quasi-antonymic relations. Students then compared the data from the word associations for these concepts and determined whether (or not) the network seemed coherent to them. In some instances there were inconsistencies. Focussing on divergences led to productive discussion on how we perceive others and their values. This led students to revise their initial hypotheses. The organization of concepts into webs, and our understanding of

them, is an on-going process. The way we feel about different aspects of our lives changes and, more specifically, evolves when confronted with another culture. This confrontation is one of *Cultura*'s objectives and can structure how students evolve throughout the course.[9]

Figure 1 shows one way in which these concepts could be organized, in a hypothetical way, in a society which places a strong value on the individual (as opposed to society at large). A counter example would be a society that put the individual in a more secondary setting. The conceptual constellation surrounding the central idea would be adjusted accordingly. Some elements would disappear and others would be introduced. Diagrams such as this one are created in class, using the well-known technology of chalk and a chalkboard.

Constructing an Interpretation According to Category and Context

Current work in psychology (Aitchison, 1994; Fodor, 1983; Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987) suggests that the structure of concepts is actually quite flexible and not nearly as static as traditionally believed. Therefore, what people may say in one context could vary significantly when they use the same concept in a different context or at a different time. For example, as we discussed earlier, the idea of "police" would vary according to whether students were thinking about campus police or inner-city police. So, in a monolingual environment, attempts to explicate conceptual, semantic networks are bound by variation over time and variation according to utterance environment. In a computer-mediated, cross-cultural environment additional factors must be taken into account (e.g., the content and structure of categories; Aitchison, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1977; mental representations in on-line course design; Pincas, 1998; and mind maps using associative cognitive networks for language instruction; Rezeau, 1999).

In the *Cultura* project, students produced their own data, but they were also responsible for interpreting it, and were therefore encouraged to draw their own conclusions. The raw data produced for the spontaneous word association related to the American and French concepts *individualism/individualisme* were discussed in the section, "What Students Learn and How They Learn It." The INT students produced the word associations on the left and MIT students produced the words on the right.) Although information in this state has been shared, it hardly has any meaning other than what the students could infer by a superficial comparison. Students discuss differences in class using the target language. They then select one word association, one sentence completion, and one reaction to a hypothetical situation and decide what ad hoc categories to use and how to classify and present the information in a meaningful way. After these discussions, they present the data and their interpretation orally in class in the target language. In this way, they have produced and analyzed data, then reformulated it in order to share it with their classmates. This process allows raw informational data to be reconstructed as meaningful interpretation. This oral language exercise becomes particularly revealing when students subsequently write up their observations, reformulated in their mother tongue, in the electronic forums. This final aspect

begins to bridge the gap between information and knowledge since students are able to make these observations in the intimacy of their own language. Students are therefore listening and reading mostly in the target language, although not exclusively, as we will see later. Speech and writing are produced in both languages. The interaction between a "foreign" language and a "mother tongue" leads to an effective integration of conceptual differences. Hence the first step in the process of cultural literacy comes about through this constant interaction between languages.

How Explication and Clarification Legitimize Interpretation

In the initial phase, students selected concepts and organized the word associations in order to show and talk about the differences. For example, here is the way students in France showed the differences in words associations for *individualism*, *police*, and *family*. It must be noted here that the way we organize information into categories and the way hierarchies structure information is culturally, if not linguistically bound. (Cabré, 1998; Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1977). These charts were made by INT students and would be rather different from those made by MIT students. Differences and similarities were discussed in class in the target language and then discussed over the forums in the source language. This led to explication and clarification. As we mentioned above, we feel that the use of both target and source languages led to a deeper appropriation and sensitivity to cultural difference. It also allows students to experience otherness within their own linguistic framework.

Results for word associations concerning the concept individualism were salient. Of the French students, 87% considered the words associated with the concept *individualisme* to be negative, whereas 85% of the American students had positive connotations for the equivalent concept. Therefore, the semantic relation between these cognates would seem nearly antonymic. At this stage, it would be more exact to refer to them as pseudoconcepts since information, in this case, the students' vision at a specific time in a specific context and, as we mentioned above, conceptual organization appears to be highly flexible. The word "concept" would also imply lexical equivalence, which these data deny. Since both terms could be considered bilingual dictionary equivalents (Harraps and Robert & Collins [1985] both give them as equivalents), it is worth highlighting this divergence in value judgments and their possible entailments.

Concepts are organized into categories and have connotative values. Through side-by-side juxtaposition, features of both category selection and connotative value emerge. For example, to define the word *individualism*, the French students used categories referring to solitude, *egoisme*, and selfishness, whereas the Americans referred to more positive ideas, such as moral values and human qualities. Students also decided whether the connotative value of these terms was positive or negative. In other words, what emerged was how students "felt" about the data. This process brought to light how a word is understood in the source culture as well as how it is (differently) grounded in the target culture. Students can situate their

individual interpretations in relation to the interpretations given by other students in the same class. The source culture thus appears to be a negotiated understanding among peers. As such, opinions are not individual fragments but authorized, legitimated interpretation. Students can see to what extent their personal opinions are shared, or not shared, with classmates. They are then in a better position to relativize the idea of cultural value when confronted with the responses from the target culture.

