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FLICKR AS A TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: A CASE STUDY OF INFORMAL LEARNING IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

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This paper describes cross cultural interaction and community formation on Flickr, one of the leading online photo-sharing networks. Taking a virtual ethnographic approach, the author describes her own experiences of online community membership, exploring issues surrounding digital identity and the sharing of social discourse in the development of intercultural understandings within a shared online environment. It is proposed that the affordances of Flickr as a multimodal space, alongside the use of search engines and online translators as informal 'cultural translators', may be a useful tool for the development of intercultural understanding and community formation.

INTRODUCTION

The online photo-sharing network Flickr is one of the most successful Web 2.0 applications, with a vast user base and a vibrant online community. The groups that operate within this community are as varied as they are numerous; the international flavour of Flickr is evidenced on the home page, where members are greeted with randomised international greetings at the top of the page each time they log in, e.g. "Szia (username)! (Now you know how to greet people in Hungarian!)". While the primary purpose of Flickr is that of an online photo-sharing network, it is through dialogue based on these images (through the use of comments) that relationships are built. Like any virtual community, friendships are formed which often cross cultural boundaries. It is these relationships, and the use of Flickr (alongside Google and free online translators) which are described in this paper. On the basis of the author's increased intercultural understanding through Flickr community involvement, we ask "can Flickr be used as an informal learning tool to foster cross-cultural understanding in online learning communities?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the challenges to educators in the current climate is that of how to abstract the elements of online communities which make them successful and then apply them to their own practice (White, 2007). While new forms of social software are community-based, in terms of their use in education there are tensions between top-down and bottom-up approaches to teaching and learning; for example, centralised versus decentralised models, formal and informal learning, traditional versus new forms of assessment. Much learning that takes place online is through the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue, although this is by no means unique to Web 2.0 – Internet Relay Chat (IRC) has been in existence since 1988.

In discussing IRC as a global cultural phenomenon with communication across national and ideological boundaries, Reid (1991) states that "it becomes possible for people to investigate the differences between their cultures", fostering a sense of "cross-cultural community". Reid then goes on to suggest that "the possibility of a new tool for fostering cross-cultural understanding is worth a closer look as well".

In terms of Flickr as a tool for fostering cross-cultural understanding, in the context of this study the author views Google Search as a 'cultural translator'; a basic-level research tool which forms an essential part of this community's intercultural dialogue with respect to

exploratory and informal learning. However, the use of Google Search as a research tool is not uncontroversial. Brabazon (2007) raises concerns about students using the search engine for instant answers rather than rigorous research of their subjects, recommending that pupils need to be taught how to use them critically rather than "drifting to the first site returned through Google." While it is widely-understood that the quality of information gained through Google Search may be variable, the fact remains that the majority of learners and educators use Google Search (or Scholar, in many cases) as a core research tool. Following a survey of tools that are useful for individual learning (rather than traditional course-based teaching), Hart (2007) complied the 'Top 100 Tools for Learning 2007' from a poll of 109 learning professionals; Google Search and Flickr came in at 4th and 16th place respectively. While respondent's use of Flickr did not specifically focus on the cultural aspects which will be discussed in this paper (those mentioned were mainly related to photo-sharing, tags, geotags, RSS and groups), the use of Google Search as a research tool was deemed to be invaluable by many of those who responded.

Research on Flickr has mainly centred on semantic tags and taxonomies/folksonomies (Rattenbury et. al. 2007, Marlow et. al. 2006) and geotagging (Jaffe et. al. 2006). Davies (2006) offers a richer ethnographic description, viewing Flickr as an "online affinity space" (Gee, 2004) which "allows us to share new ideas and new ways of seeing and to bring cultural understandings together with others" (pp. 232). Research from within Flickr, such as questions posed in the help forums by postgraduate students and researchers appears to have yielded little in the way of response; for example, a short Flickr survey (Flickr, 2006) had only 3 responses, and the thread was closed down due to lack of inactivity. It is felt that rich insights into Flickr communities are gained through insider ethnography – the approach favoured by Davies (ibid), who demonstrates a deep level of understanding of Flickr communities and member motivations.

METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on Flickr as an informal learning tool for cross-cultural understanding, presenting findings from an ongoing ethnographic study which began in 2006. The approach taken is that of a Virtual Ethnography (Mason, Hines), which Mason describes as fitting characteristics of qualitative research, which is concerned with 'how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced' (p.4). The findings are extracted from a larger study aiming to understand and describe specific subcultures in the Flickr community, where humour and subversion play a key role. Data is mainly qualitative, based on self-reflexive observation, one-to-one communications and discussions within the Flickr community. While detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, quotes from members are used to demonstrate key points.

