Sites for Collaborative Work: Cuba / Norway.

Katherine Goodnow
Intermedia,
University of Bergen, Norway
Email: Katherine.Goodnow@intermedia.uib.no

**Abstract:** This article presents results from experiments with collaborative and cross-cultural workspaces for participants from different countries. It draws on the case of a master’s program of screenwriting offered by a university in Norway and a film school in Cuba. The research indicates that despite variations and differences amongst the participants at technological levels as well as cultural contexts, the participants gradually learned how to use the Internet for community building. It is concluded that there is a need to consider online as well as off-line contexts for identifying the users’ needs for tools for cross-cultural collaboration.

**Key Words:** Web collaboratory, collaboratory sites, cross-cultural collaboration

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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with issues surrounding collaborative work spaces where the participant group is not only cross-cultural but come from countries with highly different economies and levels of technological development.

The paper draws on a particular case. This is a Master’s program in Screenwriting offered by the University of Bergen in Norway and the international film school – Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión - in Cuba.

The issues raised, however, are general. The core concern is with evolving practices in collaborative work and the nature and bases of evolving practices. The study of those practices often focuses on the tools used to support distributed work (the “co-laboratory”) and the creation of joint workspaces (the “collaborat-ory”). Added by the present study is an emphasis on the contexts surrounding the workspace: an emphasis on aspects of the socio-cultural environment within which the various actors and users are situated and within which the collaboratory has been developed. The significance of these contexts, it is proposed, is especially clear when participants come from varied backgrounds, but applies also in all collaborative work situations. Coming to understand that significance helps us then both to design and study programs when participants very in background, and to enlarge the conceptual picture of how collaborative work proceeds.

Overall, the significance of off-line contexts has received relatively little attention within work on web-collaboratories. In contrast, their significance has been underlined in several analyses of Internet research on MUDS (multi-user domains). Those analyses offer first a general argument for considering off-line contexts in any analysis of on-line performance. To take one such statement: “The Internet does not exist in isolation. To study it as if it were somehow apart from the ‘off-line’ world that brought it into being would be a gross mistake….on-line experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to off-line experience” (Jones 1999: xii).

Internet analyses offer also some specific proposals with regard to the nature of that “tethering”. Kendall, for example, offers several ways of specifying contexts and points to a number of ways in which they may alter aspects of on-line performance (Kendall 1999). She first distinguishes, as several others do, between off-line and on-line contexts. She then specifies some particular forms of each. Variations in off-line contexts, for example, have to do with variations in (a) “off-line organizations and conditions for participation” (these predominantly affect access) and (b) “localized situations” (e.g., the kinds of off-line social lives that participants lead) (Kendall 1999: 58-63). Variations in on-line contexts have to do with (a) “the history and cultural background of the Internet” for particular groups and (b) the nature of “group understandings and norms”, with these norms covering what is regarded as acceptable or responsible behaviour. The distinction, Kendall argues, should not be seen as hard and sharp. On-line contexts, in particular, are shaped by differences in off-line organisations and histories (Kendall 1999: 63).

Such distinctions among contexts may seem abstract and isolated from what people do in collaborative situations. Kendall links variations in contexts, however, to several variations in on-line patterns. Contextual variations are seen, for example, as influencing ease or difficulty in maintaining a physical and social presence in a group (an aspect seen as influenced especially by variations in access), the ways in which people present or “perform” a particular identity (seen as open to influences from experience, training, education, and affiliation), commitment to participation (seen as influenced by involvement in off-line social lives), and
the sense of belonging to some kind of “community” (seen as influenced by several contextual conditions, with one of these being a sense of shared views and commitments).

Kendall's proposals were based on observations of a people creating a fantasy world rather than an educational and collaborative research program (the Norway-Cuba case). They were drawn also from a webspace in which all the participants were within one country (the United States) and, with one exception, were from a single cultural background. Her proposals, nonetheless, open up ways of conceptualising how particular contexts and characteristics of participants can be linked to some variations in collaborative involvement. The Norway-Cuba case offers ways of amplifying and giving concrete shape to such possibilities.