The significant differences between results for the same word and its equivalent prompted questions. Were we perhaps comparing things that were simply not equivalents? For example, in the case of individualism, were the conceptual contents too different to justify their juxtaposition? Were they deceptive cognates like social security and *sécurité sociale* (a national health plan rather than a retirement pension)? The real value of a concept resides in its position within other concept clusters (Sager, 1990). How one classifies and how one categorizes a notion is revealing of his or her worldview (English & Beyeler, 1996). After all, the organization of information is hardly an objective activity. Students discussed both lexical and conceptual differences in the forums. This allowed them to become aware of their own views in relation to others, to understand their respective positions. As a result, the "authorized" interpretations were "legitimized" via forum discussions. For example, students examined the different dictionary definitions in English and French mono-lingual dictionaries and discussed how the respective definitions reflected their word association results and how this could be culturally grounded.

Concept Clusters and Salient Silences

As we mentioned earlier, the notion of *individualism* does not exist in isolation. This concept interacts with our ideas and attitudes toward our *family*, and our *school.* It can also be seen to oppose the idea of *police.* So, in relation to *individualism,* the concepts of *police* or *family* or *school* is revealing. The semantic network provided above is only one possible representation of how meaning can be construed. Its examination in a cross-cultural environment logically leads to a richer, multi-dimensional analysis.

Of course, the absence of an isomorphic mapping of semantic features from source culture to target culture is hardly surprising. Our understanding of this lexical constellation requires an interactive negotiation of meaning. On the one hand, why did INT students refer to *fear* in a collective way, whereas MIT students saw it in a more individual light? How does this relate to the perceptions of the concept of *individualism?* What other political, legislative, academic manifestations can be explained by a cultural understanding of the individual? (see section on assessment). On the other hand, many important items were not lexicalized. In the case of *family*, the word love has a much lower frequency for the French than the American students. Does this mean, as MIT students asked in the forums, that French parents do not love their children? Is what we silence in fact most salient? Students were able to lend a voice to aspects of such salient silence through questioning on the forums.

Cultural literacy requires an understanding of how the division into categories and category membership mediates communication. Categories that may be useful for classification may actually cloud clarification processes if they remain rigid. Forum discussions allowed students to observe how categories can be fluctuating variables rather than universal constants (as they are traditionally characterized). Clarification took place during the forums when the students shared their observations and interpretations. Many comments required additional explanation such as, for example, "doughnut" or "blue" for *policeman.* Police uniforms are just as blue in France as they are in the US, however, the French students did not consider this feature salient. Once again, this may reflect different approaches to the construction of knowledge: abstraction for the French and concrete embodiment for the Americans.

The explication, presentation, and comparison of semantic networks was one tool which encouraged students to relativize their own interpretation and worldview. This process not only provided input for forum discussions but also created a tool for "seeing" what the other students in another country might feel. Meaning therefore had to be negotiated within what we might call an ad hoc discourse community (Swales, 1990).[10]

Cultura methodology therefore combines word association, film scripts, and theoretical studies. In addition, the teacher's role was to show how cross-cultural communication is mediated by the very semantic networks that may diffuse and conceal cultural authority. Making these networks explicit is one step towards developing cultural literacy. We will closely examine what the teacher does in the next section.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

Questions That Come Up

In view of the very nature of the *Cultura* project, immediate questions arise regarding the role of the teacher :

- How can we be sure that we, teachers, are still necessary, if the students "do all the work," completing questionnaires, providing the raw material through their questions and interpretations, from both sides of the Atlantic? The fact that the teacher is able to read what is posted on the Web, but does not interfere with the content, seems to leave him/her even more out of the picture.

- How do we, teachers, get the students to explore the semantic networks provided by the answers to the questionnaires? What kind of task will enable students to understand and organize the information that they are given, to see patterns emerge and to grasp what constitutes the other culture?

- How can we, as teachers, feel confident that with no formal training in anthropology or sociology, we can guide our students through the wealth of raw material and information made available to them? How can raw information become knowledge and then literacy?
- How can we show up in front of a class without knowing in detail the very content at the core of our class, since its latest addition might have been posted at 3 a.m., too late or too early to have time to read it?

Traditionally, our role as a teacher has been, to a large extent, delivering content. Most of the time, reality has been organized into paragraphs, pages, chapters, books. There is a reassuring expectation, shared by teachers as well as students, that at some point the chapters will have been covered, the relevant questions asked and answered. With *Cultura*, of course, the questions are many and the book is being written as the course unfolds. The data produced by students varies and is enriched from day to day, making the process of interpretation and analysis itself the focus of the class.

Where and How do Students Work?

All throughout the project, students work both on their own, outside the classroom, and as a group in class. Outside the classroom, they fill out questionnaires, ask and answer specific questions on the forum, read their counterparts' comments, select and analyze answers, record their analyses on their worksheets, and keep track daily of their itinerary in their *"carnet de bord"* as they go along: Carnet de bord, page 1, page 2, page 3, page 4, page 5.

In class, they work as a group toward a collective analysis. The work in class, involving all students and the teacher, is an essential step, as it brings forth much more than the sum of all the students' individual contributions. The class becomes a place for reflection, where ideas are exchanged, syntheses are made, hypotheses spelled out and tested.

