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# “Soy estudiante de ingles :)” – A telecollaborative approach to intercultural and ethnographic engagement in a Hong Kong university course

*This ethnographic case study explores intercultural and ethnographic engagement by undergraduate Hong Kong students enrolled in an Intercultural Communication course at a public research university. Ethnographic projects originated from virtual exchanges with undergraduates in a professional writing course at a private research institution on the East Coast in the US. Using a discourse approach as taught in the course, Hong Kong teams explored, analyzed, and reflected on intercultural communication topics as experienced in social networking sites. Hong Kong teams elicited from their US partners information on their personal, institutional, and professional contexts. Online interactions took place on Facebook over 10 weeks, and Hong Kong teams were encouraged to analyze their online interactions for an ethnographic project, a course requirement. The author investigates Hong Kong students' prior experiences and expectations, and if and how Hong Kong students engaged with counterparts in the US on Facebook to collect information on their topic,*

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and if Hong Kong teams analyzed their Hong Kong-US exchanges. Data triangulation includes a pre- and post-project survey, Facebook interactions, and ethnographic projects. Findings indicate that the majority of Hong Kong teams used their online exchanges for analysis in relation to course themes (e.g., politeness, face systems, corporate ideologies) as well as commented on the cultural exchange as a learning outcome.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, virtual exchange, social media, intercultural, ethnographic

## Introduction

Prior research in the field of language education suggests that interactions in globalized, online spaces can provide opportunities for informal language and intercultural learning (Benson, 2015). A recent study between learners in Korea and in the US. (Park, 2014) illustrates how the platform can help students to “reflect and rethink their approaches to intercultural communication” (p.182). An early study in the Japanese as a Foreign Language context with learners in Australia and Japan found that computer-mediated exchanges could increase quantity and quality of L2 syntax, as well as the quality of vocabulary development (Stockwell & Harrington, 2003). Other early language studies explored intercultural learning (e.g., Belz, 2002; Liaw, 2006; O’Dowd, 2003; see also overview in Carney, 2006 and edited volume by Guth & Helm, 2010), relationship building and connectivity (e.g., Liaw, 2006), interactivity and interaction (e.g., O’Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005), or reflectivity in teacher education (Lord & Lomicka, 2007). More recently, it has been argued that telecollaboration should focus primarily on supporting language and cultural studies at the undergraduate level (Lewis, 2017), and CALICO Monograph has been dedicated to exploring attitude in intercultural virtual communication (Oskoz & Vinagre, 2020). One main tenet of this case study<sup>1</sup> was thus to promote engagement of Hong Kong (hereinafter HK) learners with other speakers of the target language – in this case undergraduate peers in the US – via virtual exchange, also known as telecollaboration (e.g., Belz, 2003; Kern, 2006; Warschauer, 1996).

In the present study, the telecollaboration was incorporated into an *Intercultural Communication* course in HK, a core course covering topics such as corporate discourse, ideology, gender, face systems, and politeness strategies based on a required course textbook.<sup>2</sup> The discourse analytical approach lent itself to an intercultural exchange, where telecollaborative partners served a dual role: 1) as cultural informants of their home culture, and 1) as ethnographers of the target culture and. One of the main course assessments in HK was an ethnographic research project – to be conducted in teams – on intercultural communication in an online community. The telecollaborative Facebook exchanges served the purpose of offering the data corpus for the analysis. This is in line with O’Dowd (2006), whose early research explored how students use video conferencing and email to conduct ethnographic research with telecollaborative partners, and who suggested that telecollaboration should engage students in research on how members of the target culture interpret their social reality so that students could become more aware of their own social reality.

The contributions of the present study are twofold. First, it seeks to advance our understanding of intercultural engagement as manifested in HK participants’ online interactions with US partners. The task prompts (Appendix A) provided the basis for inquiring about different personal, institutional, and professional contexts by eliciting relevant information from their partners abroad. Second, the study aims to explore HK teams’ analyses of such

online interactions for their ethnographic projects, which are explained in more detail in the method section.

## Background

Despite the potential of telecollaboration to support intercultural learning, assessing intercultural learning is complicated first and foremost by the lack of consensus on the definition of *culture*. Ware and Kessler (2014) have stressed that *culture* has been defined in over 300 different ways. For instance, Fantini and Tirmiz (2006) have defined intercultural literacy as “a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (p. 12, emphasis in original). With regard to English-as-a-Foreign-Language contexts, the recent large-scale Asia-Pacific Exchange Collaboration project connected twenty schools in Asian-Pacific countries, with half of them located in Japan, as well as in Taiwan, Thailand, and Hawai‘i (Shimizu, Pack, Kano, Okazaki, & Yamamura, 2016). According to the authors, students improved their awareness and motivation toward English language learning and communication. Classes were effective in providing students with increased opportunities for interaction in English and recognizing the value of language learning – primarily through Skype interactions.

The theoretical framework of this study draws on Byram’s 1997 intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model, which includes the inter-related dimensions of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness. According to Byram, intercultural competence entails the ability to “interact with interlocutors from a different country and culture, taking into consideration the degree of one’s existing familiarity with the country and culture and the extent of difference between one’s own and the other” (p.53). This can include knowledge of the “processes and institutions of socializations in one’s own and one’s interlocutor’s country” (Byram, 1997, p.60). In this study, the task prompts aimed at encouraging students to elicit educational and professional perspectives through Facebook interactions with their US peers. Another feature of ICC includes possessing the skills of being able to identify possible areas of misunderstanding in interaction as well as being curious and open to other perspectives. ICC also contains awareness of the relationship between the home and target cultures as well as the sharing of concepts and values behind products and practices in the target culture by its members. Of particular interest in the present study was if HK learners’ intercultural engagement was evidenced in their use of their own Facebook interactions as the basis for analysis in their ethnographic projects by applying discourse analytical techniques learned in class.