DISCUSSION

Patterns of use

People use Flickr in many different ways, holding personal accounts for a variety of reasons. While the two most obvious and functional uses for Flickr are a) a means of sharing photos with family and friends, and b) for amateur and professional photographers to develop their skills and give feedback to one another, the core community tools are the groups created around shared interests, where photos are submitted and tags are assigned by users in order to build up a rich folksonomy, alongside which reciprocal commenting and group discussions mean that many users participate in the social affordances of the site.

Once relationships have been formed through dialogue with others, Flickr may become a kind of 'chat room'; an online social space where still images serve as the trigger to dialogue and shared humour. Communities and relationships in Flickr are formed by groupings and reciprocal commenting on one another's images. It is these textual exchanges that are the social glue for the Flickr community, and some of the sub communities use the different communication channels within Flickr inventively and comically. The communication channels/spaces themselves are:

a) comment boxes underneath images
b) notes overlaid on top of images
c) tags at the side of images
d) group discussion areas

In the author's sub community, the whole communication space is often used as part of the presentation - the image, the image title, image subtitle/caption and the image tags all being utilised to form the whole 'piece'. Other users then comment (often via metadescriptions), add notes and tags, and the entire screen/URL based activity is integral to the communal dialogue in that social space. Much activity is intentionally subversive, such using tags and notes for dialogue as opposed to the comment areas (some images are covered in 100s of notes as the group dialogue is taking place on top of the image itself for comedic effect; similarly, by using tags as a discussion area this challenges the use of metadata).

Because of the nature of the sub communities to which the author belongs (where images are employed as triggers to dialogue which largely consists of shared humour), it becomes increasingly undesirable to use Flickr as a mass photo repository as the uploading of many images at once would interrupt the flow of dialogue between members. For those who use Flickr as an online social space, it is more usual to upload images gradually in order to keep some kind of momentum. Too many images uploaded at once means that comments from others will be spread out more thinly; leading to reduced exchanges on a single image and some of the richness (in terms of dialogue) is lost.

Flickr can be viewed in terms of macro and micro communities, becoming increasingly finely grained as sub-groups form out of groups, and as humour becomes more and more 'in-group' as relationships build and lives/histories are shared. Following patterns of socialisation that we see in everyday life, friendships and rivalries are formed; groups are joined and left (sometimes dramatically), and people experience emotional reactions to others in the community on the basis of their interaction. As in any other online social space, friendships and relationships are formed that then move over into face-2-face meetings, e.g. 'Flickr meets', where groups of Flickrites get together in real-life, or friendships where fellow Flickrites from different countries or parts of the same country will meet up with others when they are in the same locale. For many, their online relationships are as real as off-line:

> "I feel such a strong bond to so many of these people. So bizarre when you consider we haven't met what? Three quarters of them? But we all have these relationships that we might not have had the pleasure of having had we met in person first. Who knows, we might have, but still, you get to know each other in this totally different way where people seem less guarded almost." (Katherine – email 22.6.07)

Identity

Each Flickrite has a screen name. For some, this may be (or closely relate to) their real name. For others, a deliberate pseudonym is adopted. The type of screen name, and manipulation of that name, is as varied as the people and groupings in the macro-community. How much a person chooses to reveal about his or her true identity can be viewed as a continuum, with the use of the real full name and genuine head-shot photo

'buddy icon' at one end and an obscure name and inanimate object 'buddy icon' at the other, with no 'personal' snaps and no indication as to the identity of the account holder. Some members use their Flickr persona almost as a mask, acting out a role or an aspect of their character for comedic effect. Reid's central thesis (1991) views "IRC as essentially a *playground.* Within its domain people are free to experiment with different forms of communication and self-representation." It is through their interactions on Flickr that many people present and reveal themselves – although this too is sometimes experimented with as people develop different personas, sometimes holding multiple accounts and behaving/posting differently when adopting different identities. While some users are completely open about their identities, others prefer to remain anonymous:

> "I don't like my online friends to know who I am IRL (MSN doesn't count as I know everyone on my MSN list IRL too), but also, I don't like my IRL friends to know my online identities? I guess it makes me strange... :-) I just feel like Flickr is such a haven   for me: I can share what I feel, when I feel it, and care less what people say if it suits me. It never comes back at me in real life, and I never have to explain myself. Which I like. :-)" (Jorge – email 10.09.07)

Alongside a personal Flickr account (considerable community involvement and based around cultural issues and shared humour), the author currently holds two other Flickr accounts; one runs alongside a Second Life blog, and the other is a general work-related Flickr site for photographs from meetings, workshops and conferences, also associated with a professional blog. The three accounts relate to different online identities and are not linked to one another (although I have a core community who comment on my images, it is only a small subsection of that community who I communicate with outside of Flickr where we share personal details and information).