Class Discussions

Class discussions are a very important part of the process. They allow students to share (in the target language) their observations with each other, to confront their findings with those of the other students in the class. This sharing of information also allows students to discover things they had not noticed individually, for the simple reason that they had not analyzed every single word or situation. Classroom interaction therefore allows them to discover emerging patterns across several reactions or even across all questionnaires and to find links between responses to, perhaps, one word, one definition, and one reaction. Students are thus positioned to collaboratively create a broader picture. Class discussions (always in the target language) also allow contradictions to emerge, and these contradictions motivate students to work toward solutions.[11]

In view of the diversity of the student body (at MIT in particular), many nationalities and cultures are brought together in the classroom. Discussions in class enable students to situate themselves in relation to others, to perceive similarities and differences in personal opinions and reactions within the group, and to start identifying the many and complex factors influencing their attitudes. Students also become aware that what they say is relevant to their immediate situation and to a given context. All of these kinds of realizations occur later in the forum as well.

The class discussions and the subsequent forums make it clear that *Cultura* provides what Bass (1998) considers the truly critical and basic element of learning: engagement on the part of the students. He writes,

> If there is anything common to the many answers I have heard faculty give to these [technology related] questions [What am I doing now that I'd like to do better? What pedagogical problems would I like to solve? What do I wish students did more often or differently?] it is their desire to heighten student engagement. Faculty commonly wish that students could come to class not only having done the reading, but with something to say about it. Faculty wish that more students would talk in class or use class time more productively to dig into material. They wish students would develop their own interrogative stance toward material or look at a document or issue or event critically on their own. And perhaps most commonly, faculty want their students to develop an ability to see and express complexity in the language of that discipline in such a way that it is transferable from one problem to the next. (pp. 2-3)

In our experience, *Cultura* has addressed these issues well, stimulating not only student motivation but also critical classroom engagement.

The Blackboard

The blackboard turned out to be an important tool. This is where the teacher or students write simple words, draw lines and arrows, plus and minus signs, circling words, grouping them, crossing them out, constantly reorganizing them to try and make sense of the information they are given. This is the place where discoveries are made and very often new meanings emerge. The words on the board record the ongoing analysis. Connections, similarities, contradictions, and oppositions between concepts that were unseen, or that could have gone unnoticed, become visible, much in the same way that the simple process of juxtaposing answers from the two different groups of students on the Web reveals hidden patterns. Once again, a very traditional medium takes on a new role.

The Specific Role of the Teacher

The role of the teacher is to accompany students through the analysis and to ensure that they will avoid possible pitfalls such as

- interpreting too literally what is said or written, which would lead to a gross misinterpretation;
- making hasty generalizations and comparisons, coming up with comments such as "the French are...," "the Americans are...";
- getting lost in details and losing track of what their question was, what hypothesis they were trying to verify or debunk, or stopping halfway and not pressing a question far enough; and
- discovering early on a valid interpretation, creating a new model once and for all, and applying it to every situation, trying to open every door with the same key, looking at everything from the same angle.

How can these be avoided? The teacher can

- use contradictory interpretations as a starting point for the discussion, asking students to document their own interpretation with examples taken directly from the questionnaires or the forum, always going back to words, situations, concepts, to support their analysis;
- bring the students attention to irony, derision, humor, and sarcasm in the tone, encouraging them to nuance their own expression;
- urge students, when counting and sorting words and situations, to use abstract concepts and notions and to move beyond the most obvious similarities and differences; and
- make sure that the students follow through the process completely. Specifically, that they look at similarities and differences between concepts, find the relation between them, formulate their hypothesis in writing as well as orally, ask questions to the source (the other group of students) and answer their questions, look for additional information (newspaper articles, statistics), and check their interpretation by reading texts from different contexts, such as press articles.

Click here for an essay which is an example of the kind of writing students do. This paper was written by a student who had started the study of French two semesters earlier (at MIT). The assignment, given after one month of working with *Cultura*, was to select one concept or notion which reappears in several contexts and elaborate on it. The student chose the notion of *ordre*.

The teacher must accept the fact that he/she does not have all the answers. Sometimes this can be experienced as a perilous situation. But seen as an opportunity to grow with our students, it illustrates the very principle of the *Cultura* experiment itself: We are not trying to lead our students into believing that, if they write a long enough list of "cultural facts," they will know any better what the other culture is about. We lead them into recognizing a process, and train them to look, make hypotheses, ask questions, reflect on what "culture" is, identifying along the way their own culturally encoded behaviors, becoming more alert and open towards another culture, more flexible, and enriching the way they perceive the world.

Construction in Action

Finally, we believe that *Cultura*, both in its concept and pedagogical practices, exemplifies a model of true constructivist teaching. It provides eight characteristics of constructivist classrooms which are reported by Reagan (1999; summarizing Grennon Brookes & Brookes, 1993, and Kaufman and Grennon Brooks, 1996):

- "use raw data and primary sources, along with manipulative, interactive and physical materials.
- when framing tasks, use cognitive terminology, such as classify, analyze, predict, create, and so on.
- allow student thinking to drive lessons. Shift instructional strategies, or alter content based on student responses.
- inquire about students' understanding of concepts before sharing your understanding of those concepts.
- ask open-ended questions of students and encourage students to ask questions of others.
- seek elaboration of students' initial responses.
- engage students in experiences that might engender contradictions to students' initial hypotheses and then encourage a discussion.
- provide time for students to construct relationships and create metaphors."