Prior research suggests that the ability to change perspective and the willingness to communicate and engage are crucial factors for intercultural learning. For example, Kitade (2012) found that Japanese learners drew on the discourse analytic tool of exchange structure analysis to document group dynamics, and that group norms varied and were partially influenced by the frequency of contributions and by internal group norms; some groups were able to develop a structure that facilitated intercultural learning and allowed them to move from knowledge exchanges to perspective changes. Moreover, Liaw and Bunn-LeMaster (2010) found that Taiwanese and US students interacted in English by using positive emotion words, more social alignment terms, and more mitigating statements with one another to continually reaffirm their interactivity and interpersonal rapport. Likewise, the

Facebook interactions and analysis thereof in this study afforded students to gain insight into the target language culture through a close reading of online contributions.

Finally, competencies for intercultural literacy further encompass the understanding and the use of online cultural and discourse conventions (e.g. netiquette), and participant reflection on their engagement and contributions (Pegrum, 2009). In a similar vein, Kurek and Hauck (2014) have highlighted informed reception of multimodal input, thoughtful participation in social networking sites, and creative contribution and dissemination of tangible artifacts as well as reflection on and evaluation of processes and products. In this study, the author explored how HK participants reflected on their own interactions, their performance in the project, including their own contributions.

Against the backdrop of these telecollaborative affordances and constraints, this study focuses on the collaborative project tasks of undergraduate English majors enrolled in an *Intercultural Communication* course at a public research university in HK and peers on the East Coast in the US. Research questions are as follows:

1. What are HK participants' prior cross-cultural experiences and expectations for the telecollaboration?
2. Do HK teams analyze their online interactions for ethnographic research projects?
3. What are indicators for intercultural engagement as evidenced in Facebook interactions between HK and US participants and in HK teams' ethnographic project analysis?

## Method

This study takes an ethnographic case-study approach to provide a thick and in-depth description of a complex online context (e.g., Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012; Müller-Hartmann, 2012). The author was participant observer (Denzin, 1989) in that she co-designed the course (with her colleague in the US), and taught it in HK. The study further shares the characteristics of emic and holistic principles (van Lier, 1988) by including the HK participants' perspectives. As Spradley (1980) pointed out: "Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*" (p.3; italics in original). While generalization is not the goal of this study, classroom-based research needs to attempt for things that happen to be "*particularized* as part of pedagogically sound curricula in other settings" (van Lier, 2003, p. 57; italics in original). The author provides a detailed description of participants, contexts, and the analysis steps and procedures below.

## Participants

This spring 2016 project included 55 HK students in an *Intercultural Communication* course at a public research university in HK, and 19 undergraduate students enrolled in a 300-level professional writing course at a private research university on the East Coast in the US. The course in HK was streamlined with another section, which was taught by another instructor but not part of the telecollaboration.

74 students (55 HK students plus 19 US students) participated in the telecollaboration. First, the 55 HK students were further sub-divided into 13 HK Teams (1-13) including three to five members each.<sup>3</sup> Next, five telecollaborative HK-US teams were formed (A-E). Each comprised three to four US teammates, which had been paired with HK members by their instructor. The analysis focuses on learner contributions on the HK side of the exchange. Overall, 49 HK students signed the consent form.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, there were five

HK-US telecollaborative teams. The course in HK started on January 14, and the course in the US commenced a week later, on January 20. Online interactions took place via a private Facebook group, and each of the five telecollaborative teams had their own sub-pages. All participants had used Facebook before; the one HK student who did not want to use social media posted through his D10 team mates. Names are pseudonyms, all data are verbatim.

### *Contexts: Course requirements, tasks, exchanges*

Over ten weeks (February 17–April 27), the five telecollaborative teams completed a set of three tasks (Appendix A), which were meant to serve as the springboard for teams' ethnographic project. The ethnographic project was an assessment weighing 40% of the overall grade: 20% for the paper, 20% for the presentation; the other main assessment included a final exam weighing 40% of the grade. This project assignment asked students to work in groups of four to five to address an intercultural communication issue in HK society, using a discourse approach as taught in the course. For example, students were taught to analyze speaker selection in adjacency pairs, or to explore power relationships by looking at a proposition's weight of imposition, distance, and power of participants.

Tasks 1 and 2 were based on the framework by O'Dowd and Ware (2009). Specifically, the *Information Exchange Task* (Task 1) required students to publish and comment on one another's Facebook introductory bios. In the *Comparison and Analysis Task* (Task 2), telecollaborative teams discussed individual experiences, institutional and educational systems, and corporate and business discourse in the US, China, and Hong Kong. For the *Collaborative Task* (Task 3), Hong Kong participants worked in their Hong Kong teams in order to analyze their Facebook exchanges for their ethnographic project. It should be noted that HK students were encouraged – not required – to analyze the data generated by their intercultural Facebook interactions. Students were also free to explore any of the topics covered in the course (e.g., face systems, politeness strategies, etc.). Lastly, HK students posted final wrap-up reflections on Facebook.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The data collection took place in spring 2016, and instrument triangulation included pre- and post-project surveys (administered via Qualtrics), Facebook interactions, and course artifacts (HK teams' ethnographic projects). The objective of the pre-survey was to elicit information about students' cross-cultural experiences, and their expectations for the telecollaboration with regard to teamwork and online interactions. The Facebook data provided insight into participants' intercultural interactions. The goal of students' reflections on Facebook and the post-survey was to get their perspectives on the main course take-aways. Names are pseudonyms, all data are verbatim.

In order to answer Research Question 1, the author drew on pre-survey responses and Facebook interactions (from Tasks 1–2). To answer Research Question 2, the author conducted a quantitative analysis of Facebook posts and projects. For Research Question 3, the author investigated the post-survey and HK students' ethnographic projects. The Likert Scale items in the Qualtrics surveys produced descriptive quantitative data. Three trained raters coded the qualitative data using the software MAXQDA. Open-ended survey answers and Facebook interactions were coded openly in a first round in accordance with a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To keep an open mind initially, *in vivo*

codes were taken from the subjects' own words without applying pre-existing categories from the literature. In a second round, codes were subsumed under different categories. For example, the following codes which were in response to the question of the three top-take-aways for students were subsumed under "cultural differences:" "I can understand the differences between our Eastern culture and their western culture," "I became more aware of the culture differences and similarities," and "we might have different cultural backgrounds and beliefs." The purpose of analyzing the ethnographic projects was to get a sense of which teams voluntarily used their own Facebook interactions with US students – not to conduct a cross-group comparison of the content of their project analyses. The next section presents results regarding HK teams' prior cross-cultural experiences and expectations, intercultural engagement in Facebook interactions with US students, and whether they analyzed those interactions in their ethnographic projects.

