Thank you for inviting me to speak with you at the CRIDALA 2002 conference. I am particularly pleased to join you in discussing those issues that are critical to enhancing educational opportunities around the globe. In this 21st century we are confronted with great educational challenges and new opportunities. Technology has provided the opportunity for global electronic networks and the formation of web-based communities of learners. It is within this context that I would like to examine, with you, the impact of culture and community on Open and Distance Learning Research.

**Culture**

Culture embodies those attitudes, values, and history that are shared by a group of people through their language, history and music. Some cultures allow participation by outsiders, and in those cases the culture can be reflected and studied by non-members. Other cultures are closed to outsiders and do not invite participation by non-members. For a culture to persist, it must have active involvement on the part of members to keep the language, attitudes and values alive (Dyson 1997).
Our world is characterized by rapid cultural change. These changes bring with them increasing intercultural connectedness. We are finding ourselves more and more connected with citizens of other countries through television, movies, and music. Commercial media, in particular television, has contributed to the blending of unique national qualities into a universal or global culture. In many countries regional or local television programming is relegated to just a few channels and has a relatively small audience. The larger audience watches L.A.P.D. or similar Western programs with wide distribution.

We could debate the advantages and disadvantages of media distribution systems, but the fact is that they exist and influence the global community. Television, movies, videos, and cd-roms have been directed and produced with imbedded cultural values to which people around the world are exposed. Cultural exchanges that happen when viewers watch television occur globally at relatively low cost due to the economies of scale. The media is constantly exposing us to selected cultures, values, and attitudes.

The way in which entertainment is produced both reflects and creates cultural identities. These cultural encounters, transmitted through new forms of communication, are distributed to a “global village” that has daily exposure to these values and attitudes.

Not only mass media, but large businesses have targeted this global market. MacDonald’s, Burger King, and the Gap are familiar to teens around the world. The streets of Amsterdam, Tokyo, and Istanbul are teeming with young people in tight fitting jeans, eating fast food. Depending upon your point of view,
the mass media may generate or reflect these universal styles and attitudes. This raises the important question, How will this shift from one country’s individual culture to an emerging global culture affect the society’s development? Are there ways that national traditions and values can remain intact, or will we become one large melting pot? As technologies continue to provide the opportunity for more rapid and intimate communication, these questions become more important than ever.

When we examine how culture is distributed, we should ask questions about the various economic and political influences at work. Why are certain programs distributed internationally? What audiences are being targeted and why? There is increasing demand from parents, schools and concerned adults to put pressure on commercial interests to portray various cultures responsibly. Minority groups want to be portrayed in a culturally sensitive way rather than a stereotypic one. Ethnic groups want their voices heard. The disenfranchised are seeking ways to become contributing members of the new global society. Technology, particularly, electronic technology, has opened the door for a more interactive and democratic cultural exchange.

World population trends indicate a growing need for intercultural materials that can be used in many contexts by many different ethnic groups. China and India lead the world in total population, and their educational needs become greater with each year. How can we use technologies to help in this task?

Digital technologies can help us, in some areas, to connect people quickly and effectively. Our challenge is to take advantage of these technologies where
we can to build international communities of learners. How do we create such communities, and how can the Internet be used to help?

**Internet and Culture**

The Internet expands the influence of previous media in an interactive and intercultural way. Where television programs send one-way messages about a society’s music, customs and clothes, the Internet invites two-way discussion between people of different political, economic and cultural backgrounds. However, there are problems. Sharing ideas on the Internet requires common language, understanding of a global or universal culture, and a desire for intercultural communication. The challenge is to overcome these barriers while retaining our individual culture so that we become global communicators.

The Internet provides opportunities for interaction in a way that mass media does not. People can exchange ideas on topics of mutual interest and use language translators, if necessary, to help communicate their thoughts. People who share ideas online often share more than simply their ideas about the topic. The informal nature of online communication encourages a more intimate sharing of personal items. Friends are made, cultural differences explored, and new understanding is created. The Internet invites its users to form communities and be socially present in a virtual space.