FACTS AND FIGURES

At the time of publication of this article, the *Cultura* project will have been running for six semesters in partnership between MIT and engineering schools in France. It was deemed important that learners at the two institutions have matching learner profiles. A partial experiment was first conducted in 1997-1998 between students taking French at MIT and students taking English at the Ecole Supérieure d'Aéronautique, the leading French school of aviation engineering in Toulouse. This particular article, however, is based specifically upon the work that has taken place for three consecutive semesters (Fall 1998, Spring and Fall 1999) between learners of French as a foreign language at MIT and learners of English as a foreign language at INT. What follows is background information concerning the learner population involved in the *Cultura* project, their linguistic background and objectives, the duration of the project and results from the student evaluations.

Student and Faculty Profile, Learning Objectives

The students at MIT are undergraduate learners of French as a foreign language who fall into the age category 18 to 22 years old. Most students enrolled in the course have had, on average, no more than 3 years of high school French or the equivalent. They are taking an intermediate-level French course which meets four times a week and focuses almost entirely on *Cultura.* They have had very limited opportunities to communicate with native speakers other than their teachers at MIT, and their exposure to media in French outside of class is fairly limited. Students taking the course form a national sample of Americans and about 25%-30% of the participants are foreign students. They are enrolled in a wide variety of science and engineering programs. The study of foreign languages is optional. In addition to the cultural understanding objectives for the course, *Cultura* provides students access to authentic text produced by peers who are native speakers of French, which contributes to improving their reading comprehension skills. Teachers involved in the project are native speakers of French, born and educated in France.

The students at the Institut National des Télécommunications (INT) have been both first-year (Baccalauréat +3 years university) and third-year students (Baccalauréat +5) in the age category of 20-23 years. The *Cultura* group represents a national French sample of students. There have been three foreign students enrolled in the course and 10 students coming from bi-cultural families, 3 of whom have an American parent or family living in the US. The majority of students have had between 8 and 10 years of English studies before coming to the INT.

Students have a weekly three-hour English course during the five semesters they are on campus. English is a compulsory and students are required to demonstrate a minimum level of mastery, based on results from standardized tests such as the TOEFL, TOEIC, or the University of Cambridge English Exams. About 75% will have worked or studied in an

English speaking country for a duration ranging from 1 month to 1one year, before graduation. Access to English language media is readily available at the campus library, through the Web, at the cinema, and on television, and often constitutes required reading in engineering courses. There is a much greater number of French students interested in participating in the *Cultura* project, than students in other places available to maintain a fairly even balance between the US and French groups, INT selects students having the highest level of English to participate, and when programming permits, prefers to enroll first-year students who are less likely to have visited the United States. Teachers involved in the *Cultura* course at INT are native speakers of American English, born and educated in the United States.

The cultural understanding course objectives are especially beneficial for preparing INT students who will carry out internships in the United States and in assisting students returning from an internship to analyze some of the cultural differences observed during their stay. In addition to providing authentic text in English written by a group of peers, the course also provides many opportunities for students to analyze data, practice advanced writing and speaking skills, and formulate long written essays in the target language.

Interestingly enough, the difference in language proficiency has had little impact upon the project. This is due in great part to the fact that MIT students write in English on the Web and INT students write in French. The target language is always spoken in the respective classes.

Student Enrollment, Duration

A total of 146 students have participated in *Cultura* during the three consecutive semesters of collaboration between MIT and INT, from Fall 1998 through Fall 1999. There were 67 participants in the United States and 79 in France. Although the academic calendars at the two institutions do not exactly coincide, students have been able to collaborate together over an approximately nine-week period each semester. The *Cultura* project represents 4 class hours on the MIT campus and 3 class hours on the INT campus.

EVALUATIONS

At the end of each semester, students are asked to fill in questionnaires asking them to assess the *Cultura* project in terms of the following criteria:

- usefulness and interest for cultural understanding;
- quality of materials and activities;
- Web interface;

- nature and frequency of resources used; and
- general assessment concerning gains in understanding the target culture.

The results of these questionnaires can be found in annexes 1, 2, and 3. About 50% of the participants at INT returned evaluation questionnaires. The following section provides an analysis of three sets of questionnaires from INT. Globally, although students make suggestions for modifying some of the resources and activities, it would appear from the comments made in the General Assessment section that *Cultura* has succeeded in providing a tool and a method which helps students better construct a personal approach to understanding the attitudes, values, and concepts which underpin the target culture.

Usefulness and Interest for Cultural Understanding

Students were asked to evaluate the "usefulness" of the questionnaires, the films, and the texts according to the criteria: *very useful* (+2), *quite useful* (+1), *not sure* (0), *not much use* (-1), *quite unnecessary* (-2). Weighted results yield the highest score to the questionnaires, followed by the texts and then the films. Students were then asked to rank the same three resources a second time, according to the same criteria for their "interest" and "thought provoking qualities." In this case the texts receive the highest score, followed by the questionnaires, and then the films.