## Results

### *Prior cross-cultural experience and project expectations*

At the beginning of the project, HK students submitted answers to a pre-survey (N=30); results are shown in Appendix B. In terms of prior cross-cultural experiences, students listed: Personal traveling (seven), studying (six), living abroad (five), exchange programs (four), personal relationships (three), work experience (one), volunteering experience (one), and teaching experience (one). With regard to expectations for teamwork, the most frequently mentioned items were "cultural exchange" (15 times), followed by "work[ing] closely and efficiently with team members" (five times). In terms of specific expectations regarding the online exchanges with US partners, "cultural exchange with a focus on language use in another culture" was also mentioned 15 times, and "more active interactions" was mentioned four times. When asked what students wanted to focus in the telecollaboration project in particular, four mentioned "gender discourse," three wanted to focus on "cultural differences", three on "face systems", and four were undecided. With regard to their ethnographic projects, HK students had expressed at the outset their expectations to investigate topics such as gender discourse, and cultural differences and face systems. Some participants mentioned "parent-child communication" or "discourse (sexuality)," which were textbook topics covered in the course, and thus existed more generally as possibilities for analysis for final projects.

### *Posts and ethnographic projects*

The eight HK teams, who used their Facebook interactions for their ethnographic project, analyzed one or more of the course-related themes (socialization, forms of discourse, face systems, ideologies). Six HK teams analyzed face systems (A1, B3, B4, C6, E11, E13), three analyzed ideology (A1, B3, E11), three analyzed politeness (C5, C6, E13), and three analyzed the forms of discourse and socialization (B3, E11, E12).

Table 1 lists the average number of words per posts, and the topics and interactions of those eight HK teams who used their Facebook exchanges for analysis for their ethnographic projects.

Table 1. Teams, projects, posts

HK Teams <sup>5</sup>	Ethnographic Project Title	Average no. of words/FB post <sup>6</sup>
E12	Analysis of intercultural communication in high- and low-context cultures in Facebook community	743
E11	Exploring the value of friends on Facebook	522
C6	Similarities/differences between organizational cultures in HK & US smaller/larger companies ( <i>Best Buy?</i> )	503
B4	How we understand each other and establish new relationships by making inferences	453
C5	How do people greet and start a conversation in the context of a Facebook closed group and Tinder?	431
A1	A study of academic and leisure discourse communities	348
E13	Similarities/differences between HK and US student's use of politeness strategies on Facebook group chat	256
B3	Intercultural miscommunication between HK Ss & US	204

As can be seen above, the most active in overall posts was HK team E12 with 743 words per post on average before E11, C6, and B4. Compared with the eight HK teams listed above, B3 was last in terms of average number of words posted on Facebook. (Overall, D8 had the fewest number of words: 90.25.) Most HK teams struggled with a lack of response from US partners, which may have been due to the asymmetry of member numbers.

The author attempted to make an informed decision about which examples to present given the large volume of data. Teams B3, C5, C6, and E12 were chosen because they are representative of low-, medium-, and high-posting teams as illustrated in Table 1. Telecollaborative Team B consists of 13 students in total, that is, five HK students (B3), four HK students (B4), plus four US students. Team C consists of 17 students in total, 13 in the HK team (four in C5, four in C6, five in C7) plus four in the US team.

### *Intercultural engagement and ethnographic analysis*

Since the quality of interactions and projects cannot be derived from the quantity of words, this section looks at the content of the interactions and ethnographic projects, as exemplified by HK teams B3, C5, and C6. All screenshots have been modified to show HK students' posts only.

**Exploring educational and institutional contexts.** The example below shows a response by Alexis (C5) to the first task prompt, in which students were asked to share biographical information about themselves (e.g., the languages they speak and hobbies), as well as introduce their respective institutions and fields of study.

Hello, I am Alexis, a year 3 student majoring in English. I was born in Hong Kong, so I am a native Cantonese speaker, and a intermediate English and Mandarin speaker as well. As a language lover, I have learnt basic Japanese and Korean due to the love of Japanese and Korean TV drama and pop music, at least I can do self-introduction

and engage in daily conversation. Besides academic life, I am a part-time clerk who has been working in a Risk and credit management company [...] Recently, I grow an interest in working oversea, and I am wondering if I could develop my career path abroad.

Speaking my school, [the Hong Kong institution] has many international students and exchanges students, so we are studying in a cross-cultural environment. Like myself, I teamed up with French and Korean students in two courses in last sem and I always meet foreign students and learn with them. We help each other in learning, they correct my grammatical mistake and I work on design and content drafting. [...] Finally, I believe that every day can be a new exploration and learning experience, so I am interested to learn about your culture and language and introduce mine to you. [...]

[Facebook Excerpt, Alexis, GTC5, February 14, 8:05 pm]

In the introductory post above, Alexis introduces herself as a “language lover” and provides information about her language learning experience (Japanese, Korean), her digital media skills, her current work experience working part-time for a risk-and-credit management company, her current experience as a student at the HK university (which she considers a “cross-cultural environment”), her interest in working abroad, and her positive prior team work experience with international students from France and Korea. She closes with expressing an interest to learn about her partners’ “culture and language,” and to introduce her Hong Kong culture to them. It becomes evident that Alexis is open to learning more about her partners’ cultures based on her positive framing of prior cross-cultural experiences.

**Inquiring about learning cultures.** This section provides indicators for intercultural engagement as manifested in Facebook interactions and ethnographic projects. The excerpt below shows a post from Karla from E12, the team with the highest number of words per post.

Hi GTEA, GTEW, GTEL<sup>8</sup>, I just have a few questions about your education in the states and feel free to answer me anytime.

Does your university focus on continuous performance in class or final examination? In Hong Kong, universities emphasise the continuous performance of students, like we have tons of assignments, presentations and mid-terms so it’s really stressful. When I was doing research for my exchange, I noticed that there is one term paper and a final examination for some universities in UK so I’m just curious about universities in USA.