In the material that follows, I note first several features of the Norway-Cuba program, covering especially participants’ country of origin and the general arrangement of work. The two sections that follow take up several aspects of contextual variation (variations in off-line contexts, on-line contexts, and political/religious affiliations), noting for each of these some of the aspects of on-line performance and satisfaction that they influenced.

2. Features of the Norway-Cuba Program

The Masters program in Screenwriting was developed in Norway by a team consisting of researchers from Australia, Bolivia/Cuba and Norway. Development costs were covered by the University of Bergen through funds aimed towards increasing collaboration between institutions in Norway and institutions in so-called developing countries.

Twenty-two students were accepted in the first round of the two-year masters program. Of the twenty-two, thirteen students were in Norway and nine in Cuba. The students in Norway came from a variety of countries: China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, Venezuela as well as Norway. The students in Cuba were from several countries though with a closer regional affiliation: Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Panama.

The first semester of the course, from September – December 2002, was ICT-supported rather than ICT-based. This meant that students received some classroom teaching in addition to working collaboratively on the Net. The following three semesters were primarily ICT-based with the students in Cuba returning to their home countries. The students in Norway also carried out extensive periods of fieldwork in their home countries during this period.

Due to bandwidth and access restrictions in Cuba, the organisers chose a text-based environment as the primary collaborative workspace. At the same time a low level of access in Cuba and possibilities for synchronous communication (limited to two hours per week) led to the need to create a space that would enhance a sense of place and community amongst the participants.

Drawing on experiences with MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and the ability they offer to work creatively with text, the designers decided to utilise the cmcMoo environment created at the University of Bergen. The metaphor chosen was that of a Latin American house. Designer Veronica Cordova chose the Moo and the metaphor of a Latin American house because it offered an already understood sense of community for the majority of the students. For the others it was ‘exotic’:

“The typical Latin American place where a lot of people live together at the same house is called conventillo or solar. Culturally speaking, this place and metaphor seemed to us the most suitable. The Moo itself allowed us to create virtual spaces of all kinds within this metaphor. We felt strongly that the way to take advantage of the multicultural situation was to get all the students to ‘live’ together in the Moo.”

Within this “conventillo”, the staff and students created living rooms, personal rooms, a library, a pub and even a kitchen. The description of the space was textual and inviting:

“Here is where we meet at the end of the day. Some tenants cook together and then share noisy meals, while other tenants prefer to take turns to cook for the rest of the group. Some people cook and eat by themselves. Whatever your eating habits are, the only rules we keep around here are: Clean after yourself and share your recipes.”

Students participated in the creation of common rooms as well as developing their own rooms, such as this room created by a Cuban student:

“Hello friends. This is the Buenavista corner. A great room to share experiences, Cuban music, scripts or other ideas. Welcome to my room. Please, before you leave, turn off the light.”

The rooms were limited to textual description to ensure that all the students could “read” them. They also often included, however, links to sites – either personal or other – that either described the student or teacher or offered information on national film industries, scriptwriters or similar information. Students and researchers work together on common questions such as media ownership and indigenous representation but from differing contexts. Analyses were posted in work areas in the house and discussed in virtual classrooms or chat-room spaces within the Moo.
The program and collaborative research yielded - in addition to the posted analyses - a set of transcripts from the discussions. Added to this were questionnaires at the beginning of the process and interviews at the end of the first two semesters. Evaluation was also complemented through participant observation.

3. Variations in Access

Students in Norway have almost unlimited access to the Internet from their educational institutions or at student housing. In addition over half the Norwegian population has access to the Internet from home (Harrie and Carlson 2001).