Intercultural dialogue

One of the core aspects of the author's sub community (alongside shared humour and subversion of the medium itself) is that of a cross-cultural group who are drawn to one another through 'ways of seeing', and memes emerge which foster group cohesion as social discourse is shared. In discussing IRC subcultures, Rheingold (2000, p.182) describes the 'initial absence and subsequent reconstruction of social context', while Davies (ibid) explores the 'transformative work that takes place through bringing together competing discourses in a co-constructed productive hybrid cultural space'.

It is this notion of a hybrid cultural space which is very much the 'personality' of the author's main Flickr account. The sub community is culturally varied in its constitution; as described above, humour is often integral to the discussion and reciprocal commenting that takes place, but as members are physically located all over the world, communicating virtually across boundaries of time and space, they have different cultural reference points. Much humour has a cultural basis, and so often in order to keep the momentum of the conversation, members need to understand one another's culturally-specific jokes, or cultural/historical references. In order to achieve this, members make heavy use of Google and Wikipedia as online referencing tools, using them almost as 'cultural translators'. Often community members will use online translation tools in order to communicate to others in their native languages - with highly variable results. While the ensuing dialogue is in itself a source of amusement, key words from different languages are then picked up by the community and become part of general discourse in the hybrid cultural space. The author recently posted an image showing a subsection of text from a Finnish wall chart, inviting others to translate. Within two hours, members of the sub community had left 128 comments and 26 notes; a comical group translation exercise which acted as social glue, bringing many of the author's contacts together who had remained unacquainted until this point.

Often dialogue will begin on a post (image) which then spills over into communication back-channels. Conversation tends to be more serious and personal in nature, with identities revealed and interests shared. If a) a member shows a special interest in a native cultural artefact which somebody has photographed and uploaded to the site, and b) dialogue leads to the discovery of shared interest or curiosity, it is not uncommon for home addresses to be revealed so that gifts can be exchanged. These gifts are invariably specifically cultural in nature, and the bonds that form around such exchanges lead to increased intercultural dialogue and understanding. Alongside this, regular dialogue in non-native tongues is appreciated by many:

> "Flickr has been great for me - I've come to know people from all over the world. Not to mention how much my English has improved. Funny language - it's easy to begin with (having been weaned on English/American music and TV) but the more you try the harder it gets, e.g. "bog-standard". According to the dictionary the bog is the gentle men's cloakroom. But I'm guessing your expression has to do with "bogged down", being unable to make progress or being inferior. So perhaps something like below standard?"

> "Surströmming was last Thursday! Equivalent? I dunno. Haggis..?"

However, if left unmediated (the author actively encourages Flickr friends from a variety of countries to communicate with one another), sub communities have a tendency to form around a common language:

> "As wonderful as it is to meet people from different cultures on F it's all very western - US, UK, NZ etc. An occasional German or Italian, perhaps, but never South America, Asia or Africa. Language is an obvious obstacle - you might also have noticed that F comes in 繁體中文, Deutsch, English, Español, Français, , Italiano and Português, thus making it more local... "

While localising Flickr may result in lessened intercultural communication, the fact remains that when images (as opposed to words) are the trigger for online socialisation, members are able to connect through different modes. Davies (ibid) describes Flickr as a 'dynamic multimodal environment', arguing that the creation of hybrid cultural spaces where meanings and discourse are generated is evidence of the 'deepening global understandings within the local space of Flickr'. A huge amount of informal learning is taking place, mainly centred on culture and history, but what is especially interesting is the use of images as the trigger to conversation. Images as triggers for discussion allow the Flickr community members to be free to express their own associations and others can either follow up on these, or contribute their own. What is important here is that the learning is socially motivated, compelling and engaging for participants.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER WORK

In many web-based communities, learning often takes place informally and 'ferally'. The concept of feral learning (Nunan, 1996; Bell and Hall, 2006) is particularly apt when considering the types of learning that take place in networked society/online communities, where learners are less restricted by structure, gathering knowledge through roaming across hyperlinked texts, making their own paths according to what interests them personally.

It is proposed that Flickr may be a useful tool for bringing together different cultural backgrounds and for fostering the development of cross-cultural understanding in online learning communities. By utilising culturally-specific imagery as 'triggers' for further dialogue, participants can explore one another's cultures in collaboration with others, leading to

dynamic, highly social forms of intercultural learning. Further work will involve a) setting up groups and using images as 'cultural enablers' for pre-mobility socialisation for students taking international study exchange and work placement programmes, and b) using Flickr as a social space for international project teams.

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