Although the questionnaire were criticized by some as "too long," "artificial," or "not enough" (to provide a significant sample), students recognize that the process made it possible for them to "point out differences we did not suspect" or get a "first superficial view." Many students especially appreciated the questionnaires as a point of departure for the asynchronous discussions with the Americans over the forums. It should also be noted that issues raised from the questionnaires such as school, family, parents, and individualism, also generated discussion during the videoconferences. To conclude, although filling in the questionnaires may appear to be a tedious activity to students at first, the results provide the foundation for further work in the course.

The films are subject to the most contrastive comments from the students. They are highly criticized by some students as too "caricatured," "antithetic," or "fictitious." Some students suggest using other more recent films like *La Totale* and *True Lies* while others suggest making a comparison of French and US television shows, news, documentaries, or advertisements. Beyond the "usefulness" or "interest" that the films provide, students recognize that this media is "lively," "funny," "attractive," and felt that comparing the two films provided interesting discussions within the classroom and on the forums.

None of the students criticized the texts. They "teach us the other culture" and "were interesting." The texts help some students, even students from bi-cultural families formalize what had previously been only impressions they had about cultural differences in the US and

France. Many students would have liked to read and discuss more texts and some suggest studying other more factual texts about the United States, which would indicate that the pedagogical process used in *Cultura* was successful in generating an interest for the target culture. One student sums up the process of studying questionnaires, films, and texts in the following way: "With these three exercises, we have realized how the Americans live and how they think, compared with French people. I was interested to notice their way of life, even, if sometimes the images were exaggerated."

When asked what other materials they would like to see, many French students expressed the desire to have more frequent, richer, and more personalized exchanges with the American students. In the Fall 1998 semester students suggested adding videoconference sessions. These sessions, making it possible to bring together a classroom in France with a classroom in the US, were added to the Spring 1999 course, in addition to a direct essay exchange between a US/French pair of students. Students in the Spring 1999 session suggested corresponding directly with the American students as early as possible. In the Fall 1999, students continue to request more videoconferencing and the desire to have a US correspondent. Students do not rate videoconferencing as one of the richest sources of cultural information, but it is definitely a highly desired and motivating activity.

Materials

In the materials section students were asked to rate (a) the responses to the word associations questionnaires; (b) the responses to the sentence completion questionnaires; (c) the responses to the hypothetical situations questionnaires; (d) the forums; and later (e) the videoconferences; and (f) the essay exchange according to a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the highest score for source of cultural information. Over the three semesters, the Forum is clearly the source of cultural information, among the seven listed above, which consistently receives the highest score in the student evaluations. In answer to the question, "Did you feel constrained in the writing of your observations?" the unanimous response from students was, "No." Students were asked to name one or several issues of particular interest that were discussed on the forums. The majority of students mentioned between two to four items, with school and education, the family, the slap in the supermarket, and individualism being cited most frequently.

The word associations and class activities were also rated as good sources of cultural information. The issues which students most often cited as being particularly interesting for classroom discussion were comparisons of the French and American educational systems, texts and testimonies about culture and cultural misunderstandings (Carroll, Platt, teachers and students), the family, and the films. Written assignments received mixed reviews from students. About 60% of the students called the written assignments useful or interesting "to

sum up and analyze," "to improve our writing skills," "to improve our English." Although students recognized the value of the assignments in the understanding process, some criticized their length, frequency, or difficulty.

The Web Interface

In this section students were asked if the *Cultura* site was easy to navigate and if they had any suggestions for improvement. Like other features of the *Cultura* experiment, the student answers were varied. About half of the students were satisfied with the site. About 25% suggested making the log-in simpler and less frequently required. Students suggested adding more interactive and personalized features like a chat tool and pictures of the students participating in the project.

Use

Students were asked to evaluate the statistics and polls, the film transcriptions, the articles on remakes, the reviews of the two films, the general press articles, the archives, and the search engine first on the basis of frequency (*regularly,* +3; *occasionally,* +2; *once or twice,* +1; *never,* 0) and secondly on the basis of use (*very useful,* +2; *quite useful,* +1; *not sure,* 0; *not much use,* -1; *quite unnecessary,* -2). The videoconferences and essay exchange were also evaluated on the basis of use.

Statistics and polls are consistently the most frequently used resource over the three semesters followed by the reviews of the two films and the film transcriptions. In terms of usefulness, videoconferencing got the highest score, although it was only offered for two of the three semesters for which we have evaluations. After videoconferencing, statistics and polls and the general press articles got the next highest score. Once again, the evaluations show the interest videoconferencing generates among students, even if it is not the richest source of cultural information as seen previously.