One of my professors who studied at University of Oxford once told me that when he was still a student, he had sessions where he could ask or simply talk to his tutor or instructor one-on-one [...] So, do you guys have that kind of treatment? Or just mass lectures like the ones I have in Hong Kong? Honestly, mass lectures aren’t really suitable for teaching arts in universities. [...]

[Facebook Excerpt, Karla, GTE12, March 24]

In this post addressed to her US colleagues A, W, and L, Karla shares information regarding her institutional background (“continuous performance,” “tons of assignments,” and

education in the UK (“one-on-one” tutor or instructor meetings) also holds true for US students. Karla shows an awareness of different learning cultures by sharing the knowledge she has about higher education in the UK, and by comparing that to her own learning culture. She then demonstrates curiosity toward her US partners’ learning culture by eliciting more information on the same subject.

**Discussing cultural concepts.** In another example, Mienna inquires about the concept of “fraternities” from US partner G. since she knows that he belongs to a fraternity based on the information in his introductory post.

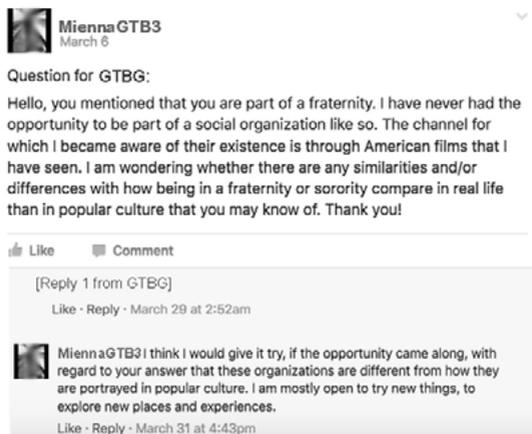


Figure 1. Mienna, GTB3

In their discussion about fraternities, Mienna is drawing on her existing knowledge from “American films” when asking US partner G. for confirmation regarding the differences and similarities in “real life.” He then explains that he does not know much about fraternities or sororities prior to enrolling in college, and that his knowledge before joining the fraternity is also primarily from the movies. G. says he feels that the concepts of values and traditions are generally misrepresented. Finally, he asks if Mienna can imagine joining a sorority if the opportunity presented itself. Mienna affirms and mirrors G.’s lexical choice in her use of a similar phrase (“if the opportunity came along”).

**Using involvement strategy.** Minnie expresses interest in her US partner Ka’s Dominican background, before inquiring if he was brought up American or Dominican. She then wants to know what he thinks about “Hong Kong culture.”

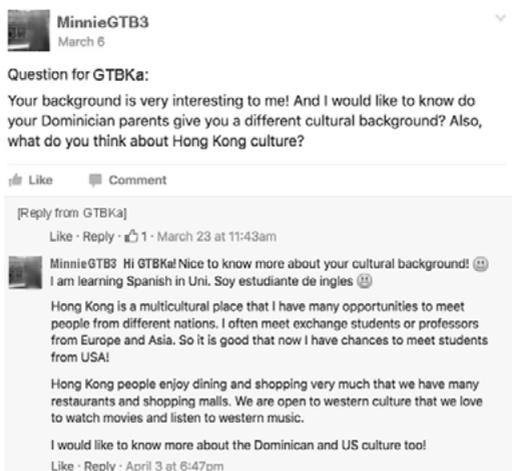


Figure 2. Minnie, GTB3

US partner Ka replies a couple of weeks later that he is very attached to his Dominican background, that he prefers Dominican food and friends, and that he also still speaks Spanish. He continues by saying that he does not know much about HK's culture, but that he knows about its rich historical background and unique experiences, and that he would love to learn more about it. Minnie acknowledges her US partner Ka's Dominican socialization by using the involvement strategy of code-switching to Spanish, followed by a smiley face ("Soy estudiante de ingles 😊"). She continues by sharing her own cultural background (HK as a "multicultural place") before expressing interest in learning more about Dominican and American cultures.

**Comparing professional experiences.** Kelvin asks the same US student (Ka) about his professional career and work (Figure 3).

Kelvin considers his partner's work experience different from the HK students' experiences. His US partner Ka replies to Kelvin's inquiries by sharing his experience of working for a well-known US fashion chain. Ka further states that he enjoys meeting a lot of clients from overseas (especially from China) and establishing a professional relationship. Kelvin engages in a number of follow-up questions with his partner regarding language barriers with international customers. In this example, Kelvin takes interest in how his US partner Ka has been able to navigate the linguistic barriers when interacting with customers ("cos it's a bit difficult for you to understand what they want?"), and whether he has encountered difficult customers. This prompts US partner Ka to elaborate on his struggles at the beginning of his sales career, and to share his strategies for remaining patient and professional in order to fulfill his clients' needs. When Ka mentioned Chinese clients, this could have led to an insightful discussion with Kelvin and his first-hand knowledge of Chinese culture. Yet, neither student shared any concrete examples beyond establishing a language barrier.

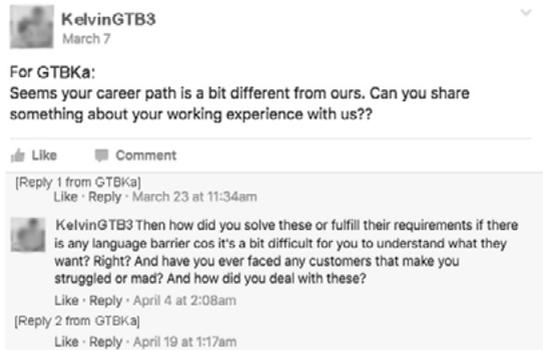


Figure 3. Kelvin, GTB3

**Contrasting organizational cultures.** Alexis expresses interest in learning about “different work culture” and asks A to share his experience. In his reply, A shares the nature of his work and mentions his favorite job at *Best Buy*. He further gives out information about working with colleagues, his working hours, and job duties and feelings. Alexis then compares her partner’s answers about working at *Best Buy* with working in HK (“most jobs prefer to work 3–5 days a week for part-time”). She demonstrates that she is able to take perspective and compare different work norms and cultures. Additionally, Alexis initiates a conversation about the working culture in the US IT industry and then reflects on her own culture.