In contrast, access in Cuba was limited through lack of technology – machines, landlines, satellite connections etc. – as well as political control and distribution of Internet access. Problems included also the likelihood of inclement weather affecting electricity supplies and therefore Net access (the connections were dial-up). Backup generators at the school and at telecentres worked only sporadically.

Ideally many of these types of problems facing many developing countries, particularly in rural areas, will be solved through a move away from wireline services, as is the case in many Nordic countries. Some researchers, such as Tapio Varis, foresee wireless solutions as also suitable for countries such as Cuba:

“(W)ireless broadband Internet is the most probable future delivery system for electronic distance education and telemedicine – by satellite for long range, microwave for medium range and spread spectrum for short range, particularly in developing countries. This is also known as the ‘fixed wireless’ approach.” (Varis 2001)

For countries like Cuba and this particular project, however, financial limitations restricted this option. In Cuba, resources are small and a restructuring has led to limited Internet access for a few and lack of feasible and affordable access for many (Venegas 1999). The Escuela Internacional de Cine y Television, fortunately, has a special status in Cuba due to the role it plays for cinematography in the region, and has therefore dedicated Internet access. The access is, nonetheless, highly limited with only six machines at the school for the entire student population of three hundred and a staff of thirty-five. For students, access at the school is their only route to the Internet. The school is physically outside Havana and transportation is difficult, restricting any access that the city itself might allow. At the school, they were also given set times for Internet access. The activity of working on the Net was also experienced as more “classroom” based than an individual activity. Four hours of access were set aside, most of which were used for organised synchronous discussions and courses. Little time was therefore available for individual communication amongst the students. These arrangements, the Cuban students commented, limited the creation of a sense of community amongst the students.

4. Variations in Off-Line Contexts

Difference in access was then one of the off-line contexts that affected the collaborative work carried out. Other off-line contexts included levels of commitment to the web-based work, experiences with higher education in general and levels of work and family obligations.

Levels of Commitment: For the students in Cuba, limited net-access and general isolation in their place of study (in the countryside outside Havana) led to a greater emphasis being placed on the net activities. In general, the students in Cuba were well-prepared and appeared regularly at the synchronous activities. The students in Norway, on the other hand, varied in their participation, with the “foreign” students generally being far more conscientious with regards to preparation and participation. The Cuban students found the Norwegian students’ intermittent participation and preparation a “breach of contract” that lowered their levels of trust in the student group.

Experiences with higher education: Asking why the ethnic-Norwegian group participated at a lower level than other students requires considering a number of factors not necessarily restricted to North/South environments but likely to occur in single-culture and other cross-cultural environments. Masters programs in Norway have generally involved few writing requirements outside of thesis work. Norwegian students entering a humanities or social science Masters program do not expect to have to hand in regular written work in the first semesters. The foreign students were more used to these expectations from their home countries and found the workload reasonable.

Offline contexts – work, family obligations etc. A further off-line context that affected participation related to non-study obligations such as family and work. The foreign students in Norway and the students in Cuba were restricted in the amount of paid work they could undertake in partly for visa reasons. These students also had scholarships. The Norwegian students on the other hand had in general a high level of paid work, as scholarships and student loans no longer match expected living standards. This is a growing problem within Norwegian education in general and not specific to this program. In addition, the majority of students in Cuba and the foreign students in Norway were away from family and previous social networks whereas the Norwegian students and ethnic-Cuban students had obligations related to these networks.
5. Variations in On-Line Contexts

Variations in on-line contexts included existing levels of on-line activities by the participants, experiences with superior technology, and previous experiences with chatting on the web.

Existing levels of on-line activities. As with many ICT-supported and ICT-based programs, students’ interests in on-line activities vary. For some, on-line educational and research activities are appreciated primarily as they provide greater flexibility. For these researchers and students, asynchronous activities are often preferred. For others, synchronous activities are seen as necessary for the creation of community. Programs or collaborative work skewed towards synchronous activities are then appreciated as they aid a sense of being part of a network of “like-minded people”. This, however, is also affected by whether the participants already have networks in place. In this case, the Norwegian students in general, with their higher levels of access, already had created networks of “like-minded people” through other chat and discussion groups outside of the Masters program. The need for contact with similar others was therefore met through these alternative spaces and in classroom activities.