General Assessment

In the first part of this section, students were asked if they felt they had learned something about American culture, to name three things that they did not know before, and to identify the things that stand out in their mind concerning American culture. Overwhelmingly, 95% of the students state emphatically that they have learned something about American culture. One of the two students who replied "no" explained, "I already have an American family so I would have to say no. But it's been very fun to be able to talk with Americans and see the gap between our cultures." Another student replied that although he did not feel he had an anthropologist's understanding, he had learned a few little things about, "the conception of friendship, neighborhood, and scholastics." All students were able to identify three things they had learned about American culture. Once again the most frequently repeated themes were education, and parents and children. It should be noted that almost all the cultural issues seen throughout the course were cited at least once on the evaluation forms. One student stated the following about what she had learned:

> The same word my have two different meanings that can lead to confusion; We should not judge one's behavior quickly, we should take other's cultural background into account; Before visiting a foreign country we should learn a bit about its culture. It is as important as learning the language.

This statement is probably the most indicative that in fact the students acquired a method for understanding a foreign culture which is what we as teachers would hope to be the result of the pedagogical process of *Cultura.*

In a second part of general assessment, students were asked to cite the positive and then the negative aspects of *Cultura.* Over 50% of the students felt that the direct contact with American students is one of the most positive aspects of the project. The direct contact makes it possible to form opinions for themselves and to put an end to stereotypes. Several students felt that the method itself was one of the most positive aspects of the project: "Having a guide rope for discovering another culture"; "We learned on our own, without accepting the ideas of an author but discovering some differences, and then comparing it to theories"; "The most positive aspect is to demystify the image that we have of another culture: to finally have the reality and the truth from the people concerned"; "Teaching us that there are some small differences in the behaviors which have consequences that can be huge." Some of the frequently cited negative aspects were too much time spent with a computer, filling in the questionnaires, the delays in the asynchronous dialogue through the Forum, that some students would like to have had a chat tool, and using French to fill in the questionnaires and forums.

Suggestions for the Future

In the final section, students were asked to make suggestions for the future. The commentary in this section repeats some of the remarks made previously concerning communication channels and choice of resources. A majority of the suggestions focussed on intensifying dialogue between students on either side of the Atlantic by increasing the videoconferencing sessions, creating French/American pairs for collaborative work, and providing a chat tool for synchronous discussion. Some students expressed a desire to meet their American counterparts face to face. Concerning resources, students generally would like to see a larger selection than those are already offered through the project, for example a wider selection of films. Some students suggested that it could be interesting to select one theme or resource and to study it in depth.

To conclude this section, the evaluations would tend to indicate that the *Cultura* course has been successful in achieving its objectives: first, giving French students insights into the hidden aspects of American culture, and second a method or "guide rope" for gaining insight into other foreign cultures. Although there is a certain amount of criticism concerning certain activities which are perceived as "boring" or tedious, like filling in the questionnaires or

writing long analytical essays in the target language, it would be difficult to eliminate them because they form the foundation for the learning process, as the students indicate themselves. Clearly as communications technologies become cheap and available, students are going to request that they become increasingly integrated into the course. One of our concerns for the future may well be the careful orchestration of an appropriate balance between content acquisition and informal communications which could to easily degenerate to "chat."

ASSESSMENT

The issue of assessment is, of course, essential. In this case it is particularly difficult to deal with because the students' work situates itself within a new medium (network-based communication), within a new learning environment (collaborative and not individual, process-oriented and not result-oriented) and within a new culture-oriented syllabus (as opposed to a purely linguistic one). These shifts clearly demand new evaluation tools and new research agendas that are congruent to both the goals and the context of *Cultura*.

We have consistently tried to come up with tasks that would allow us to assess the quality and depth of the students' "knowledge." The students' logs or journals, their regular papers where they synthesize what they have learnt are such examples. One new initiative, designed to move assessment away from just the teacher, has led us to ask our students to send their final essays (written in the target language) not to the teacher but to a peer counterpart who would then comment on the "accuracy" of their observations.

We are quite often surprised to discover how deep and insightful some of the students' comments are and how proficient they become at identifying cultural features and making relevant connections -- to the point where their perceptions, unbeknownst to them, even match the findings of cross-cultural experts.

We are also very interested in "testing" whether the students can apply their newly found skills to new areas and contexts. With that goal in mind, at the end of the semester we give students new materials to study (for example a French magazine article about young French adults who have found a new life in Silicon Valley). Before the students read the article, we ask them to try and anticipate what the article will say, how the French people interviewed will talk about the US, in what terms, and so forth. More often than not, students will indeed accurately anticipate the major themes of the article. After reading it, they then examine the imbedded subjective point of view of the article itself. This leads them to become more proficient and cautious readers and interpreters. They realize their own interpretation is a construction related to the legitimacy of its value within the target culture.

A similar activity has students compare how, on a same given day, the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* cover the same event (on the Web). One group of students, completely of their own choosing, did a comparative study of the way both newspapers talked about Chechnya,

not just in terms of what events they focused on, but also on the contexts they supplied and even the words they used when referring to Russia and Chechnya. They came up with extraordinary insights, that touched on the different ways the same event was related, what the underlying point of view was, and so forth.

Another final semester activity (at MIT) consists in having students redo an activity they had done at the beginning of the term: they were asked to again go through a French (and French-made) interactive multimedia program they had explored at the beginning of the term and analyze it in terms of its "Frenchness." Did the students see or pick up anything particularly French about the story, the characters themselves, their interactions, and so forth. The second "reading" has always yielded a much richer, deeper, insightful, and more highly contextualized analysis, leading us to assess, to some extent, the journey the students have accomplished.