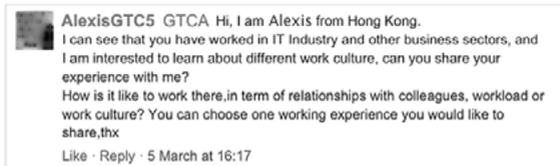


Figure 4. Alexis, GTC5

US partner A provides a lengthy answer regarding his work experience at *Best Buy*, to which Alexis’ replies to A as shown below.

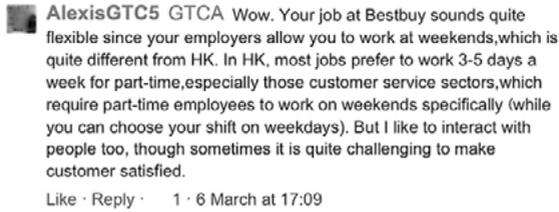


Figure 5. Alexis, GTB5

In her reply, Alexis compares her *Best Buy* experience to her Hong Kong experience with regard to flexible work hours; she also comments on the challenge of interacting with customers.

Team C6 – like C5 – is intrigued by US partner A’s work experience at *Best Buy* and decides to explore similarities and differences in organizational cultures by comparing HK and US companies. For their ethnographic project, the team focuses on analyzing face systems and politeness strategies. Earlier in the term, John started a conversation about A’s *Best Buy* workplace experience by asking the following: “Hi [A]! I see that you work at BestBuy. Have you ever had to work there on Black Friday? If not, have you ever had a hectic workday at BestBuy?” (March 6, 2016 at 9:54pm). In his reply to John’s Black Friday question, US partner A describes his experience and posts a Black Friday photo stating that it was like working on a normal day after two hours.

A month later, John writes a longer post with a number of follow-up questions addressed to all four US members. John’s list of inquiries regarding two US companies, *Best Buy* and *Kodak*, includes power relationships, group dynamics, work-life balance, workplace rules, and employee retention. (Figure 6)

In his reply, US partner A stresses *Best Buy*’s team-based approach to goals, the flexible work schedule, and the strict dress code guidelines. Two weeks later, John inquires how departmental decisions at *Best Buy* are made, and if the company assigns specific gender roles to male and female employees:

Thanks for replying! We’d like to ask one more question to know more about power distance and gender issues at Best Buy.

– Is there a clear distinction between employees and managers at Best Buy? Are decisions within your department made by higher-ups, or is it discussed and decided by everyone?

– What is the proportion of male and female managers at your workplace? Are there any assumed gender roles? (For example, are men supposed to work in the back while the women handle the cashiers? Or vice versa?)

Sorry for the trouble, and thanks for everything so far!

[Facebook Excerpt 3, John, GTC6 (2), April 24, 2:26am]

Specifically, John wants to know more about issues such as decision-making practices, power and gender issues, and pay equality. Nevertheless, due to the fact that his post is published right around the time when the HK course – and thus the telecollaboration – draws to an end, there is no further response from US partners.



Figure 6. John, GTCA

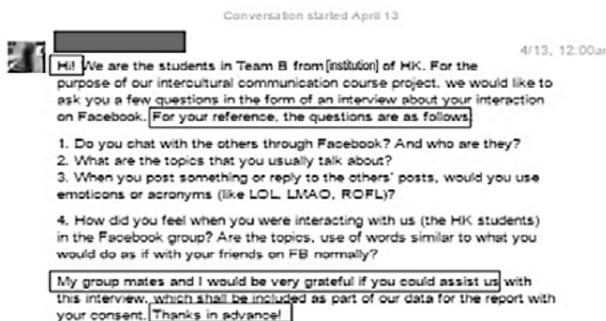


Figure 7. B3 Ethnographic Project [emphasis in original]

### *Ethnographic project analyses*

**Exploring power relationships.** While B3 was among the lowest-posting HK teams, they used three out of the four discourse topics, that is, face systems, ideology, and forms of discourse/socialization to analyze their Facebook interactions as illustrated in the examples provided earlier. They specifically look at how these manifested themselves through

participants' turn-taking. Figure 7 shows the screenshot of a Facebook Messenger excerpt from one of the HK members in B3's ethnographic project in which they analyze the notions of power and distance and face.

Below is the team's analysis of the parts in the highlighted boxes above:

In the case, the Hong Kong student was in deference face system (-Power, +Distance). Her invitation showed the equal power relationship that no one is having more power than another and the independence strategy she used shows the distance between Hong Kong and American students. Also, the invitation aimed to help the whole group not to lose face as she did not say what the group really mean, that is, the interview is very important to the research and the help from the US students is needed. Meanwhile, conflicting expectations appeared in this case. Not replying the Hong Kong student's message, the American student was using a negative face that they have their freedom to choose whether to answer or not, and they do not feel the same level of importance as Hong Kong students do. Assuming prompt replies from the Americans, the silence let the Hong Kong student feel losing face.

[Ethnographic Project Excerpt, B3 May 2016]

B3 correctly situates the power relationship with their US peers as 'egalitarian' ("-P") and 'distant' ("+D"). This shows that B3 has developed an insight into their communication culture with US partners. Yet, B3 does not indicate "weight of imposition" as "+W" despite the importance of the question for them, which subsequently results in their "losing face" when US partners do not reply.

**Politeness strategies.** C5's compares how greetings and openings in their Facebook interactions with US partners compare to interactions on the dating app *Tinder*: "The reason of choosing *Tinder* and Facebook closed group as the research topic is because both of them are popular and widely used around the world, yet the sizes of the people involved in the conversations are different." C5 focuses on components of the "grammar of context" such as scene, participants, or message form (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012) as discussed in class. For example, C5 establishes that their HK-US Facebook group could be "categorized as low context as the background information, rules and tasks involved are clearly explained." This may have been due to the explicit instructions by the author and her US colleague. *Tinder*, on the other hand, could be "categorized as high context since there are no specific rules or instructions for *Tinder* conversations" in that participants need to infer information.