**Community**

Communities are very different from cultures. They are formed by groups of people with common interests. People can belong to various
communities simultaneously. A person may be a member of a school community, a spiritual community, and a recreational community. Each of these communities develops around a common interest and the relationships are based on those commonalities.

**The Internet as Community**

The Internet is well suited to foster the development of community. It is structured to support interaction, the concept around which community is built. People can choose a convenient time to “meet” friends online and share personal details of their lives that they might not share in other presenced situations. We are familiar with the plethora of online dating services, and while these may have been treated lightly in the early days of the Internet, many people who have met each other this way say that the anonymity has allowed them to get to know each other without the distractions of physical presence.

Not only does the Internet community allow informal interactions, it overcomes limitations of time and geography. A person interested in astronomy in Calcutta can share her interest with someone in Quito. Not only can they discuss astronomy, but they learn about each other’s culture. This broadens the Indian as well as the Ecuadorian experience, and promotes the formation of it’s a new global community.

Howard Rheingold was an early and well-known creator of Internet communities. He created an environment where people with common interests could interact by forming online communities, visiting together at the virtual well
The sense that participants got of being members of a special community was enhanced by what researchers came to call “social presence”.

**Social Presence**

The construct of social presence was popularized by Short, Williams, & Christie (Short 1976). They emphasized that social presence, the feeling of community that a learner experiences, is the single most important perception within a social context. In the online environment, this becomes even more important because of the absence of visual and auditory cues. If students do not feel socially present in the online community of learners, they will not become full participants in the course. The capacity of the medium to transmit information about facial expression, tone, and non-verbal vocal cues, all contribute to the degree of social presence of a communications medium.

**Research in Social Presence**

Early studies investigated social presence by using bipolar scales such as sociable/unsociable, personal/impersonal. When used in the online environment to examine students’ perceptions of social presence, the topic becomes more complicated. Later studies examined the role of social presence in distance learning environments (McIsaac 1996).

Guanwardena (Gunawardena 1995) used regression analysis to examine whether social presence theory could be useful in interaction and collaborative learning online. The results of two studies indicated that social presence was an
important construct in creating an interactive social community online. Two components of social presence that she found relevant were intimacy and immediacy.

Tu (2000) expanded the concept of social presence to include the degree of feeling, perception and reaction to being connected electronically to another intellectual entity through a text-based encounter. He found that social presence is a vital component of online interaction. In a study using participant observation with a dramaturgical perspective, he documented three dimensions of social presence. They are social context, online communication and interactivity. Another study documents the construct of social presence with Chinese students (Tu 2001). A cross cultural study by Leh extended the notion of social presence between students in the USA learning Spanish and college students in Mexico (Leh 2001). Results of the longitudinal study suggested immediate and informal benefits to students studying in an online social community.

Tu & I (Tu In Press) have worked on deconstructing the concept of social presence and are examining those social elements that could be structured into an online course to increase interaction. In another article, Craft and I have included strategies for teachers in the social construction of online communities (McIsaac In Press). A recent report done at Arizona State University provides a thorough resource and instructor’s guide for building an online community (ASU 2001).
Building online communities and enhancing social presence

The social community supporting the individual online learner is one of the most important aspects of a successful online class. Students will be won or lost in the first few days of class. Those instructors who can create a warm, inviting social setting for students are more likely to know when someone is having technical, learning, or personal problems that impede successful course completion.

Other students in the class form the basis for the community, and often are the catalysts for developing friendships that extend well beyond the completion of the course. Students who are having trouble will more easily turn to their peers for assistance. The enemy of the online class is student isolation. The friend is a strong sense of community.