Comparing the diagrams of semantic networks that students produced in the first weeks of class with the more complex drawings they made at the end of the course is also revealing. It shows how much of the material has been assimilated and which areas are still unclear or simply remain as unanswered questions.

Finally, we marvel more and more at the type of insight students will have developed by the end of the term -- insights that quite frequently meet those expressed by experts. To cite but one example, here in translation is what a student who had never been to France wrote (in French) this past semester, as one of her initial conclusions:

> In the answers to the questionnaires about the word "réussite," the French associate words like "well-being," "happiness," "family," "épanouissement" (untranslatable) whereas the Americans. tend to associate the word to material riches .... Concerning "Mes plus grandes craintes," the French. tend to be more concerned about world issues in general like racism, war, whereas the American. fears are more of a personal nature. In the "most significant events in your life," the French often mentioned events related to their family and their sentimental life, whereas no one on the American side mentioned that. What is more important to them is professional success .... the opinion polls also are a good indicator of such concerns. I found one from IFOP which rates the most important concerns the French have: 64% say health, 55% say family and only 10% say "money" .... All of this seems to confirm that the French do not need money or material things to be satisfied.

Here is what Edith Wharton, an almost unconditional Francophile who lived in France for 26 years (from 1911-1937), writes in her book entitled *French Ways and Their Meanings* (1919):

> Their thoughts (talking about the French) are not occupied with money-making in itself, as an end worth living for, but only with the idea of making money enough to be sure of not losing their situation in life, for themselves or their children …. They want only leisure and freedom from material anxiety to enjoy what life and the arts of life offer. This absence of financial ambition should never be lost sight of: it is the best clue to the French character. (p. 93)

However rosy these assessments might be about the French, what is striking is how similar the two statements are! This is the best testimony our students can give us as to the legitimacy of what can be called the *Cultura* process.

Now, we are aware that, however significant these new insights are, they remain anecdotal and that much research is needed to try and assess what the students really learn and how they learn it. We believe that the "traces" that students leave behind -- the open forums, the logs, the papers, the evaluation questionnaires, and so forth -- provide an extraordinarily rich source of information for researchers interested in examining the cultural literacy students start with, and the level of knowledge and understanding they have garnered upon completion of the course.

Cultura clearly begs many assessment-oriented research questions, such as

- What are the most significant elements that help students construct true cultural understanding?
- What are the most likely pitfalls?
- What is the place and relevance of videoconferences?
- How do we know that students have learnt to use new sets of references when reading about or looking at a foreign reality?
- How critical is the role of the teacher and in what areas?
- What is the impact of such a project on the development of students' linguistic abilities?
- How much and how well do students integrate the language and discourse of their counterparts in their own writing?
- Does *Cultura* have a long-term effect on students?
- How does *Cultura* affect students' understand of themselves in relation to their own, collective culture?

We invite interested readers to contact us if they would like to use our materials for research purposes. Please see http://web.mit.edu/french/cultura/ for further information and updates.

CONCLUSION

It is clear, from our experience, that the methodology of *Cultura*, combined with the powerful assets of Web-based and computer-mediated communication, holds enormous promise in bringing to the forefront the "hidden dimension" of culture and in helping students develop an insider's understanding of another culture. In this global world, this is an area of crucial importance and we, language teachers, can and must play a key role. We are well-positioned to do so as we constantly operate at the intersection of language and culture. But we owe it to our students to go beyond the mechanics of language and delve, head on, into the world of cross-cultural literacy. We would be remiss if we did not.

We have learned, however, that some crucial ingredients need to be present for such a project to be successful:

- There needs to be an equal degree of commitment between the partners. One of the reasons our own experiments have worked so well, in our opinion, is that all instructors on both sides of the Atlantic have demonstrated an equal degree of commitment and involvement. It is, in fact, a crucial requirement in our opinion. It is not a given, but we are convinced that anything short of that will fail.
- Both parties need to agree to make culture the focus point of the language course they are teaching.
- Logistics need to be solved, such as what days and times a week and how often classes on both sides of the Atlantic meet.
- Finally -- and that is of the utmost importance -- the Web site requires steady and close maintenance.

The practical considerations stated above are certainly not inconsequential. The *Teacher's Guide* we are writing will provide detailed, step-by-step guidelines which will pinpoint obstacles teachers might encounter and will offer appropriate solutions and resources (such as how and where to find partners). From a technical point of view, *Cultura* is extremely simple and undemanding. The only two requirements are

1. that students and teachers have easy and/or regular access to the Internet; and
2. that one of the two school has its own server.

Looking ahead, we are planning to keep expanding the content (copyrights permitting). We are, for instance, in the process of adding fundamental historical, philosophical, anthropological and literary texts which have shaped both cultures and/or which reflect it. They will be available for the students' increasingly widening spheres of cross-cultural analysis. We also plan to keep developing the methodology and make it available to schools in both countries. In that respect, we started in Fall 1999, a similar experiment with a French and US high school: the Lycée Marcellin Berthelot in a suburb of Paris and the Lenox Memorial High School in Massachusetts.