Team C5 analyzes the following conversation opening by their HK member Crystal to illustrate how the Chinese politeness concept "*lei mo*" is used in form of a compliment: "I can see that you are really passionate of your chosen field. What's your hobby in your daily life?" (March 6). C5 discusses this post in their analysis regarding face and politeness strategies as follows:

Sometimes compliment is a common involvement strategy in which both members of Facebook closed group and *Tinder* users use to start a pleasing conversation. On Facebook closed group, one [Hong Kong] student complimented on the passion on study of another [US] student to shift the topic smoothly and pleasantly about another aspect of school life (See Figure 8<sup>9</sup>). It linked to the Ideology of Chinese "*lei mo*". Chinese tends to compliment on positive face of the recipients by attending to recipient's interests,

needs and wants (Cheng, 2003) which can be used to show respect and build a rapport. [Ethnographic Project, C5, May 2016]

In this excerpt, C5 explains how compliments can function as involvement strategies when someone wants to start a conversation in Chinese. Drawing on Cheng (2003),<sup>10</sup> C5 shows that they are able to identify the concept (“*lei mo*”) in their Facebook interactions with US partners.

**Analyzing organizational hierarchies.** In the excerpt below, C6 discusses the managerial relationships at *Best Buy* based on information received from US partner A:

Best Buy employee [A] considered his relationship with his manager as ‘friendly’ since he ‘could negotiate with managers on which day to work’ [...], and is allowed to ‘focus on schoolwork during the weekdays’ and ‘work weekends only’ [...]. This is a highly egalitarian negotiation since the managers did not make use of their greater negotiation power as seniors to force the employee to work at times they want.

[Ethnographic Project, C6, May 2016]

C6 supports one of their arguments (“highly egalitarian negotiation” in the US workplace) by using the following two quotes from their Facebook interactions: “friendly” and “could negotiate with managers on which day to work.” Drawing on Hofstede’s<sup>11</sup> dimensions of cultural differences model, C6 analyzes their Facebook discussion based on course concepts.

**Main course take-aways.** Finally, the following four main themes were identified based on participants’ main take-aways in the post-questionnaire (Appendix C): *cross-cultural interaction* (15), *ethnographic research project* (8), *social media* (6), and *theme-based task: ideologies in corporations* (3). Specific benefits included having been introduced to Facebook as a platform for data collection (“Facebook fruitful for other research purposes”), others felt that Facebook was “good for intercultural communication (photos/videos share, comments),” or “good to meet new friends abroad.” Moreover, eight students also commented on the telecollaboration as a main benefit in their final reflection post for Task 3. These results seem in line with initial pre-survey answers, which highlighted that most students were interested in the cultural aspect of the telecollaboration.

## Discussion

### *Intercultural engagement*

Most HK students expected to learn about their partners’ cultures, which resonates with an early study by Müller-Hartmann (2006) between student teachers in Germany and the United States, in which found that most of the participants expected their upcoming exchange as an opportunity to both learn unique facts about the other culture and perspectives of people with different cultural backgrounds. The eight HK teams, who used their online interactions for their final projects, analyzed one or more of the course-related themes (forms of discourse/socialization, face systems, politeness, ideology).

In an introductory post by E12, the team with the highest number of words per post, Karla described her experience with tests and exams in Hong Kong before inquiring about

the US context. By also mentioning the situation at the University of Oxford, she demonstrated her awareness of other institutional conventions. In her bio, C5 member Alexis first provided personal information such as hobbies and musical taste. She then demonstrated her willingness to communicate by expressing “an interest in working overseas,” and by introducing HK as an international educational environment where she had been able to learn from international students. She concluded by highlighting her openness to learning and exploring her partners’ “culture and language” and by introducing her home culture and language to them. The engagement by HK members illustrated their positive attitudes towards engaging with one another by using similar language, and by the skill of asking inquisitive questions about each other’s cultural and professional backgrounds.

Moreover, involvement strategies such as code-switching, eliciting more information from a partner’s bio, and expressing a desire to learn from international peers could be observed by members in teams B3, C5, and C6. For example, Minnie switched to her US partner’s native language, which shows that she was willing to approach her partner through his Spanish identity. This is in line with Shimizu *et al.* (2016), who found that an exchange can result in increasing motivation to communicate and interact in the target language – in this case in Spanish, the native language of the Dominican student. In their discussion about fraternities, both Mienna and G. seemed willing to engage with each other, and able to take each other’s perspective (Kitade, 2012). Minnie and Mienna both demonstrated intercultural engagement, which supports results from a recent telecollaboration in which the authors concluded that their project “showed a tendency toward increased tolerance of other cultures” (Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, and Collazos, 2016, p.64). Furthermore, the exchange between HK members and their US partners on organizational cultures demonstrated that students undertook perspective-taking by engaging with work cultures in both Hong Kong and the US Both Kelvin (B3) and US partner Ka demonstrated cross-cultural awareness when talking about language barriers between English and Chinese-speaking people. This is in line with Yang’s and Chen’s (2014) intercultural project with bilingual students in Taiwan, in which they found that students were able to raise their awareness of American culture by comparing and contrasting their culture with the other’s culture. Furthermore, C6 member John’s inquiries showed his enthusiasm for further exchanges with his US partner.

### *Ethnographic project analysis*

In the analysis of their Facebook interactions, team B3 indicated an understanding of the concepts of power and distance as discussed in class. Overall, B3 demonstrated an understanding of how to apply the discourse analytical framework learned in class to their Facebook exchanges with US partners.

Another HK team that showed that they were able to think from their partners’ cultural perspectives to achieve effective communication was team C5. This team elaborated on the use of the concept of “*lei mo*” as used by Chinese speakers to compliment the recipient and to show respect and build rapport. The team’s analysis was in line with the fact that intercultural engagement could manifest itself through participants’ linguistic choices such as expressing involvement by making compliments, or using the other person’s language when interacting online. Similar to C5’s analysis in the ethnographic project, team C6 also analyzed politeness strategies and face systems. But instead of using complimenting as an involvement strategy, C6 showed their enthusiasm by proactively asking various

questions regarding the organizational culture of US companies that their partners were familiar with. Intercultural engagement thus seemed evidenced in team C6's willingness to explore a corporate topic in relation to their US partner's experience working for *Best Buy*. This prompted the HK team to seek more input from their US partners for their topic of analyzing differences in organizational cultures of Hong Kong and US companies. Even though team C6 did not receive a reply to their final set of questions at the time, since the project had officially concluded, they still used their Facebook interactions for exploring their ethnographic project as shown. In their comparison of managerial relationships between the US and their home culture, this team's incorporation of online conversations into their final project analysis demonstrated the ability to reflect on their engagement and contributions (Pegrum, 2009).