Experiences with technology: Previous experiences with online discussion groups were not limited to the students in Norway. Many of the students in Cuba had participated in such groups previous to their stay in Cuba. In general, students with previous discussion or “chat” experiences were more likely to consider the discussion groups online as “chat” rather than an exchange of concepts and comparative study. These students used a higher level of emotives and were more likely to disrupt the discussions with digressions. For these students, chatting belonged to leisure activities and this blending of genres led to difficulties in staying within an academic discourse.

While humour and digressions often played an important function in community-building, particularly when political or religious differences threatened the sense of community, the difference in connection speeds between Norway and Cuba meant that it was more difficult for the Cuban students to participate in the humour or aside before the discussion had moved on. In general, the students in Norway were more likely to “fill” the waiting time with witticisms which increased the difficulties that the student moderators, particularly those in Cuba, had in keeping discussions readable and on track.

Students who viewed themselves as “technologically fluent” – whether they were based in Norway or Cuba – also found the program “visually limited” with its text-based structure rather than media-rich. For these students based in Norway the low technology did not match with their identity of themselves as technologically at the forefront and this seems to correlate with their levels and forms of participation. For similar students in Cuba this was not the case as the text-based structure allowed greater levels of participation. A media-rich program would have further slowed downloading and response times.

6. Religious and Political Differences

Crossing on- and offline contexts were a number of issues including political and religious differences. Analysis of the transcripts revealed that religious differences did affect the discussions and development of trust. Religious themes were not part of the official curriculum but entered into the discussions of representation and identity. The transcripts revealed that the single Muslim student was both the more likely to raise religious elements in discussions but also the most likely to be misunderstood. Religious as well as political stereotypes did play a role in the discussions and led to some isolation of the students who were seen to be at political or religious extremes.

Most of the students had developed a sense of community identity as liberal individuals (they were after all “film” students). This sense of common identity was developed through discussions of commonly appreciated films or discussions surrounding issues of funding, cultural policy and censorship. The concept of Cuba itself, to offer a brief example, was one area of negotiation amongst the students. The Cuban students themselves were more likely to be constructively critical of the situation in Cuba, whereas the Norwegian students had at first a fairly romantic or nostalgic image of the country and its media and cultural output. The Latin-American students held the middle ground. Cuba for them was an important regional site for the creation of an independent Latin American identity. At the same time, for the students who were studying there, the reality of the media situation, and of limited access to information was apparent.

A similar disruption of community identity arose around the student from China and her views of the role of the media. For this student, a close tie between government and media was seen as necessary – a perspective that most of the Latin American students, labouring at times under highly censorious and elitist cultural policies, found difficult to accept.

Breaches in identity either through politics or religion were recovered through a variety of means. Most religious or political “breaches” were recovered through humour, a search for a common point of political or religious ground, or an agreement to disagree and move on with the discussion.
7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the differences between student groups in a country with low access versus a similar student group in a country with high access and technological development, meant that the creation of a sense of community involved issues less likely to be confronted within similar programs within a national or single-culture experience. The need to consider both on-line and off-line contexts, however, remains in all collaborative work situations.

Like Kendall, we would now argue for the need to make differences among contexts the focus of future research. Particularly in need of greater attention, she argues, are “(a) changing meanings and perceptions of Internet usage for various groups, (b) cultural and sub-cultural affiliations of Internet users, and (c) explorations of political action and affiliation on-line” (Kendall 1999:63).

These are areas of concern for all forms of collaborative net-based activities whether they are fictional, educational or work-based.

The Screenwriting House may be viewed at http://cmc.hf.uib.no:8000.

References