Our future plans include making available to everyone who is interested some of the archived *Cultura* materials, creating templates which will allow schools to input their own questionnaires and materials, and expanding and tailoring our approach to specific target groups. We believe that *Cultura* has the potential of being successfully used and implemented by the business community: international conglomerates which have recently merged, where employees of different nationalities need to communicate successfully, need to understand each others' native cultures. The possibilities are limitless.

NOTES

return1To paraphrase the title of a book by the American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, 1973.

return2Interestingly, the word "knowledge" has two French equivalents: *savoir* and *connaissance*. While savoir refers to the checklist idea of "knowing how" or "knowing about," the idea behind *connaissance* is much broader. It encompasses the desire for, the scope, and awareness of the limits of one's construction of experience. *Cultura* strives to conciliate these aspects in the construction of knowledge.

return3This preliminary stage includes a variety of activities such as INT students initially writing a paragraph on what "culture" means to them and how they would define it. These definitions (written in the students' target language) are then shared and discussed by both INT and MIT students who then try to extract the core and multiple elements which make culture. Or, students might read a variety of newspaper articles where two countries are being compared on a any given topic, and be asked to examine what the underlying messages might be. We also have them play a card game entitled "Barnga" (Thiagarajan & Steinwachs, 1990). This "simulation game on cultural clashes" is very effective in making students aware of what it means to discover another reality.

return4The choice of which language to use and in what context, was easily made. It was clear to us, from the very beginning, that the responses to the questionnaires and the forums had to be written in the students' native language, or rather, since all students at MIT are not American and all students at INT are not French, in the language of the country where the students are studying, namely English for the MIT students and French

for the INT students. Word associations, for instance, only have value if they are made in the speaker's "native" language. Only then can one hope to access the hidden cultural values, which are intrinsically language-bound. To have students write in the forums in this language was also a deliberate choice. We wanted to make sure that students were able to express their thoughts in all their complexity as fully and as naturally as possible. This often surprises other foreign language teachers who have always thought of Web-based exchanges as a way for students to test their linguistic abilities. But this was not our purpose. And what students may "lose," by not writing in the target language, is largely offset by the gains they make by getting access to an extraordinarily rich, dynamic, and totally authentic language. This initially created a problem with INT students who resented having to write in French during an English class. They even petitioned their teachers. We wrote a letter giving them the arguments spelled in note 4. This dissipated their reluctance.

return5This, too, was a deliberate decision. It stemmed from the idea that the students should feel free to express themselves on whatever topic they choose, without fearing the teacher's interference. We thought it was important for students not to feel censored in any way regarding the ideas exchanged and/or the language used.

return6Students view *Trois Hommes et un Couffin* and *Three Men and a Baby* on videocassettes outside of class. They compare and analyse, in groups, specific scenes from the French and the American versions. We have selected six scenes:

- the first introductory scene (= the party)
- the discovery of the baby
- Jacques/Jack's return
- Jacques'/Jack's visit with his mother
- Sylvie's/Sylvia's first return
- the last scene.

return7An exception needs to be made, of course, when the words *copain/copine* refer to *un petit copain/une petite copine* (a boyfriend or girlfriend).

return8"Give me the first word you think of when I say 'hammer,'" is a standard procedure for word association experiments. Out of 1,000 subjects over half said "nail" in response to *hammer*, "low" in response to *high*, and "black" in response to *white*. The consistency of the results obtained has suggested that it may be possible to draw up a reasonably reliable map or word web of a person's mental lexicon (Aitchison, 1994, p. 83).

return9A discussion of French and American linguists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's theory of conceptual Network integration can be found at http://www.wam.umd.edu/~mturn/WWW/blending.html.

return10Swales opposes centripetal and centrifugal communities. Centripetal speech communities absorb people into the general fabric, and should logically oppose centrifugal discourse communities, which separate people according to interests or occupation. Cultura created a specific, computer-mediated, discourse community. It was centripetal in that students focused on a shared task yet centrifugal in that each identified and disambiguated the semantic structure of his own cultural environment. In this project students negotiated the meaning of their terms. In other words, they learned to evaluate the distance between what they meant, their "authorized" interpretation and its legitimacy, and what their partners possibly understood.

return11One class discussion, in particular, stands out in this regard: One day, an American student in an MIT class made the remark, based upon an analysis of French responses to the questionnaires, that the French tended to be much more direct than the Americans in terms of telling someone off, making a snide remark, or saying aloud what they thought. Yet, he added, American culture is known as being "direct." Isn't that a contradiction, he asked? We then, as a class, started listing examples of what makes American culture "direct," coming up with such examples as phone conversations, where a caller, dispensing with preliminary greetings, often immediately says "Is so-and-so there?" or business discussions where everyone is urged to "get to the point." Students started discussing that particular issue: Was it indeed a contradiction or not? Toward the end of the class, one student came up with the following explanation: It looks as if, he said, American culture is indeed direct, but only up to a point -- up to the point when one is afraid of "hurting other's peoples' feelings." Such illuminating insights, although not daily occurences, are what makes *Cultura* so worthwhile, in our eyes.

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