### *Main course take-aways*

Participants listed as the main benefits of the HK course cross-cultural interaction and the ethnographic project in the post-survey; some also commented on the telecollaboration as a main benefit in their final reflection post for Task 3. This highlights the potential of the project and also supports previous findings where participants saw the value of the telecollaboration due to the different competences that were taught (see Nicolaou & Sevilla-Pavón, 2016). This echoes another recent study by Waldman, Harel, and Schwab (2016), who found that their participants considered the process of telecollaboration meaningful for their training. In a similar vein, Greenfield (2003) found that the majority of Hong Kong high school students enjoyed the exchange with US students because they felt they gained general confidence in English and computer skills, and they also felt that they made significant progress in language skills such as writing and speaking, as well as in thinking.

### **Limitations**

While the telecollaboration has shown potential for intercultural engagement and ethnographic analysis, there were also a number of limitations. The large number of Hong Kong students may have had the effect that some students were less engaged than others (Fuchs, 2019). In addition, the fact that students were engaged online with their US partners may have prevented them from taking a more objective view regarding the data analysis. As O'Dowd (2006) found, videoconferencing and email supported ethnographic interviewing and intercultural communicative competence in his study; yet, it was difficult for students to "develop a critical cultural awareness during the necessarily short duration of a telecollaborative exchange" due to students' tendency to engage in discussion with their telecollaborative partner without being able to keep a more neutral stance (p. 115). Moreover, the author had no data from the US students beyond the Facebook posts.

### **Conclusion and implications**

While intercultural engagement can manifest itself through the topics discussed in the exchanges, it can also be shown through the linguistic choices made by participants. The interactions by teams B3 and C6 seemed exemplary for going beyond information exchanges and by displaying perspective-taking (Kitade, 2012). Despite the fact that the main assessment included a final exam weighing 40% of the grade that was not directly related to the

telecollaboration, some students were able to engage in more profound dialogue with US partners. Their exchanges went beyond question-and-answer type exchanges as illustrated by some of the students in B3. For example, Minnie and Mienna of team B3 demonstrated their willingness to engage by inquiring about each other's different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as culture-specific concepts. Moreover, Minnie switched to Spanish in her post to express solidarity with her Dominican-American partner in the US.

Findings further indicate that intercultural engagement was evidenced in that more than half of the HK teams used their online exchanges for analysis for their ethnographic projects. Eight out of 13 teams explored face systems, ideology, politeness, or forms of discourse and socialization in their Facebook interactions with US partners. This level of analysis would have not been possible without the telecollaboration, that is, a more in-depth contextualization in their ethnographic projects. Yet, the fact that students interacted with their subjects may have prevented them from taking a more objective stance (see O'Dowd, 2006).

Finally, some students commented on the difficulties and nuances of intercultural communication in their post-survey responses, and they listed a number of main take-aways from the Hong Kong course in their final Facebook reflections, which means that they were able to make connections between the course content and the online interactions. Overall, on-going reflective elements should be integrated into each task so as to prompt students to investigate more deeply and objectively specific intercultural communication elements from their exchanges – rather than posting on Facebook to fulfill a course requirement. In order to build on intercultural engagement displayed through analyzing Facebook posts, tasks prompts would need to be designed so as to engage learners in in-depth dialogue with their intercultural peers by going beyond the required number of posts. A more fine-grained linguistic analysis could be conducted for the teams' ethnographic projects. Students could systematically document their perceived intercultural learning in their interactions by for instance, systematically tracking and analyzing their and their partners' use of politeness strategies.

## Notes

1. This project was part of a larger study and funded by a Teaching Development Grant from City University of Hong Kong (see also Fuchs, 2017).
2. Scollon, R., Scollon, S., & Jones, R. (2012). *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach* (3rd ed.). Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
3. In order to indicate which of the 13 HK sub-teams belonged to the five telecollaborative teams A-E, the following letter-number labels were used: A1, A2, B3, B4, C5, C6, C7, C8, D8, D9, D10, E11, E12, E13. For example, telecollaborative Team A consisted of HK sub-teams A1 and A2, and telecollaborative Team B consisted of B3 and B4.
4. The telecollaboration was originally scheduled between the institution in Hong Kong and an institution in New Zealand but was canceled when the course in New Zealand was under-enrolled. The author was however able to partner with the school in the US only shortly before the start of the term in January 2016. The US institution was not part of the ethics protocol.
5. Out of 13 HK sub-teams (A1, A2, B3, B4, C5, C6, C7, C8, D8, D9, D10, E11, E12, E13)
6. Calculated based on each team's number of team members and number of overall posts.
7. An American multinational electronics retailer.

8. "GT" stands for Global Team, the second letter "E" stands for Team E, and the final letter is the beginning letter of the US student's name.
9. Figure 8" refers to the Hong Kong students' paper, not to the author's manuscript.
10. Cheng, W. (2003). *Intercultural conversation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
11. Hofstede, H.G., & Arrindell, W. (1998). *Masculinity and femininity: The taboo of national cultures*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

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## Appendix A

### Task descriptions

#### Task 1 Information exchange task: Individual introductory bio

The Intro Bio serves the purpose of getting to know you better and to tailor the course to your needs, and it serves the purpose of helping you get to know each other better so that you can select someone with similar interests to form a team. Please post a brief introduction to the class by including the points below. These are guiding questions only. Feel free to add anything you'd like to share with us. Please remember that this is a brief introduction, so your answers can be in the form of bullet points.

Steps:

1. Answer the questions below and post on Facebook.
2. Put your name (e.g., C's Bio) in the subject line and hit post.

*Intro Bio Questions:*

1. Your cultural and linguistic background (Where do you come from? Where have you lived? What languages do you speak?)
2. Educational background and professional experience (Where did you go to school prior to coming here? Do you have a degree in a different field?)
3. Institutional context of your school (What is it like to be student at your institution?)
4. Your professional situation or goals as well as personal interests (Where will you/would you like to work after this program? What do you like to do when you don't have to work or study?)
5. What expertise do you bring to this class?
6. Anything else you'd like to share?