Each class develops its own unique community, coming together in collaborative work. The successful instructor encourages the development of an online intellectual and social community. This should be done early in the course by encouraging students to share information about themselves, their background and their interests. Instructors should provide an informal atmosphere for this exchange. Many students are intimidated when they first write online. A good ice-breaker is posting biographies and photographs on the course site. Another effective strategy is to organize collaborative groups early in the course. These can be done around class topics and changed throughout the semester so students get to know everyone in the class. These collaborative
assignments serve a number of purposes. The groupwork makes each person responsible for a portion of the final result. It also identifies strengths of each person. For example some may be good writers, some may be technical gurus, others have their unique perspectives that bring a richness to online discussions. (McIsaac In Press).

Tools are available to help instructors understand social context in the online classroom (Tu 2002). The authors give suggestions for selecting appropriate online communication, and optimizing interactivity. Under each dimension useful strategies are provided to increase online interaction and to enhance online learning.

Social Learning and Cognition

Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1978) says that social interaction and context play a fundamental role in shaping internal cognitive structures. Cognitive presence has recently been linked to social presence to expand the practice of critical thinking and critical discourse in a computer conference (Garrison 2001).

Vrasidas (Vrasidas 2001) applies Erickson’s (Erickson 1986) interpretivist approach, using symbolic interactionism, to examine feedback in an online course. He discusses the conceptual framework as it is applied to online learning environments.

Suggestions for future research

Recent studies have revealed that online students perceive that positive feelings of community directly affect their course progress and satisfaction. The
most useful recent studies have been qualitative examinations of how and why transactions occur in the online environment. Researchers are calling for studies to examine online learning communities from sociological and social learning aspects.

There are many frameworks used to answer these questions. Tu & Corey (Tu 2001) discuss Goffman's self-presentation, a dramaturgical approach to research by examining social presence and interaction within those frameworks. They point out the weaknesses that exist in current studies of online learning communities, and suggest future studies in community based online learning. Vrasidas (Vrasidas 1999; Vrasidas 2001) used Erickson’s interpretivist approach to extract meaning from interactions in an online class. Gunawardena (Gunawardena 1995) used regression analysis to identify variables that affected online learning. Other methods include case studies, observational studies, interviews, dramaturgy, and ethnographies. All of these approaches add depth to what we are learning about the online learner.

**Conclusion**

It has not proven useful to try to isolate variables for the purpose of conducting media comparison studies. Indeed, educators have found it difficult to control for all the human variables that intervene in a “scientific” experiment. Many of the variables we examined in previous quantitative studies have, themselves, not proven to be stable. Instead we should examine why and how events occur within the online environment by observing, questioning and
documenting what is occurring. Only through the examination of individual
learning events can we gain a thorough understanding of them.

Building an online community of learners requires in depth, rich research
into the cultural characteristics, learning styles, motivation, and feelings of social
presence that are needed for our diverse groups of students. It is especially
important, as technology provides opportunities for the global community of
learners to share ideas, to design learning environments that allow national
traditions and values to remain intact while building on cultural and community
strengths.

Communities are being formed across national borders in a great variety
of areas. Communication technologies are creating networks within which
people work, play, and conduct business. In the current era of globalization,
nations are becoming increasingly interdependent. What happens in one country
quickly affects others around the globe. Digital technologies have changed the
way most of the world goes about its business. As educators, we are faced with
finding new ways to use these technologies to support electronic communities of
learners in the online learning environment.

The electronic classroom is often made up of students from diverse
backgrounds, speaking different native languages, and having different cultural
expectations. In order to serve this varied clientele, educators must examine
ways to communicate effectively, motivate students from various backgrounds,
and design courses that will meet the needs of the international marketplace.
Research plays an essential part in asking questions such as “What works best in forming online communities of learners?” “How can we design effective activities for online courses to include the needs of all learners in a global community?” “How can we help each other by sharing our research to improve the quality of the distance learning experience?” The answers to these questions will help us all as we create new educational environments for all students.

References


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