**Due:** Hong Kong: February 18

Optional: Task #1.2 Team Intro Podcast: Based on Task #1, please team up with someone you would like to work with. For the follow-up Team Podcast, please create a joint Intro Podcast including: Personal background information: Name, country, languages you speak, educational background, professional experience; expectations for this collaboration, any project ideas you might have.

### **Task 2 Comparison & analysis task**

Task 2 consists of **three parts** (2.1, 2.2, 2.3), going from the concrete/personal to the more abstract. You may be asked to offer information in response to questions generated by your overseas partners about American or Hong Kong or Mainland China universities and businesses ideologies, culture, communication practices.

#### Task 2.1

*Comparing and contrasting **personal** experiences*

Task 2 Part A directly piggybacks on Task 1, that is, it builds directly on the intro bios/podcasts you posted at the beginning. Please do the following:

1. Review your overseas partners' bios. Choose two people with whom you think you have commonalities.
2. *Two Questions:* Write two questions total (one to each of your partners) and inquire about something else you don't know about him/her yet but that you would like to find out more about.

**Due:** Hong Kong: Sunday, March 6, 9pm; US: Monday, March 7, 2:15pm EST

3. *Two Replies:* Reply to any questions (at least two replies total) you receive from your partners. If you did not receive any questions, write to two more people (see step 2 above – this will count as your required posts).

**Due:** Hong Kong: Tuesday, March 8; US: Wednesday, March 9, 2:15pm EST

#### Task 2.2

*Comparing & contrasting **institutional** experiences in educational systems*

- 24** Task 2 Part 2.2 focuses on comparing and contrasting your experiences in educational/

institutional contexts with a particular focus on your educational institution, that is, [the institution] in Hong Kong (or a school you went to in another country) and [the institution] in the US. What can you say about your institution's ideologies or boundaries? *You will write 2 questions and 2 answers to your partners.* For instance, in Hong Kong, you could reflect on how you feel about doing this project and the related assignments compared to not doing a project in this course (like the other section of our course)? How do your US partners feel? What are the educational boundaries in both contexts?

**Due:** US: Wednesday, March 9, 2:15pm EST [Spring Break March 13-21]; *Hong Kong:* Wednesday, March 16, 9pm

### Task 2.3

#### *Comparing/contrasting professional experiences in corporate/business discourse*

Task 2 Part 2.3 focuses on corporate and professional discourse (ideologies in professional/corporate contexts). Your task is to compare and contrast businesses of the professional/corporate world in the US and in Hong Kong/Mainland China (or another country you have experience with!). *You will write 2 questions and 2 answers to your partners.* You can focus on a large US or Hong Kong/Mainland China corporation and look at a general business climate and ideologies (for instance, most American businesses have their own culture, code of conduct and ethics). Here is an example: If you were to look at things such as collectivist vs. individualistic cultures in businesses: What can be said about the company's/companies' ideologies? What kind of evidence do you have?

Possible topics can include: Western utilitarianism, capitalism and individualism liberalization of markets (vs. collectivism and communism in China; China's ban on mobile apps); Private vs. state-owned/-controlled enterprises; e-commerce

**Due:** HK: Wednesday, March 23, 9pm; US: Monday, March 28, 2:15pm EST [Spring Break March 13-21]

### Task 3 Reflective Task

Task 3 serves as a wrap-up reflective regarding Tasks 1 and 2: What are the top three take-aways from the exchanges for you? What were the most intriguing things for you and why? *You will write one final wrap-up post for your team space on Facebook.*

**Due:** US: Monday, April 4, 2:15pm EST; *Hong Kong:* Wednesday, April 6, 9pm [Easter Break March 25-31]

## Appendix B

### *HK students' needs analysis results (pre-survey)*

#### *Team work expectations (N=30)*

Cultural Exchange (15)

Work closely and efficiently with team members (5)

Data analysis (2)

Experience sharing (2)

Generate more ideas with [US] students (2)

Fun and productive atmosphere (2)

Active communications (2)

Learn more about miscommunication problems

- Simply get the final paper done
- Make friends with them
- Gain interesting and new knowledge
- Become mutual motivation for each other
- No expectation at all

*Specific expectations for online exchanges with the US (N=27)*

- Cultural exchange (e.g. language use in another culture) (15)
- More active interactions (4)
- Not sure/ no expectation at all (3)
- Minimize miscommunication (2)
- Make long-term friends with them (2)
- Limit time constraints (i.e. Jetlag)
- Hope [US] students could help with the project
- Share opinion in a funny way

*Focus on this project specifically (N=27)*

- Gender discourse (4)
- Haven't decided (4)
- Cultural differences (3)
- Face system (3)
- Communication break down (2)
- Facebook tagging (2)
- Hidden meanings behind prevalent English words
- Parent-child communication
- Speech and humor
- Discourse (sexuality)
- Politeness
- Familiarity (e.g. communication with people not familiar with and how to get familiar with them)
- Different perspectives in conversations
- The development of ideas in cross-culturally ways
- Language and politeness
- The formality of US students talking to others
- Openness to different kinds of topics
- Personal experiences
- No focus at all

## Appendix C

### *HK students' main take-aways from course (post-survey)*

#### *Cross-Cultural Interaction (15)*

- Interaction with US students (5)-social networking
- Insight into US education system; lifestyle/culture (2)
- Difficulties/Nuances of intercultural communication (4), authentic FB context
- Communication style; Politeness strategies; Showing appreciation/respect

*Ethnographic Research Project (8)*

- Proper procedure of research
- Case study/ethnography (3)
- Work on complex communication project with US
- Team work
- Project analysis based on FB conversations
- FB fruitful for other research purposes

*Social Media (6)*

- Similarity in media use: FB, Snapchat, Twitter; emoji
- Enjoyed chatting with US group
- FB good for intercultural communication (photos/videos share, comments)
- FB good to meet new friends abroad
- FB to understand; value of friends and use of social networking;
- Privacy issues when using social networking

*Theme-Based Task: Ideologies in Corporations (3)*

- Careers and corporate contexts in US
- Difference in work place (US more flexible)
- US work relationship less hierarchical (negotiation of schedule)